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Rossi, Riikka

2025

Université Marc Bloch, Département d'études néerlandaises

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/627984

Rossi, R 2025, 'Women Writing Finnish Naturalism : Minna Canth (1844-1897) and Ina Lange (1846-1930)', Deshima: Arts, lettres et cultures des pays du Nord , vol. 19, pp. 135-154. https://doi.org/10.57086/deshima.821

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Women Writing Finnish Naturalism

Minna Canth (1844-1897) and Ina Lange (1846-1930)

◊Riikka Rossi

The history of literary naturalism has traditionally been narrated through male authors who emerged as the movement's public figures and leaders of naturalist schools—Émile Zola in France, Giovanni Verga in Italy, August Strindberg in Sweden, or Theodor Dreiser and Stephen Crane in the anglophone world. Yet, particularly in the Nordic countries, women writers played a central, and in some cases leading role in shaping the movement. The rise of feminism in Scandinavia during the latter half of the nineteenth century opened new possibilities for women in the literary field and influenced the forms that naturalism took in the region.[1] Authors such as Victoria Benedictsson, Minna Canth, Anne Charlotte Leffler, Camilla Collett, Ina Lange, and Amalie Skram adopted naturalist techniques and employed the genre to pursue both aesthetic innovation and societal critique. As Päivi Lappalainen (2000, 2007, 2008) has argued, the naturalist novel—with its claims to truth and scientific authority—provided women writers a medium through which to inscribe themselves into a genre coded as masculine, while simultaneously mobilizing it for their own aesthetic purposes and political purposes. In the Nordic context, "the woman question," as contemporary debates on gender inequality were termed, became a recurrent theme.

Over the past few decades, Finnish scholarship has increasingly identified naturalism as a central part of late nineteenth-century Finnish and Nordic

◊ Riikka Rossi, University of Helsinki.

[1] On women authors in the nineteenth-century Finnish literature, see e.g. Lappalainen & Rojola (2007). John Stuart Mill's famous essay *On the Subjection of Women* (1869) was translated into Danish by George Brandes immediately in 1869, and in the same year it appeared in Swedish.

literature and drawn attention to women's contributions to the movement.[2] These studies have demonstrated how Finnish naturalist authors combined naturalism's "entropic" narratives of decay and disintegration with a critical view of social inequality and the female condition. This article synthesizes some key findings from these studies and extends this research by arguing that a nuanced consideration of women authors writing from the cultural peripheries not only enriches our understanding of naturalism as a transnational movement but also reveals how the genre's documentary methods were transformed and how its poetics was redirected in diverse cultural contexts. Although research on transnational naturalism has often been centred on Zola's influence and reception (see e.g. Laing Hill 2020), my aim is to show that women writers should be seen not merely as his successors but as active participants who reinterpreted, expanded, and revised the naturalist project.

For instance, the case of Minna Canth foregrounds significant aspects of women's engagement with naturalism and exemplifies the way in which they modified the techniques and topics of naturalism. Her career challenges conventional narratives of how nineteenth-century authors engaged with literary life from a peripheral position. Although Paris was, in Pascale Casanova's words (1999: 41), the "capital of the literary universe," which attracted authors to participate in the prestige of that scene, Canth never travelled there; however, she became a leader of the naturalist school in Finland and developed a distinctive naturalist voice in dialogue with international currents. While Canth was one of Zola's most enthusiastic supporters in Finland,[3] her own work redirected the clinical modes of observation of external realities toward the psychological analysis of passions and emotions. In her work, the misogynic tropes of women as degenerate and primitive were transformed into a critical discussion of the female condition and the pathological narratives and aesthetics of disgust were often intended to shock conservative audiences. Although Canth's prose fiction and her novella *Kauppa-Lopo* (1889, Lopo the Peddler) have sometimes been considered as her most naturalistic and Zolaesque (Lappalainen 2007: 39), her naturalism was not limited. She also renewed naturalism in various ways, making important contributions to the field of naturalist drama, a genre that was less elaborated within in French naturalism.[4] Canth penned pioneering works of working-

[2] For instance, the studies on Finnish naturalism by Päivi Lappalainen (2000) and Riikka Rossi (2007) and Minna Maijala's research on Minna Canth's naturalism (2008, 2013) have revised the role of naturalism in Finnish literary history.

[3] She frequently mentions Zola in her correspondence and recommended Zola's works for reading (e.g. Maijala 2008, 2013).

[4] See Rossi 2007. My approach is based on a relatively broad understanding of the naturalism as a genre, which uses techniques of realistic representation yet has own distinctive thematic repertoire (Baguley 1990,48). I have discussed the term elsewhere (Rossi 2007).

class naturalist drama in the European context. Her dramatic work reminds us of how Nordic women writers played an important role as innovators in the genre, in which Ibsen, Strindberg, Anton Chekhov, and Gerhart Hauptmann have been acknowledged as precursors.

Ina Lange's work and career complements this view by reminding us of that "women naturalists" do not constitute a unified category. Rather, their works reveal various thematic concerns and formal strategies shaped by the linguistic and cultural contexts in which they wrote. Whereas Canth was canonized in the early twentieth century, and later became as an icon of Finnish feminism, Lange occupied a more marginal position. Writing in Swedish under the masculine pseudonyms Daniel Sten and Daniel Stern, she was long excluded from the history of Finnish literature and only rediscovered in the twenty-first century (Lappalainen 2000; Toftegaard Pedersen 2002; Rossi 2007).[5] Along with Gerda von Mickwitz and Lilly Londen, Lange's work represents one of the most radical contributions to the Swedish-speaking literary scene of the era (Forssell 1999: 456). Her radicalism was however met with harsh criticism, which may have eventually influenced on her withdrawal from writing in the 1890s, after which she pursued her main professional career as a pianist.

