De taal van het hart
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English summary

Dutch regional novels have a large, predominantly female readership. Reviewers and critics, however, are generally not very positive about the genre. They point to the simple plot, the sentimental love story, the melodramatic happy ending and the plain language. Reviewers usually relate the triviality of the novels to the fact that they are, for the most part, written and read by women. The underlying assumption is that the schematic world of the regional novel is a direct reflection of the readers’ moral values and frame or reference. Critics take the view that the readers of the genre have the same schematic, simple and straightforward outlook as is expressed in their favourite books. Thus not only the novels, but also their female readers are depicted as trivial. Research into the way the novels are received is, in the opinion of the critics, unnecessary: it is “difficult to dispute” that the novels reflect their readers’ views, and they do not expect further research “to yield any groundbreaking results”. Due to this general opinion, presented as an obvious fact, little more is known about the popular regional novel than some unfounded preconceptions.

In the present study a method is developed to describe the reception of trivial texts. The method is based on the assumption that readers attach their own meanings to the stories. This makes it possible to explain the success of the novels without reducing the reader of the genre to a simple, schematised mirror-image of the text.

In the first chapter this method is developed and illustrated. The second chapter examines the regional novel in its literary and historical context. In the third and fourth chapters two prevailing assumptions with regard to the enjoyment that readers derive from the novels are examined. It is demonstrated that these assumptions can only partly account for the success of the books. Therefore, after an interlude about “true love” in the fifth chapter, in the final chapter an alternative explanation for the popularity of the genre, is formulated.

Chapter 1 surveys the theories on trivial literature. A view is put forward on the way in which texts entice their readers to adopt certain attitudes or positions, or experience certain emotions in response to the imaginary world of the story. Furthermore, a method is discussed for describing the rhetorical structure of the novels.
Rhetorical invitations to readers can be viewed as structural features of particular texts, regardless of the way they are used in individual cases. In order to investigate whether - and if so, how - these textual invitations are taken up by actual readers, the regional novel which had been lent out most frequently during 1994 by the public libraries in the provinces of Groningen and Drente, *Verzwegen Verleden* (1988) by Henny Thijssing-Boer, was given to a group of readers with the same characteristics as the target group of regional novels. The sample consisted of 250 members of the Nederlandse Bond van Plattelandsvrouwen in the provinces of Groningen and Drente. The respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire to ascertain how they read the novel. The present study then progresses in two ways. It includes both an analysis of rhetorical invitations occurring in, among others, *Verzwegen Verleden*, and a description, based on the questionnaire mentioned above, of the way individual readers respond to these invitations.

Chapter 2 examines the regional novel in its literary and historical context. It is not easy to trace the origins of the genre. The terms regional novel, regional literature, Heimat literature and dialect literature are used alongside each other. Although their meanings sometimes overlap, they often differ on important points. Nevertheless, according to some well-known literary histories, two periods can be regarded as the heyday of the literary complex that may be loosely referred to as “regional literature”: the transitional period between Romanticism and Realism, and the period between World War I and II. During the first period, novels were written which have become widely acknowledged as masterpieces, such as *De Vlaschaard* (1907) by Stijn Streuvels and *Het recht van den sterks te* (1893) by Cyriel Buysse. At the same time a second movement developed that is described as popular, sentimental and trivial. In this period the term “regional novel” appears to function as a contrastive notion, distinguishing the classical, mythical novel from its trivial counterpart. In surveys of literary history, the novels produced by the latter movement are usually ascribed to female authors.

During the interwar years, the popularity of regional novels rose to new heights, with titles such as *Kinderen van ons volk* (1928) by Anton Coolen and *Bartje* (1935) by Anne de Vries. After the Second World War the genre became associated with blood-and-soil ideology. The negative connotations the term already had, were further reinforced by associations with fascist ideas. Although in this post-war period no author of any real significance ventured to contribute to the genre, regional novels have enjoyed an unprecedented popularity with their readers, as De Schutter (2000:305) observes. However, the various surveys of literary history hardly pay any atten-
tion to these widely read post-war novels. Over time the genre has disappeared to the periphery of literature.

In Chapter 3 a common explanation is examined for the pleasure that readers derive from regional novels. This view suggests that readers of regional novels are driven by a nostalgic longing for a lost world and therefore enjoy exchanging the complexity of modern society for the small-scale, orderly and safe life in the countryside. This chapter aims to clarify whether the rhetorical structure of regional novels gives rise to this kind of escapism.

In the most popular novels, the narrative is embedded in a world that also exists outside the books. The narrator of *Verzwegen Verleden*, for example, mentions actual villages in the Groningen countryside and also refers to the Second World War. These facts serve to lend the novels a high degree of realism which is, however, modified at the same time. The village appears unaffected by the consequences of the war: no real hunger is experienced, no Jews are carried off and all those in hiding come through the war safely. Moreover, the exact location of the village is unclear. Although the names of neighbouring villages and hamlets are mentioned, the scene of the action cannot be located. Here the realistic preference for transparency and precision gives way to a certain vagueness. The opening passages of the novels encourage their readers to regard the scene of the action as a real, safe space in an unsafe world. The texts do not offer enough clues to form a clear picture of this space, which therefore serves as a background to the narrative.

