

A woman in a green bikini is sitting on a blue towel on a sandy shore, painting a landscape. She is surrounded by art supplies, including a palette and a bag. In the background, there is a calm lake and a forested hillside. The scene is framed by green leaves in the foreground.

EXPLORING 'LAGOM' IN GERMAN LITERATURE

TEA
WALLMARK

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Professor Mladek
8 Short Books That Will Change Your Life
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Front Page: My friend Loane photographed by me at Mink Brook
in Hanover, NH in late July 2023.

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INTRODUCTION

In Sweden, lagom is the state of perfect balance. Not too much, not too little. Not excessive, not too sparse. It's the state of something exactly in the middle. Something lagom is something "just right," something adequate and sufficient. It "represent[s] the average," and "it forms a border zone for moderation."¹ A person in lagom needs to be self-sufficient, independent, and risk averse. As such, lagom implies a kind of ideal and optimized decision-making. Such decision-making requires rationality and, therefore, a considerable amount of restraint.

As a Swede, I wonder how lagom affects the way Swedes love, the way Swedes think of justice, the way Swedes approach suffering, and the way Swedes act in the context of conformity.

In this collection of short analytical essays, I explore this conception of lagom through four classic works of literature. Analyzing the work of Goethe, Kleist, Nietzsche, and Freud exposes relevant and revelatory aspects of living life either inside or outside of lagom.

I believe that all four authors would be unnerved by lagom as a social phenomenon. Goethe's work highlights the incompatibility between lagom and the boundless love exhibited by Werther. There's a paradoxical danger to independence. Kleist's story demonstrates the tension between an ambitious pursuit of justice and remaining in a state of lagom. Emphasizing variety dangerously undermines the singularity of passionate pursuits of justice. Nietzsche's comparison of the intuitive and rational man paints optimism as a tragic fate of society; lagom is founded on this sense of optimism through rationalization. Finally, Freud's work helps tease out the significance of the Scandinavian conformity law called 'Jantelagen'—a foundational concept of lagom.

In short, by viewing these works through the lens of lagom, what can we learn from these authors about love, justice, attitude, and conformity?

¹ Anna Svedberg Bondesson, "Through the land of lagom in literature," 2017.

1. LAGOM AND LOVE

DEPENDENCY IN GOETHE'S *THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER*

*I possess so much, but without her I have nothing.*²

What does it look like to love someone a lagom amount? As established, achieving lagom requires reliance on one's rational capacities and operating according to sound decision-making. Meanwhile, falling and being in love is often described as ineffable and irrational. In this sense, love would seem to undermine the rationality that lagom necessitates. Although there are many ways to define love, does lagom inhibit the full expression of love? Can a boundary-full love ever supplement boundless love?

In Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Werther's love for Charlotte defies the calculated, balanced, and self-sufficient love that lagom would require. Werther's dependence on Lotte soon turns to possessiveness, which consequently leads to a total loss of control. Losing control reveals a part of himself that only he can access. In acquiring such 'knowledge of the heart,' Werther experiences the world in a fuller—albeit shorter—fashion.

Contrasting Werther with the character of Albert teases out the tension between Werther's love and lagom love. Although Werther would have maintained more control were he to love Lotte as Albert appears to do, his boundless love actually reveals a part of himself that only he can access. In acquiring such 'knowledge of the heart,' Werther experiences the world in a fuller—albeit shorter—fashion.

² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "The Sorrows of Young Werther," 1774.

Werther's Dependency

From the very first moment Werther laid eyes on Lotte, he was enthralled by her. As she handed out the rye loaf to the children, Werther describes how his “whole soul was absorbed by her air, her voice, her manner.”³ Lotte “charms” him, whether intentionally or not, narrowing his senses and perception of the rest of the world.⁴ Soon, like a “warmhearted youth [who] becomes strongly attached to a maiden,” Werther’s happiness and whole being is dependent on Lotte.⁵ Simply hearing her voice removes any “gloom and madness” and lets him “breathe freely again.”⁶ Without Lotte, “[he] has nothing”.⁷

In contrast, love as seen through the lens of lagom requires self-sufficiency, something Werther lacks. Lotte’s fiancé Albert, however, appears to love with this self-sufficiency in mind. While Werther is filled with “impetuosity...which [he] cannot conceal,” Albert approaches his relationship with a temper of “coolness.”⁸ While Werther’s “whole heart and senses” are “entirely absorbed by her,” Albert “merely like[s] Charlotte.”⁹ Albert appears to love Lotte in a balanced fashion. He’s maintained his independence even though he’s described as “fully sensible of the treasure he possesses in Charlotte.”¹⁰ Albert’s lagom love for Lotte further demonstrates Werther’s excessive and dependent love.