While naturalism was once effaced from Finnish and Nordic literary history (see Lappalainen 2000 and Rossi 2007), Ina Lange's work clearly demonstrates how naturalism was adopted and adapted in Nordic literature in the early 1880s. In recent studies, Lange's major novel, *"Sämre folk. En berättelse*" (1885; "Inferior People. A Story"), has been re-considered as a pioneering novel in Finnish naturalism. The novel, which includes in the number of one of many "Nana narratives," sparked by Zola's most internationally renowned novel *Nana* (1880), engages with *fin-de-siècle* themes through irony and, at times, sharp satire to interrogate upper-class values and morality. Lange's ironic and sometimes satirical mode—in spirit of Strindberg and Alexander Kielland—was often misunderstood by her contemporaries. *"Sämre folk*", as well as her later novel *Luba. En Studie* (1889), demonstrate how Lange's work, with its decadent motifs and textual practices, move from naturalism to decadence and invites further reflection on the intersections of these movements. In what follows, I first situate Canth and Lange within the literary and cultural context of their time, before examining in detail the poetics of naturalism in their work.

[5] The Lange was discovered in the wake of the feminist criticism (e.g. Nevala 1989). Yet there were also other reasons that she was not known in Finland: her novels were not easily available in Finland in the 20the century and Finnish translations of her work did not exist until the 21st century.

Female Naturalists Against the Grain



Fig. 1. Finnish novelist and business woman Minna Canth (1844-1897). Picture by Anton Nordgren published in Finnish periodical Uusi Kuvalehti *on 1st June 1891. <https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/aikakausi/binding/891344?page=1>.*

Minna Canth's career reflects the broader transformations in the profession of writing that took place across nineteenth-century Europe. As Yves Chevrel (1993: 173) notes, the modernization of society allowed writers from the bourgeoisie to enter the literary scene, and to live independently without reliance on patrons. Yet the trajectory of Canth—a woman with a working-class background—was exceptional even in a global context, as she attained a central position in the literary community. Canth was born in the industrial town of Tampere, where her father worked in a textile factory—first as a labourer, then as a foreman, and later as a textile shopkeeper.[6] The family's upward mobility made it possible for Canth to receive a relatively thorough education. They later moved to Kuopio, a rural town in eastern Finland. Her first language was Finnish, but she learned Swedish early and attended the Swedish-language girls' school in Kuopio, the first state school for girls in Finland, founded by the national philosopher Johan Wilhelm Snellman (1806–1881). The modernization of Finland in the late nineteenth century elevated the status of the Finnish-speaking majority. In the 1860s, Canth enrolled in the newly established Jyväskylä Teacher Seminary—the first institution in Finland to offer higher education to women. In 1865, she married her natural sciences teacher, Johan Ferdinand Canth, with whom she had seven children. His death in 1879, shortly before the birth of their youngest child, left Minna Canth a single mother.

Women writers have held a strong position in the history of Finnish literature since its beginning in the nineteenth century (see e.g. Lappalainen & Rojola 2007). However, Minna Canth's path is illustrative of the broadening of female writers' role in the Finnish-language cultural field, as she became the first notable woman to write in Finnish.[7] Like many other naturalist authors of the era, Canth began her literary career in journalism. In the late 1870s, she began to send her critical writings on girls' education and the female

[6] The presentation of Minna Canth's life in this article is based on Minna Canth's biographies by Greta von Frenckell-Thesleff (1944) and Minna Maijala (2013).

[7] Women writers had occupied a prominent place in Finnish literary history since its emergence (e.g. Lappalainen & Rojola 2007) in the nineteenth century, but Canth's work marked a significant expansion of their role in the fennophone literature.

condition to local newspapers in Kuopio and Jyväskylä and also published her first fictional stories in newspapers. Although she never travelled abroad, she became acquainted with Émile Zola's work through Swedish translations and engaged with contemporary intellectual currents by reading Charles Darwin, the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, and the psychopathological theories circulating in Europe at the time.[8] In the 1880s, Canth's home at Kuopio became a literary salon, a social venue that served as a debating school and literary college. Canth gathered around her young writers and journalists, supporting and guiding them. Among those she mentored was Juhani Aho (1861–1921), who would later achieve recognition as a major figure in Finnish literature.

Beginning in the early 1880s, Canth increasingly focused on drama, which she eventually came to regard as her principal literary domain, while continuing to write novels and short stories. The emphasis on drama was encouraged by the establishment of the Finnish Theatre in Helsinki in 1872 and by the flourishing of Scandinavian drama, particularly the works of Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. At the beginning of the 1880s, Canth began to collaborate with the director and founder of the Finnish Theatre in Helsinki, Kaarlo Bergbom, and his sister Emelie Bergbom. Their support proved to be crucial for Canth's career, enabling her plays to be staged in the newly established national theatre and securing her reputation throughout Finland. Bergbom's artistic orientation, however, leaned toward Romanticism, and he sometimes encouraged Canth to mitigate the sharp naturalism of her plays (Koski 1999: 27).

Canth's roles as an author and mediator of literature, and mentor of young writers can seem exceptional in the context of naturalism, especially when contrasted with figures such as Zola, who gathered other male authors at his house in Médan to discuss naturalist poetics. In the Nordic countries and in Finland, however, women participated widely in the nineteenth-century cultural field (Lappalainen & Rojola, 2007: 8). Women teachers, artists, and activists—many of whom were actively involved in the feminist movement—played crucial roles as mentors, mediators, critics, and translators, facilitating the circulation and reinterpretation of diverse literary currents. For instance, Helena Westermarck, a Finnish-Swedish painter, introduced contemporary French literature in her essays and book reviews. The cultural exchange was not limited to France or to other Nordic countries. Westermarck subsequently published a study on George Eliot (1894). Hanna Andersin, a rector, translator and journalist, introduced Italian naturalism in Finland by translating a selection of short stories by Giovanni Verga, Matilde Serao, Edmondo de

[8] As Maijala (2008) has shown, some of Canth's lesser-known works, such as the short story *"Lääkäri"*(A doctor, 1891), demonstrate that Canth was very well acquainted with contemporary theories of hysteria and neurosis.

