
**Sektion 8.1. Prekäre Lebensbedingungen, unsichere
Arbeitsverhältnisse – Expansion sozialer
Ungleichheiten. Auf dem Weg von der Peripherie zum
Zentrum?**

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New Mythical Wor(I)ds

Transferring Myths from Folk Poetry to Contemporary Literature

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In my paper, I am going to introduce one of the Finnish contemporary novels as a sort of rewritten Finnish epic *Kalevala*. My aim is to show some that some features seem to be characteristic when moving myths and mythological characters from folk poetry to contemporary literature and especially to postmodernist literature.

Old myths in contemporary reading

Throughout the history of arts there has been a tendency to move myths and mythological characters from the folk poetry into the works of different kinds of arts. As in the fields of music, fine arts, and performing arts, also in the field of literature this phenomenon can be proved by a large number of examples. It is only in the 1960's that Julia Kristeva gave a name to this tendency by introducing the term of intertextuality in her study dealing with Mikhail Bakhtin's works. Intertextuality contains all kinds of movements between texts, including the transference of myths.

Similarly, the Finnish history of arts is full of segments borrowed from the folk poetry. Elias Lönnrot put together the Finnish epic *Kalevala* (*The Old Kalevala* was published in 1835, *The New Kalevala* in 1849), consisting of those runes that he – and his colleagues – had collected during their long folklore-collecting journeys, primarily in White Sea Karelia (Pentikäinen 1999, 99). *Kalevala* – similarly to the other European epics – has had an important role in the creating of the Finnish national spirit. It's a cosmogonical kind of narration and a mythological story of Finnish origin. The kaleidoscope of Finnish mythological characters has been a source of material to be borrowed and placed into various works of art. Artists, prose- and drama-writers, poets, musicians, composers, film directors etc., have grounded a lot of visual and literal works (paintings, dramas, novels, poems, operas, symphonies, films, etc.) on *Kalevala*. The end of 20th century and the beginning of

the 21st century witnessed the start of a new period: it was marked by the experimental attempts at rewriting of *Kalevala* (comics, picture books, and other variants). A Finnish contemporary writer Johanna Sinisalo – earlier known as a science fiction writer – also performed her experiment: she joined to her novel *Sankarit* (2003) (the English translation would be *The Heroes* but it has not been translated; in this paper, I will use this title of the novel) a series of works using the mythical elements of *Kalevala*.

The connection of *The Heroes* with the world in *Kalevala* is very clear, even if in *The Heroes* the adventures, the heroes, and the heroines are contemporary. Neither the environment in which the characters move looks same as the environment in *Kalevala*: instead of mythic surroundings of *Kalevala*, the characters of *The Heroes* drift around the streets of present-day Finland. Nevertheless, the novel follows the chronology that Elias Lönnrot gave to *Kalevala*, to such an extent that both the asymmetries and intermittent disjointedness in *Kalevala* become obvious. (The methods Elias Lönnrot used while collecting and recording folk poetry have been subject of discussion since *Kalevala* was published. For example, one of the female characters, Aino, doesn't exist in the Finnish folk poetry as the same character, but Lönnrot put together the material from the work of several poets thus shaping the character of Aino. Anyway, the aim of this paper is not to comment on the working methods of Lönnrot.)

We can read *The Heroes* also as an independent novel – if there can be any independent works in postmodernist times at all. However, if we have in mind the connection with *Kalevala*, we are given a wider range of possibilities to analyze it. If the reader knows well the Finnish culture and folk poetry, especially *Kalevala*, the text indicates different meanings than it would be in the case of the one who does not know *Kalevala* or is not aware of this background. Even if we read *The Heroes* as a version of *Kalevala* and thus as a mythical narrative, we are continuously aware of the other aspects of the novel. Sinisalo guides the main thread with four strands throughout the novel. The feminist, the fantastic, the mythical and the parodic strands are equally present.