³ Ibid 13.

⁴ Ibid 14.

⁵ Ibid 8.

⁶ Ibid 28.

⁷ Ibid 66.

⁸ Ibid 30.

⁹ Ibid 26.

¹⁰ Ibid 30.

Werther's Possessiveness and Loss of Control

As Werther's dependency on Lotte grows, he becomes increasingly possessive of her and involuntarily relinquishes control of his feelings. In turn, possessive feelings illicit jealousy; Werther cannot control his feelings of jealousy. When Lotte offers orange slices to those sitting around her, Werther describes feeling "as though a dagger went through [his] heart."¹¹ When Lotte speaks with Albert "her betrothed," Werther "feel[s] like the soldier who has been stripped of his honours and titles."¹² Lotte's behavior dictates Werther's feelings, even if she's just being polite to those around her and spending time with her fiancé. In turn, regardless of Werther's resolve, his dependency leaves him deeply distraught.

To direct one's life according to the principles of lagom requires restraint and control over one's actions. Once again, a comparison with Albert reveals the striking differences between the way Werther and Albert loves Lotte. While Werther describes something having taken "possession of him,"¹³ Albert does not undergo any change throughout the story. As the editor of the story notes, "the character of Albert himself had undergone no change in the meantime: he was still the same being."¹⁴

Werther's Knowledge of the Heart

Although Werther's waning control appears to trouble him greatly, it also puts him in touch with a piece of knowledge that's ineffably his. Werther describes the phenomenon at the end of his letter on May 9th: "All the

¹¹ Ibid 16.

¹² Ibid 27.

¹³ Ibid 74.

¹⁴ Ibid 74.

knowledge I possess every one else can acquire, but my heart is exclusively my own.”¹⁵ This knowledge of the heart is non-communicable, yet the “source of everything of our strength, happiness, and misery.”¹⁶ Only through losing control does Werther reach that ‘knowledge,’ which appears to take the form of an overwhelming “love, joy, rapture, and delight.”¹⁷ Albert, by contrast, cannot acquire this knowledge of his heart since he doesn’t lose control. His independence prevents him from ever developing those extreme possessive feelings that Werther falls victim to.

While this knowledge of the heart ultimately appears to drive Werther to his suicide, the singularity with which he devotes himself to Charlotte communicates the raw power of possessing such intuitive knowledge. Losing control and gaining access to this knowledge is dangerous; however, there seems to be something truthful and intuitive about this kind of knowledge. Werther lives life fully. Even though he might appear unfree because of his impaired irrationality and complete dependence, his love towards Lotte is unrestrained. Paradoxically, then, maintaining independence in love—as Albert exemplifies—restricts and truncates one’s love. Werther’s dependency, by comparison, opens up the potential for a natural unity with another human being.

In the end, how one approaches this *potential* for ultimate joy or ultimate despair provides the best indicator of one’s adherence to *lagom*. For Werther, pain and pleasure flow from the same source—his dependency on Lotte is responsible for his greatest moments of joy *and* misery. As a result, by loving the way he does, Werther

¹⁵ Ibid 57.

¹⁶ Ibid 66, 57.

¹⁷ Ibid 66.

takes on considerable risk. Whether he knows it or not, he leans into the risk and the singular source of pain and pleasure.

In contrast, Albert takes a risk averse approach to love. He doesn't let himself become dependent on Lotte. In doing so, he approaches the characteristic balance of lagom, but misses out on the euphoric joy that Werther describes. While Werther embraces the fact that his pain and pleasure flow from the same source, Albert works to separate the two as a way of gaining control. However, pursuing such a separation process and building indifference within a love relationship requires considerable energy. Independence within a love relationship doesn't come naturally; therefore, one works against something intuitive and natural when reaching for a lagom love.

Lagom and Love

As Goethe's comparison between Werther and Albert reveals, loving someone a lagom amount requires resisting the natural tendency to develop a dependency on the beloved. This resistance to something intuitive leaves certain knowledge—knowledge of the heart—out of reach. Although acquiring this knowledge comes with substantial risk, it puts one in touch with the raw and indescribable experience of loving someone unconditionally.