The focalisation structure of regional novels encourages the readers to identify strongly with a limited number of characters. The focaliser is a narrative agent which perceives, sees, smells, hears and feels. It is generally assumed that readers identify most closely with characters through whose eyes the narrative events are perceived. The novels analysed here, consistently and frequently present the view of a limited number of country people. This encourages a strong involvement with these characters. Thus the rhetorical regimes of the most popular regional novels focus the readers’ attention not on the countryside, but on its inhabitants.

This chapter then explores the extent to which readers respond to the textual invitations. Over three quarters of the respondents believe that the descriptions of the area and life in the countryside in *Verzwegen Verleden* are authentic. Also in accordance with the rhetorical invitations, readers do not regard the countryside as described in the novel as the subject of the story, but as its background. In view of this result, it is improbable that the readers’ enjoyment of regional novels can be explained by the descriptions of the area. These descriptions are not sufficiently explicit.
In Chapter 4 the common view is examined which assumes that readers of regional novels wish to lose themselves in a sentimental love story with a happy ending. The actantial model is used to investigate whether the most popular regional novels are structured as love stories. The actantial model gives an insight into some basic questions concerning the “building plan” of a novel: who pursues what in the narrative, who or what helps or hinders, and is the ultimate goal achieved or not? From this analysis it emerges that regional novels are indeed written as love stories. The hero, who is solitary at the beginning of the story, is united with his beloved at the end.

In the framework of an actantial analysis, mobility and subjectivity are closely connected. The actantial model is based on Vladimir Propp’s structural analysis of folk tales (1928). In folk tales the hero usually goes out into the world to achieve a certain objective. In an actantial analysis, the character who moves around most and enters, explores or conquers different narrative spaces, automatically emerges as the hero (the subject-actant) of the story. All attention is focused on this mobile character, while the other characters are relegated to the position of objects in the background. They only represent an intermediate goal, a halting-place and a pause in the story about the hero. In *The Origin of Plot in the Light of Typology* (1979), Jurij M. Lotman defines these non-mobile characters as a function of the space which they form a part of. This role is usually reserved for female characters. Traditionally, mobility and activity are not only connected with subjectivity, but more specifically with masculinity. Lotman argues, for example, that the narrative structure of a story in its most fundamental form is based on two functions: “entry into a closed space, and emergence from it”. These spaces can be interpreted as “‘a cave’, ‘the grave’, ‘a house’, ‘woman’” and entry into these “spaces” as “‘death’, ‘conception’, ‘return home’” and so on. Lotman adds that “all these acts are thought of as mutually identical” (1979:67). In relation to the active male character, capable of development, the characters occupying object positions are passive exponents of a certain space or locality.

The view on subjectivity by theorists such as Propp, Greimas and Lotman has specific implications for the interpretation of regional novels. Reading a regional novel with exclusive attention to activity (and this is inevitable in an actantial analysis) amounts to reading a love story: “how he gets her in the end”. An analysis of the focalisation, however, exposes a different story.

In *Verzwegen Verleden*, for example, the character of the mother, together with the small, ramshackle cottage in which she lives, is an object in the story about the hero. Since she seldom leaves her cottage and is not mobile, she cannot be classified as hero or subject on the basis of actantial analysis,
but appears as an object. Nevertheless, as a result of the focalisation and the way the narrative is told, her point of view predominates. The reader is encouraged to share her interpretation of the events.

*Verzwenen Verleden* thus contains a double perspective. The reader is enabled to identify with the (actantial) hero of the love story, but is at the same time encouraged to view the story’s events through the eyes of the mother figure. Thus it is difficult to argue that the narrative can only be read as a love story. Most novels referred to in the present study contain an additional story about the relationship between mother and child.

According to the survey conducted for this study, only 10.3% of the readers identify exclusively with the actantial hero of the story. Of the respondents 44.1% identify with the mother figure, while 40.2% identify with both characters. A large majority of the respondents (84.3%) have also read the novel as a parent-and-child story. This result confirms the conclusion that the rhetorical regimes make it difficult to interpret the narratives exclusively as love stories. Apparently romantic themes are not of major importance to the respondents. This is further indicated by the fact that the average rating of the parent-and-child story is 4.0 on a scale from 1 to 5, while that of the love story is 3.4.

Therefore, the pleasure experienced by readers of regional novels cannot be explained by simply referring to the romantic plot. The novels also tell a story about mothers and children, a story in which the contrast between power and powerlessness, omniscience and ignorance plays an important part.

