

How did stereotyped Finnish drunks, Reds, knife wielders become clean Finns who paid their debts?



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The article examines indices of Finnishness in the production of second- and third-generation Finnish-American authors. My aim is to analyse some historical events from fictional points of view as they are depicted in the central works of chosen authors: namely, Lauri Anderson's Heikki Heikkinen And Other Stories of Upper Peninsula Finns; Mary Caraker's Growing Up Soggy and Elina, Mistress of Laukko; Joseph Damrell's Gift; Lynn Laitala's Down from Basswood; and Paula Robbins's Below Rollstone Hill.

Here, it is important to recognize the subjective aspects indicated in all historical writing in these texts. I will analyse the different iconospheres¹ (a certain historical period of time) within the texts, studying the historical events which have affected the authors' auto-images (images of the group a person belongs to) and also investigate how these events mirror the hetero-images (images

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of outside groups) of the surrounding society. Through those images people modify their self- and auto-images, their identities. Consequently, I will present the aspects that I believe most clearly characterize the Finnishness of the authors but which concurrently have affected their personal acculturation or assimilation into 'ordinary' American life.

The theoretical basis of my work is one of the most important disciplines within the field of Comparative Literature – where the function of critical scrutiny is to examine cultural identity, and various cultural models – imagological literary research. For the purposes of the present thesis, the theoretical basis of this research has been taken as the cognitive theory of cultural meaning in Comparative Literature, with its imagological approach.

Background

Contemplating the different elements of life, and their importance to a nation, Renan (1990: 19) concludes that race, language, material interest, religious affinities, geography, and military necessity are not adequate for creating a nation. What, then, are the defining characteristics? According to Renan, "a nation is a soul, a spir-

itual principle". Two things represent this soul. One is the legacy of memories of the shared past, and the other is present-day approval of the common values, and motivation to maintain them (ibid.: 19). The situation of those Finnish immigrants who came to the United States during the great waves of immigration was almost the opposite. They had left their precious homeland, Finland, a nation to which they belonged. For this reason, the only things they had to fight for, or sometimes go against as members of a new nation, were language, material interests, religious affinities, and geography (as a place of their own). They also had to take a stand on racial as well as military issues in the new country. These immigrant Finns had lost their 'soul' as a nation, but they still had their shared past which, unfortunately, did not help them in American society. Along with that past they naturally had their future, but it was not necessarily shared with other Finns as a group any more. These Finns were individuals in a strange society surrounded by immigrants from other countries. Hence, they were unable to found a new nation. They had to recreate their identity. They constructed tight societal communities wherein they could share their past and plan a better