2. LAGOM AND JUSTICE

SINGULARITY IN KLEIST'S "MICHAEL KOHLHAAS"

*Whoever withholds it from me drives me out
into the wilderness among savages.¹⁸*

How does a lagom approach to life harmonize with a pursuit of absolute and transformative justice? Does pursuing justice, and particularly a kind of revolutionary justice, undermine the balance of a life lived in lagom?

In his novella "Michael Kohlhaas," Heinrich von Kleist explores the destructive and dramatic impacts of a pursuit of justice. Michael Kohlhaas, a horse-trader and the protagonist of Kleist's work, undergoes the corruptive transformation as a result of his all-consuming search for justice. After being treated unjustly, Kohlhaas sets out on a quest to redress the experienced injustice. Although he first goes through traditional judicial channels, he turns to extra-legal and explicitly violent means when those existing channels fail him. As his pursuit develops, Kohlhaas descends into a progressively frenzied state. His motivations narrow and his pursuit becomes increasingly singular. In this way, Kohlhaas' story demonstrates the process of awakening one's inner sense of justice and committing it to a singular cause. Analyzing how Kohlhaas singularly commits to his inner sense of justice reveals some central contradictions between redressing justice and maintaining a state of lagom.

Kohlhaas' Turn Towards Singularity

¹⁸ Heinrich von Kleist. "Michael Kohlhaas," 1810, 52.

Kohlhaas' story begins as he's stopped on his way out of Brandenburg and asked to show his horse-dealers permit—a permit that he does not possess.¹⁹ Kohlhaas is told “he must either purchase a passport on the spot or return whence he came.”²⁰ Although Kohlhaas identifies these demands as “illegal and extortionate” and feels anger building up within him, he keeps his cool.²¹ He goes to speak to the Junker personally and ends up leaving two of his three horses with the Junker as assurance that he will get a permit. At this point, Kohlhaas has identified the growing anger within him but chooses to yield to the Junker's request: “[s]eeing clearly that he would have to yield to force, the horse-dealer decided that he had no choice but to do as they demanded.”²²

When he arrives in Dresden to speak with the Chancellor, he discovers “what his original feeling had already told him: the story about the permit was a mere fabrication.”²³ Still, he returns to Tronka Castle with a certificate of the groundlessness of the Junker's request “with no more bitterness in his heart than one might feel at the general sorry state of the world.”²⁴

Soon, however, Kohlhaas discovers the depraved state of the horses he left behind and the notable absence of his groom.²⁵ It is at this discovery that Kohlhaas notes the emergence of a “strong impulse” within him.²⁶ He's torn as “the judge within his own heart could not decide whether

¹⁹ Ibid 115.

²⁰ Ibid 116.

²¹ Ibid 116.

²² Ibid 118.

²³ Ibid 118.

²⁴ Ibid 118.

²⁵ Ibid 119.

²⁶ Ibid 120.

his opponent was guilty.”²⁷ He acknowledges that since his “experience had already given him a realistic sense of the imperfection inherent in the order of the world,” he was “inclined...to accept the loss of the horses as a just consequence.”²⁸ But he doesn’t. In fact, Kohlhaas doubles down and concludes that it’s “his duty to the world at large to exert all his powers in securing redress for the wrongs already perpetrated and protection for his fellow citizens against such wrongs in the future.”²⁹

Kleist foreshadows this emerging duality within Kohlhaas’ soul at the very beginning of the story by describing Kohlhaas as “one of the most honorable as well as one of the most terrible men of his age.”³⁰ The discovery of his abused horses is not only the first instance that reveals this duality, but also the first instance Kohlhaas takes action in favor of the destructive and confrontational part.

Upon identifying an injustice and committing to redressing that injustice, Kohlhaas first attempts to find justice through existing channels. In the presence of his wife, he claims he’s “determined to seek redress in a public court of law.”³¹ He believes in the impartiality of the court and, therefore, expresses “complet[e] confiden[ce] of the outcome of his case.”³² When almost a year later he finds out that his case had been dismissed due to the “intervention from a higher level,” Kohlhaas searches for answers in a state of astonishment.

²⁷ Ibid 120.

²⁸ Ibid 121.

²⁹ Ibid 121.