Amicis, Luigi Capuana, and Giuseppe Giacosa, published as a volume *Nuori Itaalia* [Young Italy 1893]. Like Canth, Elisabeth Järnefelt, a member of the nobility of Saint Petersburg, held a literary salon in Kuopio. She introduced young writers to Russian literature, to the work of Leo Tolstoy, and to Vissarion Belinsky's theory of realist types.

The project of naturalism thus inspired artists from various fields beyond literary circles. Ina Lange's participation in naturalism can be set in this context, as Lange eventually made her principal career as a professional pianist.[9] Although Lange's life has not been studied as extensively as that of Minna Canth, the available sources (Mörne 1939; Torvinen 1967; Ahola & Nevala 1989; Luthander 2015, Kaasik-Koivisto & Välimäki 2023) reveal a multi-dimensional cosmopolitan trajectory of a professional pianist, composer, music pedagogue, music historian and a naturalist author, whose legacy extends beyond literature and music to an unusual field, political diplomacy. Born in in Helsinki in 1846 into a family that belonged to the civil service, Lange's outlook was shaped by her cosmopolitan upbringing—a background rare in the Finnish context. Like many upper-class girls of her time, she received a private education, first at home under a governess, and later at a private school in Berlin. She subsequently pursued musical studies, first in Berlin and then at the Moscow Conservatory, where her teachers included such prominent figures as Nicolai Rubinstein and Pyotr Tchaikovsky. While Lange had multiple roles in the field of music, she achieved recognition particularly as a lied pianist, as well as an early composer of Finnish-language lieder (Kaasik-Koivisto & *Välimäki 2023, 125)*.



Fig. 2. Ina Lange, Danish pianist and writer, born in Finland. Det Kgl. Biblioteks billedsamling Billedsamlingen. Danske portrætter, 4°, Lange, Ina (1846-1930). <http://www5.kb.dk/images/billed/2010/okt/billeder/object457987/da>.

In 1876, Ina Forstén married a Swedish opera singer, Algot Lange. The cultural circles in Stockholm, where the couple lived in the 1870s, inspired Lange to begin writing. It was Ina Lange who presented her friend, the Finnish noblewoman and actress Siri von Essen, to her future husband, August Strindberg. In Stockholm, Lange became acquainted with Swedish authors such as Ellen Key and Selma Lagerlöf, and developed a friendship with Anne Charlotte Leffler, who became an important mentor to Lange. In an article published in a Finnish cultural review, *Valvoja*

[9] Biographical research on Lange is scant. Lennart Luthander's *Gränslös kärlek i Strindbergs tid* (2015) is based on an unfinished manuscript, and opens interesting views for further research.

in 1883, Lange presented Leffler as one of the "first and boldest" pioneers of modern realism in Sweden and expressed her admiration for Leffler's work, which searched for unembellished truths.[10] The Langes moved to Copenhagen in the mid-1880s, another important scene for Nordic cultural exchange at that time. There she made the acquaintance of Edvard Brandes, the brother of George, both influential critics and authors in the Nordic cultural circles. For virtually her entire career, Lange lived and worked outside of Finland, yet she frequently returned to Finland to spend the summer. The time she spent in Finland is reflected in her short stories, which are often set in a Finnish rural environment.

Most of Lange's fiction writing took place in the 1880s, during the heyday of naturalism in Finland and many Nordic Countries. Her notable works included the collection of short stories *Bland* ödebygder *och skär* (1884, Among wilderness and islands); "*Sämre folk". En Berättelse* (1885, "The Worst Sort of People". A Story"), *Luba. En Studie* (1889), and *Berättelser från Finland* (1890, "Stories from Finland"). In addition, there are possibly lost manuscripts, which limits a full understanding of her work. For instance, after *"Sämre folk"* she worked on a novel entitled *"Fint folk"* which would depict the Finnish aristocracy in the 1850s. The title with its quotation marks echoes "Sämre folk" and its irony; this novel would have possibly continued the critique of the Finnish upper classes that is salient in *"Sämre folk"*.[11] Lange also authored a one-act comedy, which premiered at the *Svenska Teatern* in 1890 and was well received by contemporary critics.[12]

Although women authors such as Canth already published with their own name, as was common for many nineteenth-century women writers, Lange disguised her identity behind masculine pen names, in her case, Daniel Sten and sometimes Daniel Stern, although it was publicly known who was behind the aliases. As Päivi Lappalainen (2000: 44-45) notes, the model probably came from some Swedish female authors.[13] During the 1910s-1930s Lange published several works on music history, this time under her own name.

In addition to her career in music and literature, Lange is remembered for her diplomatic efforts for her native country during the Russification period, also called as Finland's years of oppression, at the early 1890s.[14] Lange served for several years as a confidential informant for Finnish politicians at the Danish court. Through her position as court pianist, she was able to

[10] The article was published under the pen name Aino 1883. The text was probably a translation from Swedish.

[11] The novel plan was announced in a short news in the newspaper *Wasa Tidning* 12.11.1886.

[12] See *Åbo underrättelser* 01.05.1890.

[13] On the use of pen names, see Lappalainen 2000: 44-45.

[14] Finnish historian Taimi Torvinen (1967) has documented this exchange on her study on Lange's secret diplomacy.

transmit reports she had received from her cousin, Member of Parliament and Professor of History J. R. Danielson, to Crown Prince Frederik of Denmark (later Frederik VIII), who in turn passed them on to his sister, Empress Maria Feodorovna of Russia (formerly Princess Dagmar). The intention was to make Emperor Alexander III—who otherwise could not be approached—aware of how Russian right-wing circles were undermining Finland's autonomy, and to draw attention to Finland's special constitutional position.