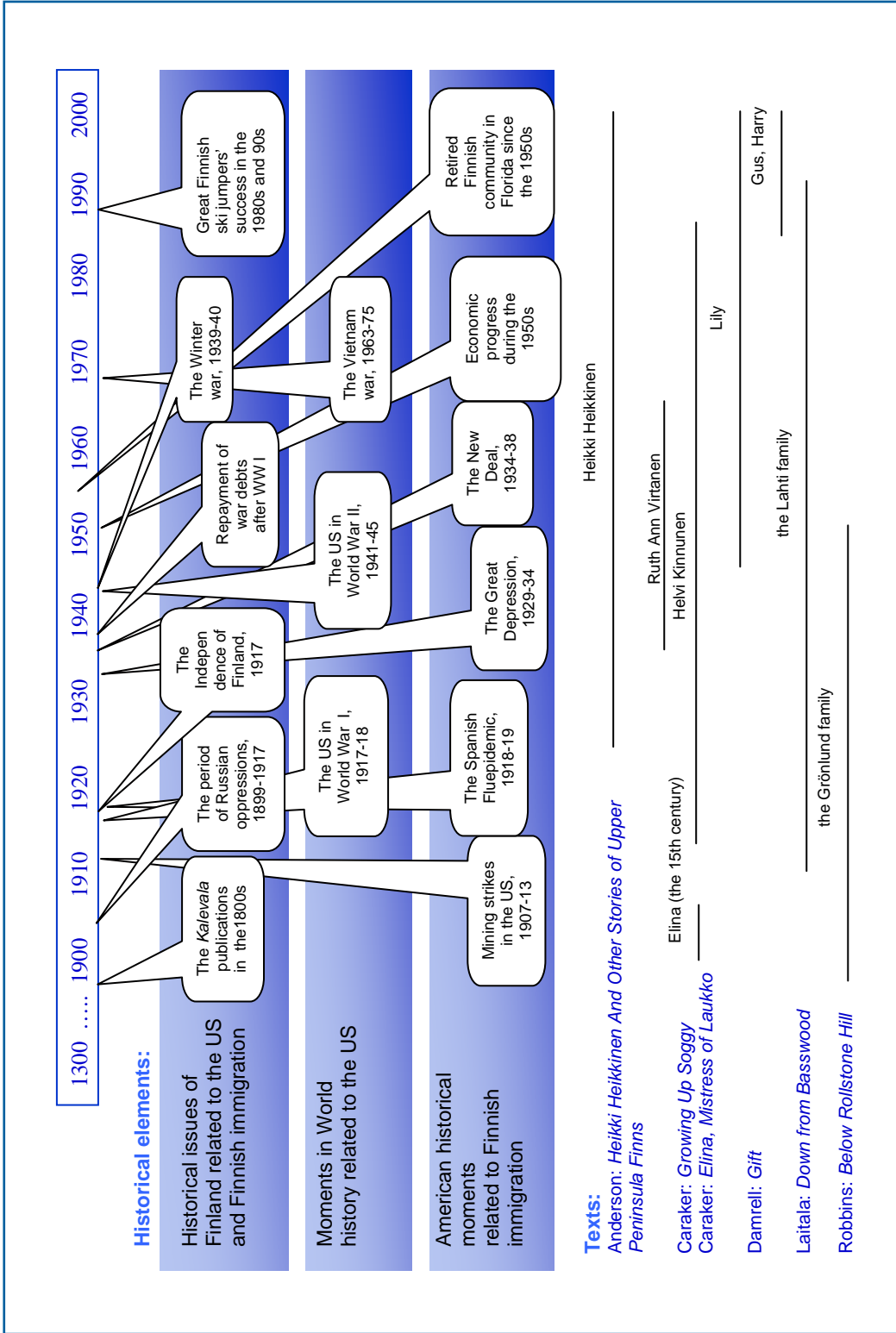


Figure 1. Main historical events related to the texts

future together. The historical past of Finland has gained well-deserved descriptions in the chosen texts. Equally, those incidents in American history which directly concerned Finnish immigrants have been described as subjective visions of the authors and with fictional outline. Figure 1 represents the chronological order of the main historical events figured in the texts. The three different levels in Figure 1 represent historical periods related to the narratives. The first level depicts historical events in Finland, indicating both Finnish immigrants and the United States. The second level reveals the major wars described in the texts, and the third level describes those historical events in the United States that can be connected to Finnish immigrants' everyday life as the authors have sensed and illustrated them. As a summary, Figure 1 indicates the main events drawn a parallel to the eras into which the authors have located their texts, and the actors. The stories revolve around two thousand years of Finnish history. If the ancient time of Finnish history is considered as a separate category, there still is about a hundred years' period of Finnish immigration history surveyed by the chosen authors. Caraker describes, as seen, her historical iconospheres in *Elina, Mistress of Laukko* through the lives of three protagonists. One of them, Elina, lives in fifteenth-century Finland. Helvi Kinnunen fights her battles in a Finnish-American community in Oregon, in the middle of the twentieth century, and Lily, her granddaughter, struggles in modern America. According to Caraker (e-mail letter, 31.1.2005),

Lily's story ends in the 1990s or a bit earlier. In her autobiographical novel, *Growing Up Soggy*, Caraker portrays their family life in Astoria, Oregon during the Great Depression and the Second World War until 1957 when she got married; the last episode (her mother's funeral) takes place in 1988. In her fictionalised history, *Below Rollstone Hill*, Robbins (as she asserts in an e-mail letter, 23.1.2005) describes the story of her mother's family in the town of Fitchburg, Massachusetts, during the world wars, the periods of Russian oppression in the Grand Duchy of Finland, and the Great Depression in the U.S. ending around the year 1948. In Anderson's Heikki Heikkinen stories, the reader is able to survey characters together with their development from the early years of the twentieth century up to the 1990s. Laitala's short stories in the collection *Down from Basswood* date back to twentieth-century Minnesota, beginning from about 1913 and ending in the 1980s. Damrell has placed his story about Gus in his novel *Gift* in the era of the 1980s and early 90s (e-mail letter, 28.1.2005).