³⁰ Ibid 114.

³¹ Ibid 126.

³² Ibid 127.

Nevertheless, Kohlhaas tries again through the court of Dresden. This time, since he'd "composed an account of his grievances fully in accord with what was required," he was "more reassured about the outcome of the case than ever before."³³ Yet, once again, he's told that the letter wasn't handled according to usual procedure.

Following this final let-down within the existing system of courts, Kohlhaas isn't just filled with a "grief at seeing the world in such monstrous disorder," he's actually flooded by "an inward sense of contentment."³⁴ Crucially, he finds this "harmony within his own heart" not after redressing his injustices, but after realizing that the existing structures will not help him address that injustice.³⁵ At this point, after failing to redress the injustice through the system, Kohlhaas' ambition narrows. He "take[s] no further pleasure in breeding horses, or in his home and farm, or scarcely even in his wife and children."³⁶ The system is completely inadequate from his perspective and cannot serve him in his search for justice. Such disillusionment explains his move into the extra-legal sphere. He moves beyond the system and instead views unconventional and violent means as the way to achieve his aims.

As the story progresses, Kohlhaas becomes increasingly consumed by this singular mission. He's overtaken by a 'wholeness' derived from his unconditional commitment to the cause. In Werther's story, a movement towards relying on the heart rather than the head put Werther in touch with a particular 'knowledge of the heart' that contributed to the fullness of his life. In Kohlhaas' case, there's

³³ Ibid 129.

³⁴ Ibid 131.

³⁵ Ibid 131.

³⁶ Ibid 130.

something intuitive with his complete commitment to the extra-legal. Although Kohlhaas goes on to murder innocent people through his destructive rampage, he's settled into the harmony of his heart—a harmony founded in his pursuit of justice.

Lagom as Incompatible with Singularity

Although Kohlhaas finds this deep sense of internal harmony through his singular pursuit of justice, his commitment to a singular cause is ultimately incompatible with a life lived in accordance with lagom. As described, a life lived in lagom requires balance, which in turn requires variety. One cannot live a balanced life without a variety of facts to balance. In turn, since Kohlhaas' singularity undermines variety, his pursuit of justice is incompatible with a lagom life.

So how does one redress injustice according to lagom? Is it even possible to pursue justice in a balanced and seemingly unconcerned manner?

Turning back to the analysis of Kohlhaas' all-consuming approach reveals some implications of embracing lagom in the context of justice. From the very beginning, Kohlhaas feels a sense of being wronged, almost like alarm bells within him. At first, he acknowledges but ignores those alarm bells as he agrees to go speak with the Chancellery in Dresden. Soon, however, the alarms overpower the part in him that's traditionally played a restraining role. At the discovery of his abused horses, Kohlhaas assents to his intuition that an injustice has occurred. Under a lagom pursuit of justice, an individual must weight the circumstances with a particularly high threshold for taking action and "assenting" to the alarm bells. Kohlhaas' threshold would appear too low.

Even if the first action Kohlhaas took in response to an identified injustice reflected decision-making in accordance with lagom, an individual with a lagom approach would have had more patience with the legal system. Although Kohlhaas twice attempted to achieve justice through the existing legal system, after the second failed attempt he quickly took up unconventional ways. He sets fire to entire towns and burns down houses in the name of a “just war.”³⁷ An individual who pursues justice in a lagom way would, first, continue to attempt to redress the injustice through the existing legal systems because it’s the calculated and secure path forward. They would be patient and almost apathetic towards the slow and inefficient system. Second, a lagom pursuit of justice would very rarely include the violent measures employed by Kohlhaas.

Lastly, even if the injustice was bad enough to warrant assenting to the alarm bells *and* taking extra-legal action even within the lagom framework, an individual adhering by lagom would never make their pursuit of a singular injustice the entirety of their life as Kohlhaas did.

In these ways, Kohlhaas’ pursuit of justice is incompatible with a life lived in accordance with lagom. Although there is something very selfish and broadly unjust in encouraging the kind of ambition that Kohlhaas exhibits, there’s an individual fulfillment that’s found through a complete commitment to one cause no matter the means. This individual fulfillment is something intuitive. In a world where injustices often lay dormant or unheard, there’s something endearing about Kohlhaas’ all-consuming approach.

³⁷ Ibid 140.