After the 1890s Ina Lange withdrew from writing naturalist fiction and thereafter focused on music and music history. The reasons of Lange's withdrawal are not thoroughly documented, as the biographical research on Lange is limited. However, one may speculate that the criticism that her work encountered influenced this choice. Of course, naturalist literature raised globally critical reactions and scandals were part of its poetics. Male authors were not spared from criticism, yet women naturalist authors encountered particularly severe hostility. Ina Lange, too, was condemned for her gender. When "*Sämre folk*" appeared in 1885, a critic accused Lange of following her masters, Zola and Strindberg, to a point that one could barely tolerate from a woman.[15] In addition, her work was not well received in the cultural circles in which she socialized. In a letter to his mother Albert Edelfelt, the famous Finnish painter called "*Sämre folk*" as "awful rubbish", "thoroughly mediocre" (cit. Lappalainen 2007: 44). Lange further indicated, in a letter to Anne Charlotte Leffler that she had personally encountered harsh criticism. "Everyone is writing to me: "For God's sake, write something 'beautiful', otherwise you are doomed!""[16] The naturalistic descriptions of sexuality were not always well received among the conservative wing of feminists. Some considered that the emphasis on erotic emancipation could undermine or even ruin the feminist movement's target to improve the female condition.[17]

Moreover, the reception of naturalism was a politically sensitive issue in Finland, at that time an autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia. In Finland, French naturalism and decadence seemed to threaten the image of a healthy, young, and aspiring nation, where the national and nationalist circles glorified progress and modernization. Critics felt that naturalism was a dangerous European contagion, which should not take root in the soil of the young Finnish nation. Finnish naturalist authors were heavily criticized for moral and aesthetic corruption and for drawing impulses from "the sewers of Paris." In many Nordic countries "naturalism" often went under the term "realism"

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[15] *Finland* 24.12.1885.

[16] My translation. The original in Swedish: "*Alla skrifver till mig: För Guds skull, Skrif någonting vackert eljes är du förlorad*".

[17] Anne Charlotte Leffler was also criticized for too bold descriptions of female sexuality. See Lindén 2013.

or "new realism," as these terms were considered to be more optimistic than Zola's naturalism.[18]

In Finland, the term *inhorealismi* ("disgust realism") was coined as a derogatory label for naturalism, reflecting the connotations of naturalism's dangerous contagion. Minna Canth was frequently cast as the leading representative of this so-called "disgust literature." A bourgeois mother, who described adulterous women and women committing crimes, she made critics turn pale with indignation. The reception of Canth's novella *Kauppa-Lopo* (1889, Lopo the Peddler) is a well-known case: Canth was denounced as an "admirer of disgust," who had gone too far in the footsteps of Zola. To quote a critic's judgement: "the reader does not know what is worse: that one has painted such a portrait of our people, or, that there are writers who dare to offer these kinds of portraits to their public. What is more, the reader is shocked by the fact that in our country the skilful painter of these mean caricatures is a woman."[19] The critics' dissatisfaction reflects a certain horizon of expectations for female authors: the nineteenth-century conservative ideals of female authorship limited to didactic genres and children's literature, both situated in the private and domestic sphere, women's realm in patriarchal society.[20]

Tragic Passions and Shock Effects

I now turn to a more detailed discussion of Canth's and Lange's poetics. Minna Canth was thoroughly familiar with naturalist aesthetics and its experimental method, as shown by how her practices of writing. She took topics from the real life and the news, she documented life by visiting prisons and poorhouses. In her literary work she however diverged from the naturalist model of detailed description of external reality in favor of the analysis of emotions and the psychological effects of society and the environment. Her sustained interest in the psychological dimensions of naturalism is evident in both her correspondence and public engagement, which reveal a broad reading of contemporary authors such as Zola, Henrik Ibsen, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. While recognizing Zola as the central figure of the modern novel, Canth reformulated the naturalist project by shifting the emphasis toward the psychology of emotions: "The modern novel seeks to explore the human soul, to learn to understand the development of emotions and passions, the hereditary and other tendencies of the soul, the external circumstances, as well as the influence exerted by these and by health on its formation," she explained in one of her letters.[21]

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[18] On the reception of naturalism in Finland, see Lappalainen 2000 and Rossi 2007.

[19] See Meurman, 1885: 2. More on Canth's reception, see Tiirakari 1997.

[20] On this horizon, see Pykett 1992: 35-36.

[21] Canth, a letter 4.3.1888 to pastor Elis Bergroth (Kannila 1973: 315). The original in Finnish: *"Nykyaikainen romaani pyrkii tutkimaan ihmissielua, oppia ymmärtämään*

Canth's emphasis on the poetics of passions—a concept that Minna Maijala (2008) has identified as central to her naturalism—constitutes a defining feature of her work from the very beginning of her career. Her naturalist writings frequently take the form of psychopathological illness narratives, informed by contemporary theories of hysteria and neurosis. An "entropic vision" of disintegration, characteristic of naturalist poetics (Baguley 1990), provides the default framework of her narratives and dramatic settings, which move with almost fatal inevitability toward decline and decay. The naturalist motif of the fall is recurrent in both Canth's dramas and her prose fiction. Her works frequently present women who descend into misfortune and suffer a physical and/or mental breakdown. At the same time, these narratives are infused with intense emotional charge: characters are propelled by instinctive passions, while the audience is confronted with emotional effects such as disgust, moral indignation, and compassion. These affective strategies invite readers and spectators to engage critically with the social realities represented on stage. Whereas naturalism has often been associated with an aesthetics of objective documentation and detached analysis, Canth's deployment of emotion reveal the persuasive power of emotions. The emotional effects of her work operate in tandem with her critical aesthetics and reinforce the "reality effects" (Barthes 1968) of her naturalism.