Lönnrot put together the Finnish epic from different runes; thus, there are gaps within and between the narratives. Sinisalo highlighted the connection with the mythical world of *Kalevala*; moreover, she did not always try to patch these gaps in her novel. She also underlined the features of the characters, for example, using extracts from different kinds of genres as segments in the text (e.g. the extracts from a fairy tale, a column, a feuilleton, a love story, reports, interviews etc.). In doing so, she strengthened the fragmentariness of the novel. The fragmentariness is one of the characteristics of postmodernist literature (see: McHale 1987, 7), thus *The Heroes* belongs to postmodernist literature, at least, if we think about its structure.

Myths and mythical characters were moved to a new context even before postmodernist literature, but the methods used in postmodernist literature give a new perspective for building the profile of mythical characters in their new context. Liisa Saariluoma (2000) in her essay introduces the history of myths and mythical components in the oral and literal tradition. The signification of using the myths as material of literary expression has been changing significantly from the very beginnings of the written literature. In ancient times, myths were cosmogonical narratives; they were mimed or retold in a contact with certain rites. Later, myths were secularized: they lost their religious significance. The myths didn't lose their significance even during the period of Classicism with its prevalent rational way of thinking because “-- since the 5th century myths have been taken non-literally, as allegories -- [and] the gods -- as personifications of forces of nature, forces of mind and moral” (Saariluoma 2000, 18). The Enlightenment tried to prune the myths down from the literal expression, because they were seen as the opposite of reason, but instead of using old gods as material, some new myths were born. Romanticism was a new golden time for mythologies. Romantics longed for the old times that were full of gods, demigods and heroes. They also gave birth to new mythology by creating various representations for the segments of nature, using folk poetry as basic material. Realism was opposed to the mythical way of thinking: if ancient myths were used, the mythical characters were analyzed mostly as psychological cases. Nowadays, there are different ways in which we can approach various myths in literature. For example, feminist writers rewrite the myths and thus use them as means of criticism. (Saariluoma 2000, 11–50.) Also, in fantastic literature, myths are used in order to emphasize a variety of actual themes (Sinisalo 2004, 23–24).

In our case, *The Heroes* can be read as a parody and criticism of contemporary society. When mythical heroes are planted into the characters of new cultural heroes, the characters (both the old and the new) get new significances, which can be examined from several points of view. For example, in *The Heroes*, the mythical episode of an old shaman Väinämöinen and a young girl, Aino, is turned into an episode of Rex and Oona. The girl is an under-age, insecure adolescent, who is to be raised by her mother into a fascinating girlfriend of Rex, and then tempted by this successful rock-star. Later, Oona leaves Rex and moves to a community of worshippers, who worship the cult of water; there she gives birth to Auroora, the daughter of Rex, and at the end of her story she unifies with the nature. She becomes a part of the folks of the water at the closure of the mythical circle when she walks into a lake in a purifying ritual. This multi-coded narrative is offering us distinct meanings to be examined by the tools of feminist and gender studies. Also, it has a clear mythical connection to *Kalevala*, but if we focus on the story of the daughter as the Aurora of the new age, the mythical connection is even stronger. I am focusing on the mythic reading of *The Heroes*, because this point of view seems to be very obvious in reading the novel. Cycles and returns, overlaps, as well as dreams with mythical content (see Korte 1988, 131), lead us to read *The Heroes* as a collection of mythical narratives. I will now highlight one mythical motive which is found in *The Heroes*: the creation of the world(s).