Therefore, countries, communities, or individuals who adhere to or at least attempt to adhere to a lagom lifestyle should be aptly aware of injustices and the way that upholding lagom suppresses passionate and singular pursuits of justice. Although injustices can still be redressed in a lagom way, awareness of these dynamics is imperative to shaping and maintaining a just society.

3. LAGOM AND ATTITUDE

PESSIMISM IN NIETZSCHE'S *THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY*

*What if it were madness itself...which bestowed
the greatest blessings on Hellas?³⁸*

How does optimism and pessimism operate within the lagom framework? As the stories of both Werther and Kohlhaas demonstrate, dependence and singular commitment do not adhere to a life lived in lagom. With this knowledge, how does a lagom attitude affect one's outlook towards pain, suffering, and life?

In Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche explores the question of pain and suffering and their role in fueling art, thinking, and philosophy. Nietzsche's argument that the existence of such life-giving features of the human experience are predicated on the existence of pain and suffering prompts the question of attitude towards that suffering. In particular, Nietzsche's comparison of what he calls "strong pessimism" and the relentless "optimism" of modern society brings up very similar questions as a critical analysis of lagom. Ultimately, it appears that Nietzsche's strong pessimism argument would disturb the indifference inherent in the optimistic attitude of civilization.

Nietzsche's Strong Pessimism and Civilization's Optimism

Nietzsche opens his "Attempt at Self-Criticism" in *The Birth of Tragedy* by challenging the societal understanding of pessimism. He asks: "Is pessimism *necessarily* the sign of decline, decay, of the failure of the exhausted and

³⁸ Nietzsche "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense," 1873.

weakened instincts?”³⁹ It’s in this context that he introduces the concept of “*strong* pessimism.”⁴⁰ Nietzsche implies that there’s something inherently wrong and counterproductive about society’s fascination with optimism. According to Nietzsche, being optimistic implies an unwillingness to recognize and a dismissal of hardships. The veil of optimism becomes a protection against the pain and suffering of life. Nietzsche, therefore, asks the concluding question: “Could perhaps, in spite of all ‘modern ideas’ and prejudices of democratic taste, the victory of *optimism*, the achieved predominance of *reason*, practical and theoretical *utilitarianism*, like democracy itself, its contemporary—be a symptom of failing strength, of approaching old age, of physiological exhaustion?”⁴¹ Since, as mentioned above, the life-giving aspects of human existence stem from the inevitable pain and suffering, an optimistic approach inhibits a natural and ultimately beneficial aspect of life.

The ‘Intuitive’ Man vs. The ‘Rational’ Man

In his “On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense,” Nietzsche stages a sort of play between the intuitive and the rational man, which adds more nuance to his argument for *strong* pessimism. According to Nietzsche, “there are ages in which the rational man and the intuitive man stand side by side.”⁴² Both men “desire to rule over life” but in distinct ways.⁴³

The rational man attempts to rule over life “by knowing how to meet his principle needs by means of foresight,

³⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Oxford University Press (1872), 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid 7.

⁴² Nietzsche “On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense,” 1873.

⁴³ Ibid.

prudence, and regularity.”⁴⁴ Rationalizing is an attempt to categorize and create distance between oneself and hardships, much like the process of becoming an optimist.

The intuitive man, by contrast, attempts to rule over the world by “disregarding [his] needs and, as an ‘overjoyed hero,’ counting as real only that life which has been disguised as illusion and beauty.”⁴⁵ The intuitive man embraces the totality of life because he’s searching for what’s *real*. Yes, “he suffers more intensely” and “when he suffers; he even suffers more frequently.”⁴⁶ The intuitive man doesn’t learn by rationalizing his experiences; rather, he takes every experience at face value and revels in the “harvest of continually inflowing illumination, cheer, and redemption.”⁴⁷

While the rational man approaches pain and suffering with indifference, at least with an *appearance* of indifference, the intuitive man approaches suffering knowing that the best (and the worst) parts of life both originate from this same source. When an individual suppresses the source in totality by refusing to acknowledge the inevitable existence of suffering—as relentless optimists do—they not only shut out the suffering, but also the raw, invigorating force of life.

Pessimism or Optimism?

As determined, living a lagom life encourages a fearful optimism such as the optimism of Nietzsche’s stoical and civilized man. So which attitude—the rational man’s

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

pessimism or the intuitive man's optimism—proves more effective in a changing world?