The intensity of emotions found its first major expression in her breakthrough play *Työmiehen vaimo* (*The Worker's Wife*), a five-act drama that premiered at the Finnish Theatre in Helsinki in 1885. The play portrays the destructive dynamics of a working-class marriage between a virtuous servant Johanna, and Risto, a drunkard worker who is interested only in her savings. The polarized setting, which depicts a submissive wife and a villainous husband, echoes Romanticism and the Manichean poetics of melodrama, both of which had made a deep impression on Canth, influencing her dramaturgy above all.[22] The Romantic impulse towards transgression is most powerfully personified in Homsantuu, Risto's former fiancée. Cast as a Romani woman, mysterious, exoticized outsider, she embodies the transgression of the social order and gives voice to a protest against patriarchal society and legislation that rendered women and their property subject to male guardianship. From the play's first performances, the figure of Homsantuu captured public attention, largely due to the performance of Ida Alberg (1857-1915), the preeminent star of Finnish theatre, whose performance in the role became iconic. In particular, Homsantuu's famous tambourine dance, which echoed Nora's tarantella dance

tunteiden ja intohimojen kehityksen, sielun perinnölliset ja muut taipumukset, ulkonaiset olosuhteet, niiden ynnä ruumiinrakennuksen sekä terveyden vaikutusmäärän".

[22] Friedrich Schiller's *Die Räuber* was also a source of inspiration for Canth, the figure of Homsantuu, a mysterious outsider of the community was inspired George Sand's *La Petite Fadette* (1849), which became known in Finland as a dramatic adaptation by Charlotte Birch-Pfeiffer.

in Ibsen's *Et dukkehjem* (*A Doll's House,* 1879) exemplifies Canth's naturalist poetics of passion. The bodily expression and vivacity which characterize the figure of Homsantuu, is invested with a symbolic transgression of the restrictions on women. Yet, in keeping with the tragic poetics of naturalism, her act of rebellion ultimately fails: the police arrive to arrest her, while Risto and his companions head indifferently to the beer hall. In the final act, she returns with a revolver and delivers one of Canth's most enduring lines: "Your law and justice—ha, ha, ha, ha! That is what I wanted to shoot at." [23] This line continues to resonate in Finnish public discourse, often cited in debates on gender inequality.

Another working-class drama *Kovan onnen lapsia* ("Children of ill fate", 1888), continues to elaborate themes of social protest and transgression, empowered by romantic personae and melodramatic conventions. The play depicts a workers' strike in a sawmill and features a rebellious outlaw who defies both law and society. The poetics of melodrama are evident in its stark polarization between villains and victims, as well as in the aesthetic of excess that permeates the work—most notably through hyperbolic rhetoric and emphatic delineations of the moral universe. Yet, unlike classic melodrama, Canth eschews the resolution of a happy ending: the play unfolds as a naturalist tragedy. In both *Työmiehen vaimo* and *Kovan onnen lapsia*, the rebellion of outsiders against society ultimately fails; victims remain trapped in suffering, while villains go unpunished. Rather than offering cathartic release, Canth's endings intensify discomfort in order to sharpen the critical edge of her plays. The spectator is left not with consolation, but with a heightened sense of moral outrage at social injustice and an acute awareness of collective responsibility. The shock effects of *Kovan onnen lapsia*—including a homicide—proved too disturbing for contemporary audiences. The play provoked harsh criticism and even accusations of inciting proletarian violence, leading the leadership of the Finnish Theatre to fear the withdrawal of state subsidies. As a result, the performances were halted immediately after the premiere.

An empathetic view of poverty and a critical stance toward the defects of working-class conditions are also reflected in Canths's prose fiction; for example, Canth's *Köyhää kansaa* (1886, *Poor Folk*), a short novel, depicts the misery of a working-class family from the mother's perspective. The story engages with contemporary psychopathological discourses of the so-called "age of hysteria and neurosis." Exhausted by illness, hunger, unemployment, and the death of her child, the mother experiences a mental collapse, and is confined to a sordid, filthy nursing home. *Köyhää kansaa*, like many of Canth's work, exemplify the typical scheme of naturalistic tragedies, in which woman, and especially the female body, on which the stability of the social body depends, become the focus of the tragic disaster. However, her treatment diverges from

[23] My translation. The original in Finnish: "*Teidän lakinne ja oikeutenne ha, ha, ha, ha.* […] *Niitähän minun pitikin ampua.*" Canth 1885, p. 106.

the clinical mode of narration practiced by some male naturalist authors. While authors like the Goncourts or Zola reflected and sometimes legitimised the essentialism of the female body as a source of hysteria, emancipated writers like Canth frequently emphasised social circumstances and patriarchal society as fatal triggers for women's physical and mental breakdown. A similar strategy which both uses and mobilizes tropes of naturalism permeates in *Kauppa-Lopo* (1889, Lopo the Peddler), which caused a scandal. The story focuses on a marginalized woman, who has fallen into vagabondage and theft, and relies on the naturalist poetics of disgust, emphasizing the grotesque physical ugliness and dirtiness of its protagonist. However, the narration simultaneously highlights Lopo's inner goodness and good-hearted nature, and in contrast highlights the upper classes' contempt for the poor woman, thus challenging the morals of the wealthy and powerful.

In Canth's work, the naturalist poetics of shock effects is combined with techniques of narrative empathy, to use Suzanne Keen's (2007) terms. By means of free indirect discourse, the implied reader is invited to acknowledge the protagonists' situation and feel with the female characters. Along with *Poor folk*, Canth's novel *Hanna* (1886) uses this strategy. The novel depicts a young bourgeois girl's coming-of-age, disclosing differences in education related to gender and a young girl's experience of a series of deceptions: a family life ravaged by the father's alcoholism and double standards, then a fiancée who betrays and abandons her. Moreover, the novel takes a critical stand regarding the bourgeois girl's superficial education, a theme which Canth also criticized in her journal articles.