Some of the historical elements of the chosen texts

World Wars along with periods of Russian oppression caused difficulties for Finns in Finland and America. In particular, the second period of oppression beginning in 1908 caused fear for many Finns, and some of them fled to America. According to Kero (1996: 50-51), many young Finnish men escaped the unpleasant risk of being conscripted by the Russian army for

military service. Yet, as Kero emphasizes (ibid.: 51), military service was not the only reason to leave Finland. The prevailing atmosphere and Russian law restricted freedom and made the everyday life difficult for Finns. In her novel, Robbins (2000: 2-3) clarifies the reasons that father Grönlund had in making the decision to leave Finland:

My father was dissatisfied with the conditions at the large cotton mill [...]. Some of his friends had gotten into trouble with the government because of their complaints, and one outspoken man had even sent to Siberia. [...] The idea that there was freedom of speech in America was very appealing to my father. He believed that in the New World there might be an opportunity to create a workers' democracy. His hope, along with the desire to improve the lot of his growing family, tipped the scales in favor of immigrating to America.

His decision was wrong, and he noticed it right away. He begged his wife to go back to Finland, but she did not agree. While reading the whole story, one has to agree with father Grönlund that it was a mistake for them to come to America and to stay there. He did not find a job, reducing his self-esteem; gradually he became an alcoholic. Portraying her grandparents' life in Fitchburg, Robbins opens her cultural memory, giving the reader distressing memories of her mother's family where various images describe the anxiety of her grandfather. If the reader considers the threefold assimilation theory by Gans (2004: 33-34), he or she will be ready to affirm that father Grönlund did not even have a decent opportunity to take the first step in the

form of economic assimilation (let alone cultural assimilation) because he did not have the requisite English language skills. If one considers Berry's (1990: 220) psychological acculturation strategy, one finds that father Grönlund was trapped between his two possible groups. Eventually, he was in conflict with his family, other Finns, as well as Americans (even the police); he retreated and gave up all the social and behavioural interactions with people, being a victim of the process of marginalization.

In 1917, the United States entered World War I, causing difficult times for Finnish immigrants with respect to taking sides. There was a great deal of discussion about the draft also in the Grönlund family. The following debate was held over the dinner table at the Grönlund boarding house:

"Why should you go and fight for the capitalists? It's a European war; they should just fight it out themselves. People in America don't need to be involved," said Mother, who feared losing Antti, now eighteen, to the draft. Some of the boarders agreed, but others voiced different opinions. "This is our country now, and as long as the United States is in the war, it's our responsibility to serve." (Robbins, 2000: 57)

The wars were difficult events for immigrants. Their auto-image (Firchow, 1990: 135-136) of themselves as Finns, Finnish Americans, or Americans altered considerably depending on how they felt their identity, what was their relation to homeland, what was their residential area in the United States, or what was their social position in the community. In Rob-

bins's story the Grönlund family had escaped the authoritarian policies of the czar's government, so they were not sympathetic towards American involvement in a European war. Their ethnic identity was tottering between Finnishness and Americanness. The cultural assimilation of the first-generation immigrants was not easy, as perceived in the case of the Grönlunds. Their cultural relations to Finland were fading away, but the assimilation to American society was not yet happening; they were vacillating in their allegiances and trying to make up their minds. However, Antti Grönlund, the second-generation immigrant, lacked all kinds of associations to Finland, but he still went to war. For most of the Finnish immigrant descendants the acceptance of native-born Americans was immensely important. The slow social assimilation of Finns demanded a commitment that gradually completed the assimilation process of those immigrants who personally supported it. Yet, there were those immigrant Finns who resisted hasty assimilation as well as going to war in Europe. Robbins describes the feelings during that time: "Most socialists were opposed to the draft, and in several towns there were anti-draft rallies, including ones among Finnish miners in Butte, Montana, and the Mesabi Range of northern Minnesota" (Robbins, 2000: 56-57). Thus, there were attitudes against and for the war among Finnish-American immigrants. According to Kero (1997: 219), there were thousands of Finns who participated in World War I. Some of those who did not register for the draft were impris-

oned; others succeeded in escaping to Canada. In the Grönlund family Antti registered because he felt it to be his duty. Robbins (2000: 66) observes: "The war was becoming more and more intrusive in our lives. There were posters of 'Uncle Sam Wants You!' plastered all over the city. Antti had finished his basic training and was sent to France in April, 1918."