In times of severe societal strain, Nietzsche implies that the intuitive man is better situated to deal with any changes and suffering as a result of that strain. Since a pessimistic attitude embraces both the good and the bad—and accepts that suffering flows from the same source as life's greatest joys—a pessimistic individual has a better grasp of the changing landscape. Since it doesn't suppress any aspect of the human experience, taking a strong pessimism approach appears more intuitive.

In contrast, the stoical man's indifference, which manifests as a kind of ignorance, only provides temporary safety from change. Therefore, although the rational man is "indifferent," the approach is temporary and, thus, ineffective in addressing the long term implications of societal change. Society's optimism tears us away from our natural presence, adaptability, and deeply artistic nature.

Following this analysis, the rational man's optimism and self-declared state of happiness appears somewhat false since it is intentionally erasing a natural part of the human experience. Could Nietzsche's strong pessimism, by comparison, paradoxically represent a *true* form of optimism? By acknowledging the totality of human experience, embracing the fact that suffering and joy flow from the same source, and rejecting the indifference of the rational man, does the strong pessimist strangely become the truest kind of believer in humankind?

As Nietzsche wrote in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "It is the stillest words that bring on the storm. Thoughts that come on doves' feet guide the world."⁴⁸ Tragedy doesn't exist

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

without calmness just as calmness doesn't exist without tragedy. Ignorance and indifference do not change the world—recognition and passion do.

4. LAGOM AND INTUITION

CONFORMITY IN FREUD'S CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

*"...a law once made will not be broken in favor of the individual"*⁴⁹

Jantelagen, the law of a small fictional town in Scandinavia, has had a profound effect on shaping the culture and behavior of Scandinavian citizens. Jantelagen is comprised of a list of ten laws—laws that define and restrict the behavior of the individual in relation to the larger community.

The Ten Laws of Jante:

1. Do not think you are anything special
2. Do not think you are as good as we are
3. Do not think you are smarter than we are
4. Do not imagine yourself better than we are
5. Do not think you know more than we do
6. Do not think you are more important than we are
7. Do not think you are good at anything
8. Do not laugh at us
9. Do not think anyone cares about you
10. Do not think you can teach us anything

In the town of Jante, "all individuals are expected to subsume their identity to [that of] the group."⁵⁰ Jantelagen defines the role of the individual in relation to society, just as lagom speaks to the importance of remaining

⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, W.W. Norton & Company (1929), 28.

⁵⁰ Rebecca Thandi Norman, "What is Janteloven?," *Scandinavia Standard*, 2023, <https://www.scandinaviastandard.com/what-is-janteloven-the-law-of-jante/>.

independent from other people. There's a tremendous pressure to conform and not stand out, as well as a pressure to remain independent. When you're told to think that no one cares about you, you must develop a self-esteem independent of what others think of you. When you're told that you shouldn't think you know more than others, your intellectual confidence and knowledge of yourself must develop independently of your community. As such, lagom and Jantelagen are intertwined.

The Jantelagen social code emphasizes collective accomplishments and well-being and *deemphasizes* individual achievements. Scandinavian countries encourage a system in which individuals strive to be financially and socially successful, while also discouraging the self-promotion that often accompanies this kind of success. So what can Jantelagen's extreme portrayal of conformity tell us about lagom?

Examining the work of 19th century neurologist Sigmund Freud adds another layer to the exploration of lagom. In his book *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud examines the pressures that arise from the civilizing process, focusing particularly on the impacts of conformity. How do pressures to conform interact with our compulsive tendencies? And how does conformity impact our relationships with human intuition? These questions translate directly to an analysis of the impacts of conforming to the laws of Jante and, in turn, to our analysis of lagom.

Freud's analysis demonstrates that the process of conforming—whether to civilization as a whole or to the laws of Jante—ultimately restricts man's compulsive tendencies and brings us farther from our intuition.

Freud begins his examination of conformity by evaluating the impacts of religion on our individual consciousness. Religion is one of the earliest, yet enduring manifestations of civilization. According to Freud, religion “imposes equally on everyone its own path to the acquisition of happiness and protection from suffering.”⁵¹ Religion leaves no room for “individual neurosis,” and rather “forcibly fix[es] them in a state of psychological infantilism” and “mass-delusion.”⁵² At its core, religion asks individuals to conform.