Canth's emancipated interpretation of the naturalist analysis of milieu and heredity is also evident in her treatment of crime, one of the themes that spread across nineteenth-century literature from Dostoyevsky to Zola and was reinforced in criminological discourses such as those of Cesare Lombroso. Canth explored this topic from the perspective of women in several of her works, portraying characters who, driven by desperation, commit crimes and eventually end up in prison. Rather than focusing on individual culpability, they emphasize collective responsibility. *Sylvi* (1893),[24] and *Anna Liisa* (1895), which blend the Zolian model with a psychological struggle reminiscent of Russian realism, can be mentioned here. *Sylvi* is a drama based on a "*fait divers*," a news story of a young wife who murders her husband in desperation; her mind shatters and she ends up in prison. The language and the setting of the play echo Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in multiple ways, a play which is both directly and indirectly referred in elsewhere in Canth's work.[25] However, in

[24] Canth wrote Sylvi originally in Swedish. It was premiered in the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki in 1893.

[25] *A Doll's House* is directly referenced also in Canth's play *Papin perhe* ("A priest's family," 1891), in which one of the main characters, Maiju, wants to become an actress, and plays Nora and scenes of Ibsen's play.

Sylvi Canth's interpretation of women's potential to fend for themselves is more pessimistic; Sylvi's passion and frenetic quest for freedom become driving forces towards catastrophe (Maijala 2008: 112).

Anna Liisa is also reminiscent of Ibsen's plays, especially in its form. Like many of them, it is an "analytical drama," to quote Peter Szondi (1987: 12), which builds on the exposure of past mistakes in the present. The play depicts a young farmer's daughter, whose past crime—infanticide—is revealed in the present. While preparing *Anna Liisa*, Canth had visited a Finnish women's prison and interviewed young female criminals. The drama presents a critical view of collective responsibility for the infanticide, which the young girl had committed in despair to avoid shame and society's moral judgement. The tragic pattern, which recurs in naturalistic fiction, often emphasizes the helplessness of the protagonists, who have been unable to control their fate. At the end of *Anna Liisa*, the protagonist confesses in public, is absolved of her sins by the village parson, and willingly accepts the punishments of shaming and imprisonment. Canth's play has been said to echo Leo Tolstoy's philosophy and ideas on forgiveness (von Frenckell-Thesleff, 1944: 315). However, the reconciliation is superficial: the final scene can be interpreted as a kind of sacrificial ritual in which the woman is made a scapegoat for the community's hypocrisy. The protagonists' sincerity is juxtaposed to collective hypocrisy; the play thus criticizes the former and praises the latter. As is typical for analytical dramas, what is revealed is not only past but also the present moment. The revelation of past secrets challenges the inequality of the female condition in the present, and also the falseness of life in general.

Ina Lange's Decadent Naturalism

Canths's naturalism favours the poetics of passions and gives pride of place to dramatically tense dialogue, even in her prose work. The detailed descriptions of milieus, which made Zola famous, play a less prominent role in Canth's prose fiction. Ina Lange, in contrast, employs description more extensively. Through description, she simultaneously introduces new milieus to naturalism, like in "*Sämre folk." En Berättelse,* which moves from the Helsinki archipelago to the city to the metropoles of Russia, St. Petersbourg and Moscow. "*Sämre folk*" can be included among one of many "Nana narratives" inspired by Zola's most internationally renowned novel, which both shocked and fascinated reading audiences. As it has been documented in the study of naturalism (Baguley 1990: 164-165, Laing Hill 2020: 108-109), Zola's narrative of the rise and fall of a courtesan—framed through male desires and obsessions with female sexuality—gave rise to a transnational wave of rewritings, parodies, and adaptations which established the *Nana* figure as

a cultural motif and as a crossover product.[26] However, Lange's engagement with Nana-narratives can be seen as both bold and exceptional, given that female authors rarely undertook adaptations of Zola's work. The choice was particularly audacious in the Finnish context, where prostitutes in literature typically appeared only as minor characters and fallen women were often portrayed as victims of adverse social conditions, designed to elicit the readers' sympathy (see Lappalainen 2008: 156). It is therefore unsurprising that Lange's novel provoked harsh criticism and moral indignation.

In "*Sämre folk,*" references to Nana are evident from the outset, beginning with the name of Lange's protagonist, Nadja, whose trajectory—rising from poverty to the status of courtesan before falling into degradation—clearly echoes the pattern of Zola's *Nana*. Already early reviews compared the novel to *Nana*.[27] Nadja, the daughter of a Russian Cossack and a Finnish servant, grows up on an island close to Helsinki, works in a tobacco factory, gives birth out of wedlock to a child fathered by a Russian office, and becomes a wet-nurse. Like Zola's Nana, she breaks into the theatre world as a choir girl, although she can barely sing, and then becomes a high society courtesan, corrupting those who meet her. When Nadja's career in Helsinki ends, she moves to St. Petersburg, where she rebuilds a new life of success. Throughout the novel, Nadja's Russian background represents inherited degeneration and symbolically reflects the late nineteenth-century political situation and fears of Russian oppression in Finland. As was typical in late nineteenth-century Finnish literature, Lange portrays St. Petersburg and Moscow as decadent cities (Lappalainen 2008: 162). Following the naturalist pattern of decay, Nadja's rise in Russia concludes with a fall, and she ends up performing in a beer hall in Moscow, where she is eventually rescued by her Finnish lover. He takes Nadja in a home for fallen women, and she is obliged to rebuild her life as a humble servant known by the fennophone name of Maja (Maija). Just as in Zola's *Nana*, the prostitute's corruption and transgressions against bourgeois morality and ideals of female decency and purity are punished.[28]

While Zola's *Nana* exposed the hypocrisy and corruption of society by depicting male obsessions with the female body, Lange's narrative of a prostitute likewise functions as a critical instrument. In *"Sämre folk"* the implied author's view of the upper-class society around Nadja is highly critical. Swedish-speaking educated people are represented especially negatively and viewed sometimes through satirical lenses, a feature that extends to Lange's other novels and short stories (which was perhaps reflected in the harsh criticism that Lange encountered from her fellows). While heredity is featured

[26] On Nana-narratives, see Baguley 1990: 164-165 and Laing Hill 2020 109-101.