The creation of the new world(s)

In *The Heroes* one grand narrative is divided into many small narratives focussing on different characters. It's quite hard to analyze the novel from a single point of view or – using the metaphor of thread – to split the strands which belong together closely. The use of myths and mythical characters in a new context, in a new world, hints at the issue that instead of building a new mythological whole, a grand narrative, the mythical meanings as symbols and allegories, are rather about to be united with the interpretations of other disciplines. As a result, the features of the characters gain new significance and levels. For example, Rex-Väinämöinen – as mythically examined – is the representative of the old world order, but the character of Rex can also be analyzed by the tools of gender studies: through the relationship with his daughter Auroora, we can examine the possibilities of new masculinities, including the question of fatherhood. Rex-Väinämöinen is bearing the stamp of a paedophile, but his character undergoes a change when he becomes a father. This happens only after Oona's (Aino) death, when Auroora, their daughter, is assigned to his care. This fatherhood is especially interesting if the reader is aware of the turns of events in *Kalevala*. At the end of the epic, the virgin Marjatta gives birth to a boy, who becomes the king of *Kalevala* instead of Väinämöinen. This metaphor of Christianity is parodically turned around in *The Heroes*. Oona gives birth to a daughter of Rex, and she, Auroora, becomes a queen of music and the symbol of the beginning of a new age. Examining Oona, Rex, and Auroora, we can find various features which lead us to various discussions that are the subject of feminism and gender studies (I have discussed these connections in my paper *A víz gyermekei – Oona, Rex és Auroora* in gender-conference *A női/férfi identitás és tapasztalat* (Szeged, Hungary) on September 2007.)

The mythical birth is represented several times in the narratives. (For example, Rex himself is born twice from the water. This is connected with the birth of his daughter, Auroora, and the creation of the new world order examined through her story.) This leads us to examine the novel as a mythical narrative(s). The frame of the narrative of *The Heroes* is obviously mythical: the world order is created both in the prologue and in the end of the novel, and it's narrated with the very same words. There is only one significant change: the subject is different.

Rex feels his head crack like an eggshell and the pieces ricochet in all directions, they hurtle into space like shrapnel and dash red-hot and hissing into the surface of the water and form all at once night and day and stars and moons and a whole new order of the world. (SA, 9. Transl. Anne Karppinen.)

Auroora feels her head crack like an eggshell and the pieces ricochet in all directions, they hurtle into space like shrapnel and dash red-hot and hissing into the surface of the water and form all at

once night and day and stars and moons and a whole new order of the world. (SA, 392. Transl. Anne Karppinen.)

The mythical frame of narrative offers us an opportunity to analyze the novel as allegory and mythical narration of the creation of the new age.

The second mythical birth of Rex which is described in the prologue has a special meaning in the novel: Rex is born as a father. He has been with his two-year-old daughter, Auroora, in the old family house for a while, before he understands the fact that he is a father. Only a shocking incidence can awaken him from his negligence. Auroora falls in the lake while squeezing shells of a water bird's egg in her hand. When Rex rescues her from the water, both of them undergo a transformation in a way. (Mircea Eliade discusses mythical nature of water as symbol of entirety of possibilities. Both the death and the rebirth are included in the symbolism of water. Sinking under water is symbol of "temporary return to formlessness" and is always followed by creation of something new. Eliade 2003, 151) Rex is born as a father. He feels as if he had been "squeezed into a womb that was success and reputation and money", and from which he then fell into "cold water from which he...clambered coughing and spluttering onto the beach and saw the sun and moon" (SA, 11. Transl. Anne Karppinen). At the same time Auroora is born as a thinking being: her consciousness awakens (see SA, 10). In the tableau shown in the prologue of the novel, we get a wind of the mythical nature of the novel. According to Korte, (1988, 78) the cyclic, organic and progressive process of changing characterizes the mythical world-view, and *The Heroes* is opening up as a mythical narrative of a cyclic return to natural, feminine values, represented by the mythical character Auroora, the daughter of Rex and Oona.

In the closure of the novel, Auroora is born as the symbol of the new world order. She is getting free from the patriarchal order and the old world order represented by his father, Rex. She gets angry with his father and "feels his head crack like an eggshell ... and [the pieces] form all at once night and day and stars and moons and a whole new order of the world." (SA, 392. Transl. Anne Karppinen.) This is a rise against the patriarchal order. (See Korte 1988, 138–143 about matriarchal and patriarchal paradigms in myths.) Auroora is strong enough to oppose the old world order against the attempts that are made before. (In the scene of the singing competition – shown both in *Kalevala* and *The Heroes* – the old world order represented by Rex-Väinämöinen wins, because Joakim-Joukahainen is too young and weak an opponent to Rex.)