Freud adds that “[r]eligion restricts [the] play of choice and adaptation.”⁵³ Here Freud points to the loss of intuition inherent within the process of conformity. Mistakes and experimentation are discouraged, and in turn we lose our ability to adapt. As developed in Nietzsche’s comparison of the rational and intuitive man, the optimism of the rational man tears us away from our natural adaptability. Within Nietzsche’s analysis, optimism lures us away from our intuition. Within Freud, religion acts as the lure by providing uniformity through conformity. Freud, like Nietzsche, takes notice of the layer of deception over religion and civilization’s other allies.

Freud then broadens the scope, analyzing the suppression of the individual and the loss of adaptability within civilization at large. With regards to the individual, Freud holds that “the decisive step of civilization” is the “replacement of the power of the individual by the power of a community.”⁵⁴ From the very beginning, civilization and individuality are incompatible.

⁵¹ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 19.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid* 27-8.

Like Freud's example of religion, this incompatibility translates to decreasing adaptability and a curbing of the creativity of the human intuition. In "restrict[ing] themselves in their possibilities of satisfaction," members of a community leave many ways of living undiscovered.⁵⁵ But Freud recognizes that civilization does a fine job of covering this consequence.

As mentioned, religion lures people in by promising uniformity through the conformity. In the same way, a community is "united against all separate individuals"⁵⁶ and therefore promises provides a sense of comfort and oneness. However, there's a fictiveness to that oneness. Although the stated goal of civilization may innocently be "to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations," both those aims have subversive consequences on the state of individuality and humanity.⁵⁷ Protecting men against nature decreases their perceptibility of the true world, while restructuring and organizing their relations lessens the possibility of uncomfortable, yet transformative relationships.

In the context of the *law* of Jante, it is fitting that Freud also addresses the role of law and justice within his analysis of civilization. As part of this "fictive oneness," Freud describes how the "first requisite of civilization" is justice and that justice, in turn, is "the assurance that a law once made will not be broken in favor of an individual."⁵⁸ This powerful rejection of the individual speaks directly to the foundation of law in general.

⁵⁵ Ibid 28.

⁵⁶ Ibid 23.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid 28.

Notably, Freud's statement also resonates with Jantelagen. Jantelagen takes the denial of the individual to its very extreme. Once these laws are put in place, they remain. The laws employ us-them language, which, again, speaks to the appearance of unity.

Ultimately, as best stated by Freud, "it is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct."⁵⁹ What would we really be losing? In terms of strength, Freud states that "instinctual passions are stronger" than the "work in common" of civilization.⁶⁰ So will these instinctual passions win out in the end?

Civilizations represent an attempt at "finding an expedient accommodation" between an individual and the group.⁶¹ Although there's benefits to finding a community through a civilization, the pressure to conform suppresses and deforms the adaptability and creativity of human individuality. Civilizations, due to their reliance on conformity as their driving mechanism, prove unable to reconcile the tension between the individual and the group.

⁵⁹ Ibid 29.

⁶⁰ Ibid 40.

⁶¹ Ibid 29.

CONCLUSIONS

Lagom tempts us. It promises to structure and assure every part of our lives. Yes, its benefits are many, particularly for maintaining secure societies. But what parts of the human experience does it overlook?

This collection of short essays explored themes within the work of four authors and emphasized how those themes interact with the idea of lagom. Studying each author's analysis of a central theme of their work revealed the unnerving losses of a life lived in accordance with lagom.

As Werther's story demonstrates, life in lagom prevents attaining the invigorating joy of the "knowledge of the heart." In the case of Kohlhaas, the harmony in his heart would have remained undiscovered if he took the indifferent lagom approach. Nietzsche warns of society's misguided optimism and its threat to the adaptability of humanity. Finally, Freud draws our attention to conformity's threat to our intuition.

In conclusion, these authors all express strong uncertainty towards the more complex dynamics of society and civilization. Within its broad cultural and behavioral impacts, lagom represents one such structure with the potential to extinguish human intuition.

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Tea Wallmark grew up in Sweden, but moved to the United States when she was 8 years old. Since spending her gap year back in Stockholm, Tea has grappled with the implications of the Swedish imperative to live a 'lagom' life. To avoid pain and live a happy life, you're supposed to avoid taking risks. But a variety of changes throughout her life has made Tea question the validity of this imperative. Tea's balance comes from the advance and retreat from risk—living the sine curve rather than the line.