Finally, the appeal of the books is sometimes ascribed to the notion that regional novels reflect and confirm the moral values their readers. To test this assumption, a number of views held by the mother figure from *Verzwenen Verleden* were presented to the readers. The majority of the respondents did not share the views held by the mother. Moreover, from the group of respondents who primarily identify with her (44.1%), 71.7% felt that they had learnt nothing from her that was relevant to their own life. Therefore, it appears that the pleasure derived from reading regional novels cannot be explained by the mechanism of reflection and confirmation.

Traditional views on the popularity of regional novels, therefore, only offer a partial explanation of their appeal. According to the readers, the scene of the action, painted in soft watercolours and vague shapes, only provides the background for something more significant. The love story, often mentioned as the main attraction, accounts for only half of the story. Moreover,
readers do not share the conservative moral values and norms adhered to by the characters.

**Chapter Five** presents an interlude dedicated to the nature of “true love”. Even though readers do not share the moral universe reflected in regional novels, there is one statement uttered by the mother figure to which nearly all respondents subscribe: “True love is the most important aim in life”. In this chapter the meanings of “true love” will be discussed in the context of regional novels, as well as the rhetorical effects of this cliché.

Consistent with the romantic tradition, love is described in these novels as something predestined, irrational, once-in-a-lifetime, and passionate. Love is of vital importance for the happiness of the young farmer’s sons and daughters, but can hardly be influenced. Love is blind and strikes like a bolt out of the blue. Romance is associated with pain and being hurt.

In regional novels, however, another side of love is also shown. This is expressed in images of sowing and reaping: “If you sow love, you will reap love … there is a good reason for that saying”. In *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors influence the way a concept is experienced, as well as the actions resulting from this experience. Through the use of metaphor, love is depicted as a living organism in need of food and care on a daily basis. A languishing relationship is nurtured and attended to with loving care until it starts to bloom. This particular representation of love encourages patience and dedication and depicts relationships as lifelong commitments. Through the metaphor of sowing and reaping, the passionate and unpredictable nature of romantic love has been brought under control. Ultimately this results in a reassuring image of love, despite the turbulence associated with its romantic aspects.

Finally, in **Chapter Six** a new explanation is offered for the pleasure derived from reading regional novels. The most popular novels contain a double perspective and encourage readers to identify both with the actantial heroes who carry the action and the love story, and with the characters playing the mother role. The narratives about the heroes are characterised by powerlessness and loneliness. Without outside help they do not succeed in accomplishing their aims. The protagonist’s helplessness is sometimes mentioned as the reason for the popularity of the novels. The female readers are thought to see their own powerlessness reflected in the protagonist. In her much-quoted study *Reading the Romance* (1984), Janice Radway argues that identification with the heroine enables readers of romances to enter into feelings of desolation, fear and desire for emotional fulfilment. Towards the end of the novels, this desire is fulfilled through the love of the hero for the heroine.
Traditionally, only the heroine’s perspective was represented in romances. In more recent romances, however, readers also wish the hero’s perspective to be included. In the light of this development Radway’s explanation has become problematic. Unlike the romances described by Radway, in which readers identify exclusively with the heroine, representing feelings of incompleteness and longing, regional novels alternatively enable readers to identify with the character that “redeems everything” and takes away the loneliness and desire. Thus this enables the reader to not only enter into feelings of desolation, but also to identify with the person who can take away these feelings. The rhetorical regimes of regional novels encourage readers to identify with the helpless hero and also with the powerful mother figure.

From the perspective of the “lack of representation” with regard to the mother figure, described by Kaplan and Hirsch, this is a remarkable outcome. Jacques Lacan demonstrated how the importance of the mother is repressed or displaced in the process of symbolic representation. This is reflected in the fact that in western culture the mother is hardly represented as an acting, thinking or speaking subject. Usually she only plays a part in the story of her child(ren), either as the object of desire or as the impediment to their development. In the regional novels analysed for this study there was no evidence of either repression or displacement.

This is further illustrated by a series of “paintings” of mother and child in the regional novel *Tweedonker* by Annie Oosterbroek-Dutschun. Facial portraits of the maternal countenance often occur in these books. According to publishers, regional novels without a maternal face sell relatively badly. These portraits constitute a special rhetorical invitation. With their loving tranquility and iconesque aura, they create an illusion of unremitting, unconditional love. The narratives appeal to a longing for intimacy, emotional fulfilment and (maternal) affection. In regional novels this desire, which is actually not typically female, is satisfied through the use of images that do not represent the mother as inherently flawed, but as authoritative and perfect.

The rhetorical regimes of the most popular novels contain an invitation to enter into the narrative from the perspective of both the child and the mother. The fact that the story is mainly told, contemplated and interpreted by the mother, turns her into the most important character of the book, both from a narrative and a visual viewpoint. Regional novels enable their readers to view the mother not only as object, but also as a thinking and speaking subject of the narrative. The success of the novels can be explained against this background.