[27] E.g. the critique in *Finland* 24.12.1885.

[28] Here Lange concludes with a different solution than that of Anne Charlotte Leffler, who criticized the punishment of female transgression in *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*.

in *"Sämre folk,"* in contrast to Zola, Nadja's character is shaped not only by inherited degeneration but also by the influence of her social environment. The way in which Nadja is made an object of entertainment for upper class men is critically observed. Nadja eventually adopts the naturalistic slogans of nature and the idea of free morality from upper-class men, which directs the reader's attention to class and gender difference:

> Clean! Such a stupid word, as if there was something pure. Pure was against nature, nature, which was nowadays worshipped, she knew that. […] Her friends in Helsinki had taught her a lot of such "education". Ulf and Lundberg and Lemke and Anderson. Well-educated gentlemen, well-educated boys![29]

Lange's narration is frequently highly ironic, which serves as a means of social critique. The novel unveils upper-class prejudices, even contempt, for poor people and women, who are made scapegoats of vice and social corruption. The very title of "*Sämre folk,"* ("inferior People"), is indicative of this criticism. The quotation marks around the title refer to the upper-class pejorative discourse about ordinary people. The title reads as ironic, challenging the discourse it critiques. The unequal distribution of wealth is subsequently presented ironically and commented on throughout the novel. The reference to the Gospel of Matthew encapsulates the implied author's criticism: "The well-off will be treated well. The one who has in abundance will be given more. And the one who has little, even that will be taken away."[30] Lange also offers satiric scenes describing the upper classes and how they see ordinary Finnish people through the lens of the nationalist-romantic program. Lange adopts a satirical tone in her depiction of nationalist circles in St. Petersburg, which romanticize a prostitute by seeing her as a pure child of nature or as a future musical talent.

However, while "*Sämre folk"* conveys a moral critique—targeting the upper classes and men—the novel's narrative techniques generate greater ambivalence than, for instance, some of Canth's tendentious works. The use of point of view and free indirect discourse that foster narrative empathy in Canth's tragic prose is less prominent in Lange's novel. In some scenes charged with high affective potential, the narrative perspective remains external. For instance, the narrator briefly mentions of the death of Nadja's child: "Her own little child died of neglect at the hands of a 'child-loving madam' in Rödberg", in explaining how Nadja became a wet-nurse, yet hiding the character's experience.[31] Arne Toftegaard Pedersen (2002: 174-175) has identified a certain functionality in

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[29] The original in Swedish: "*Rena! Sådant dumt ord, liksom det fans något rent. Det rena är emot naturen, naturen, som nu för tiden dyrkades, det visste hon.* […] *Hennes vänner i Helsingfors hade lärt henne en hel del sådan 'bildning'. Ulf och Lundberg och Lemke och Anderson. Belästa herrar, riktigt bildade gossa!*" Lange, 1885: 57.

[30] The original in Swedish: *"Det är de bättre lottade som skola ha det goda. Den, som har mycket, skall få mera. Och den, som eger litet, skall mista äfven det* ." Lange 1885:13.

[31] *"Hennes eget lilla barn dog af vanvärd hos en 'barnälskande madam' vid Rödbergen".* Lange 1885: 101.

Nadja's character. The almost predestined scheme of the Nana-narrative of the novel, as well as the circulation of naturalist discourses (heredity, nature) in Nadja's character results in a certain constructedness, which eventually detracts from in-depth psychological characterization. But while the novel depicts scenes of role-taking and performances, Nadja's performative play with roles in *"Sämre folk,"* extends beyond a motif. Nadja embodies a fictional character: she performs Nana and she performs the conventions of naturalism.

In some respects *"Sämre folk"* manifests a layer of meta-fictionality or self-conscious naturalism, which both engages with and challenges the naturalist project it presents. In addition to Nadja's character, the novel's preface exemplifies this aspect. "*Sämre folk"* opens with the author's foreword, a convention typical of naturalist novels, which usually defended truthful documentation based on real life (e.g. Zola's preface to *L'Assommoir,* 1877). The preface to "Sämre folk," however, is a controversial paratext framing the novel. Written in the form of a letter to "Fru Edgren" [Anne Charlotte Edgren Leffler], and signed simply as "the author" ("*författaren*"), the foreword recalls a visit they together once made to "a home" where they met a woman who inspired Nadja's story. The author writes that she intended to find an explanation for this woman, who had been under police's supervision for fifteen years: "But—I failed. Instead of becoming her defender, my love of truth led me to accuse her."[32] This statement introduces a series of contradictions. The pursuit of truth that the novelist describes is both affirmed and undermined; the moral message is both stated and problematized; the author's empathetic understanding ties with moral judgement. What is more, from a textual perspective, the interplay between the male pen name "Daniel Sten" in the cover of the novel, and the female authorial presence in the preface blurs the boundaries between masculine and feminine in Nadja's story. Read through a biographical lens, the foreword reflects how the real Ina Lange behind the pen name seems to be surprised by the contradictions to which the naturalist project has taken her.

The play with masks and textuality in *"Sämre folk"* generates a certain poetics of ambivalence which manifests itself in the affective and epistemological contradictions mentioned above. The ambivalence reminds us of the *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics which turned away from naturalism's project of truth and documentation.[33] Indeed, decadence emerges in Lange's *"Sämre folk*"; its characters (the *femme fatale*, and a minor character, a feminine male figure), as well as scenes of performance and mirroring, can already be read as harbingers

[32] *"Men - jag misslyckades. I stället för att bli försvarare, dref min sanningskärlek mig till att anklaga*." Lange 1885, no page number.