As Rex was born from "a womb that was success and reputation and money" (SA, 11. Transl. Anne Karppinen) at the beginning of the novel, also Auroora, at the end of the novel, will emerge out from the cocoon she inhabited. One morning she wakes up, the sign of this emerging, thin, light grey gossamer is found on her bed. (See SA, 393.) This is the final separation from the world order represented by her father. She will take the place of his father and become the queen of the music. Here, we can find also a weak fantastic strand of the four-stranded thread. Mythical references make us to hesitate between the real and the not-real, the natural and the supernatural. Even if there are these kinds of scenes in which the borders between different worlds are perceptible, the novel is not purely fantastic, at least, not in the way Todorov would see it. In *The Heroes* we can find exaggeration, hesitation and references to supernatural level (See Todorov 1970/2002, 27–38), but these features are not characteristic for the whole novel: they occur only occasionally. For example, the light grey gossamer that is found on the bed of Auroora is a typical reference to supernatural level which Sinisalo uses with the intention of showing the connections both with the mythical world and with the genre of fantastic literature.

Towards new world(s)

Kalevala was used as a means in creating the Finnish spirit. The national identity is no longer needed to be created in the same sense as in 19th century. Therefore the attempts to rewrite the *Kalevala* don't have the same function as the original had at the time of the National Romanticism; rather, they have another characteristic - to be interpretations of the national identity of today. *The Heroes* is a good example of this: the Finnishness is emphasized in the European frame of

reference through describing various successes of cultural heroes (in music and sports) and technological achievements. Sinisalo both underlines and criticizes this phenomenon and the connection between the Kalevalan mythology and the current cultural heroes by showing these new icons of Finnishness through the light of parody. This kind of carnivalesque laughter (see Bahtin 2002, 8–16) strengthens the position of both old and new mythical characters on creating the cultural environment. Using the carnivalesque-parody motive of double-characters (ibid, 16) in a feminist-mythic-fantastic mode in the novel with postmodern structure is an interesting choice for a novel that demonstrates a critical attitude towards society.

Then, what makes all this so particular? One could say: there is nothing special in this at all. But, I assume, there is. As André Lefevere (1992) writes, the use of different kinds of rewriting, translators, editors, the writers of anthologies etc. can help in manipulating of literature in various ways. Rewriting folk poetry by transferring mythical heroes and heroines from mythical environment to a contemporary one, gives the writer various possibilities to „touch” the original text. S/he can underline the significances by, for example, planting the story in a new genre, or, s/he can highlight some character which is not so prominent in the original text. By doing so, the writer gives the characters, the events, even the whole text -some new significance.

The Heroes is a multi-coded, fragmented novel: its mythical frame of narrative also includes other aspects (the aspects of parody, fantastic, and feminist literature) that are merging with the mythical narration. Sinisalo built whole worlds around the characters borrowed from *Kalevala*, increasing and forming the significance the characters transmit. The characters are transferred from *Kalevala* avoiding to forfeit their original cores: in the characters of the cultural heroes in *The Heroes*, we can still find the Kalevalan “ancestors”. This kind of creating of characters and emphasizing some of their features leads us to examine different narratives in separate worlds, or zones. Depending on the character we focus the analysis on, the individual features become more obvious, or are mixed, but the four-stranded thread is interwoven throughout the narratives, and carries various meanings, on several levels. The novel is a narrative of the contemporary society and its vileness. In a way, the pessimistic novel, representing the chaotic contemporary world, becomes an optimistic and a hopeful description of the beginning of the new age - in a reading which is tinged with mythical interpretation.

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