[33] It can be reminded that Lange lived in Denmark, which was an important mediator of Decadence in the Nordic countries. A similar fusion of naturalism and decadence took place for instance in the work Herman Bang, whose work and essays were renowned in the Nordic countries.

of decadent aesthetics. The transition towards decadence manifests itself even more clearly in Lange's later novel *Luba. En Studie*. The novel, subtitled as a study, is a story of Luba, young and sensitive bourgeois girl, who falls ill with religious-erotic hysteria, echoing the Goncourtian type of the pathological illness narrative—again, a rare topic for a female author. Like many characters in realism and naturalism, Luba is easily absorbed in romantic literature, and lends herself to "bovarism" and dreaming. Her tendency to affection is reflected in her Russian name *Люба*, which means "love." The novel is set in a recognizable Helsinki milieu, with a prosaic backdrop: Luba is the youngest daughter of a post director. However, Luba displays the transgressive attitude of à *rebours*, against prosaic, bourgeois morals. She despises the decency of her elder sisters, and admires the bohemian attitude of her father. Hereditary degeneration between father and the daughter is featured in *Luba*, as well as the influence of a liberal education. Orphaned at birth, she is raised by her father and tutors.

Like Nadja in *Sämre folk*, Luba's character embodies a collage of discourses and philosophical ideas that circulated in naturalism and decadence. Another central trope of naturalism is introduced, when Luba's sensibility develops into hysteria. She learns that her sister will be engaged to a family friend with whom Luba has also fallen in love. She is overcome by an attack of hysteria. Thereafter, Luba becomes weak, feverish and paralyzed; her father succumbs to drinking and dies. "There is terrible decadence in that family!"[34] people in society gossiped. As is typical of naturalism, the character of a medical doctor serves to confirm the effects of reality: Luba's hysteria is diagnosed by a minor character, Doctor Collin, who has studied at the renowned medical school, *Karolinska institutet,* in Stockholm and specialized in "illnesses of her kind." Luba remains paralyzed for ten years, during which she develops a morbid religious passion and love for Christ. She marries a pastor of a revivalist sect, who however deceives her. The critique of double standards in marriage, a theme favored by contemporary Nordic authors, is here interwoven with the naturalist illness narrative.

Like "Sämre folk", *Luba* begins with a preface which functions as a paratext framing the narrative. In the foreword to the novel, which is signed by the real author "I.L" instead of the male pen name "Daniel Sten,"[35] Lange presents the work as an exploration of "one of the current pathological phenomena" and convinces readers that the topic is taken from real life: "every word is true, all events once lived."[36] At the same time, the preface can be regarded as a response to the criticism that Lange had received earlier. She comments on the constructedness of fiction, regretting that some people are "so naïve that they

[34] My translation. The original in Swedish: "*Det är ju en faslig decadence i den familjen*!" Lange 1889, p. 61.

[35] The foreword of *Luba* is directed to "Nenni" (probably Leffler).

[36] See the foreword of *Luba*, 1889 (no page number).

seriously believe it is the author himself who speaks through the characters he presents in his story" and who consider that "portraying less sympathetic individuals within a nation indicates an attack on that nation".[37] This seems to target conservative, nationalist-minded Finnish critics who had implied that naturalist descriptions of the Finnish people—unembellished and morally controversial—were unpatriotic. Lange also appeals to Edgren Leffler to accept the book with "sympathy for the suffering, whether it is self-inflicted or not."[38] In this sense, *Luba* aligns with the critical naturalism of Nordic authors, as it emphasizes the critical view of power and gender, although the novel builds on the *fin-de-siècle* illness narrative and discourses of female hysteria.

Conclusion

In this article I have provided an overview of the work of two Nordic female naturalist authors in the Finnish context, attempting to demonstrate the forms that naturalism took in the context of their work. The naturalist novel has sometimes been considered as an attempt to appropriate realism as a masculine science and thus masculinize the novel (Pykett 1992: 25), whereas women and their bodies offered objects of study for narratives of decay and corruption. However, the works of Lange and Canth highlight how naturalism's scientific discourse served as an aesthetic form capable of opening a critical discussion of important social topics in different cultural contexts, including the female condition. While their work engages in dialogue with Zola, Ibsen, and others, their works should not be seen as mere adaptations but as interpretations of the transnational poetics of naturalism. For instance, the way in which Canth transformed naturalism's masculine project and aesthetics of disgust into a critical feminism can be considered as a *tour de force* that importantly revised the project of naturalism. Moreover, their work also demonstrates the different directions that naturalism took in the transnational context. It should be emphasized that the works of women authors of the era, or the work of women naturalists, do not constitute a unified category. This is reflected in the distinctive themes, narrative strategies and forms of their work, ranging from Canth's poetics of passions and her achievements in drama, to Lange's turn towards *fin-de-siècle* topics, textuality, the use of irony and sometimes satire.

While both authors have now established their place in Finnish literary history, their work continues to invite further exploration. A major project

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[37] The original in Swedish: *"Som du vet, finns det många goda människor hvilka äro så naiva att de på allvar tro att det är författaren sjelf som talar i de personer han för fram i sin berättelse. Människor som förmena att då författaren skildrar några mindre sympatiska individer inom en nation, en församling, en sekt, han därmed vill angripa eller anklaga nationen, församlingen, sekten*." Lange 1889 (no page number)

[38] The orignal in Swedish: "*Mottag boken och läs den med den sympati för lidandet det må nu vara sjelfförvålladt eller icke som jag sjelf känt."* Lange 1889 (no page number).

to produce the critical edition of Canth's work has been launched at the Finnish Literature Society,[39] and new ongoing research e.g. on her unfinished manuscripts promises[40] to broaden the understanding of Canth's work in its different stages. Lange's oeuvre still awaits more sustained scholarly attention, extending beyond "*Sämre folk*" to encompass her short stories, biography, and the manuscripts that might shed light on the full scope of her literary production. Such investigations would not only deepen our understanding of Nordic naturalism but also contribute to a broader re-evaluation of women's roles in shaping and transforming nineteenth-century literary movements.

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[39] See SKS website: Minna Canthin näytelmien kriittiset editiot | Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.

[40] Canth's 14 unfinished manuscripts are currently studied in an ongoing doctoral thesis project at the University of Helsinki.

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