Admittedly there may have been some members of the labor movement and the IWW in the war, but most were 'church Finns', temperance men, and Republicans. They tried in every way to suppress the conflicts caused by language and nationality and accept their adopted country whole-heartedly. (Paavolainen, 1976: 246)

These passages indicate the difficult situations that Finnish immigrants got into and the fact that they had to take sides in the new country. They came to America for a better life, work, and freedom. Apart from the fact that they were surrounded by their own problems, they had to face the problems concerning the whole of American society. They were not ready to take sides in societal matters. In her iconospheres of Finnish immigrants, Robbins outlines pictures of life under Russian authority as well as life in the independent United States. She picks up images from both of them, building an image field (Johnson, 2005: 8) full of oppressive configurations. Life in Fitchburg was not easier than life in Finland for her mother's family; it was just different. In 1939, the Winter War began between the Soviet Union and Finland. That was the time in which Finnish Americans were called upon most ur-

gently to provide help for Finnish people. Many Finnish Americans worried about their relatives in Finland and tried to assist as much as they could (Joutsamo, 1971: 79-113). As Robbins (2000: 124) puts it: "We spent every minute of our spare time working to raise money and send help to Finland." In spite of the horrors of the wars and depression, life went on in those remote areas of the United States where Finnish immigrants arranged their family life after the times of disorder. According to Høglund (1960: 138-139), by 1920 Finnish Americans sensed the end of an era, for example, in their associative life, and "they came to a milestone in their history as immigrants by continuing to stay in America". Furthermore, World War I diminished immigration from Finland, while legislative restrictions also made it more difficult for immigrants to enter America. Additionally, as Ross (1977: 138-139) emphasizes, the appearance of the independent nation of Finland during World War I changed the attitude towards Finland among immigrants and Americans. It confirmed the national pride of Finnish immigrants, giving them a new start as people who had identity. They were no more immigrants from the Russian Grand Duchy or Mongolians, and thus the "term Finnish Americans acquired a new significance in American society" (ibid.: 139). As a consequence, at the end of the 1920s, Finland's Ministry for Foreign Affairs began propagandistic radio programmes to make Finland better known all around the world (Lähteenkorva and Pekkarinen, 2004: 124-125). For instance, on the first of June, 1930, a major

American broadcasting company, CBS, aired a programme about Finland and Finnish culture in which the Finnish Minister to the United States delivered a speech about the origin of Finnish people which was aimed at bringing to an end all the insinuations about Finnish people's background as Mongolians. On the other hand, the impressive determination with which the Finnish authorities wanted to improve Finland's bad reputation led to the final decision to repay its war debts to the United States. Thus, Finland's reputation as a reliable debtor was established in 1933, when Finland paid the loan it had gained from the United States in 1919 (ibid.: 370-371):

*In American newspapers Finland was portrayed as a small country that gives the shirt off its back, while its richer neighbours leave their debts unpaid. Even today, many American school children recall Finland as 'the country that pays its debts', since the fact is pointed out in at least a few textbooks. Instead of the small news and caricatures used so far to describe Finland, 1935 saw a turnaround, with more extensive and somewhat more truthful articles being written on the country.*²

The sympathetic feelings described above have been spread to people through newspapers, radio speeches, as well as flattering statements uttered by important public people to show support and respect to Finnish people (Lähteenkorva and Pekkarinen, 2004: 370). Partly as a result of these positive articles, Finns gained an extra reputation for fairness and honesty. Finland's repayment of the debt became a moral symbol which

gained a wide awareness among Americans (Paasivirta, 1962: 85). According to Berry (1987: 305-306), this symbol was particularly influential because it

stood in contrast to the failure of the European democracies to live up to American expectations. Finland became a symbol of those qualities which Americans considered essential to the achievement of an informal international community in which industrialized nations could compete and prosper in the marketplace rather than fight imperial wars.

In fact, most respondents in Palo Stoller's (1996: 159) research emphasized Finland's ability to pay its war debts to the United States, its ability to maintain independence, as well as fighting the heroic battle in the Winter War. In other words, the stereotypical positive hetero-images had maintained the positive auto-images of these respondents when they could be proud of their ancestral past.

In my research, the authors' self-images have gained a positive emphasis due to the fact that Finland paid its war debts, as was especially stressed by Anderson and Caraker. Perhaps a less important trait of Finnishness, but something that is still well remembered and honoured was the bravery of Finnish males in the Winter War. Finnish men were considered heroic, fearless men with 'sisu' who fought against a gigantic enemy, Russia. These two arguments are good examples of Janus-faced imagemes, stereotypical oppositions, in which stereotyped Finnish "drunks, Reds, knife wielders", as Laitala phrases it, are given another stereotyped description as

"clean Finns who paid their debts" (Laitala, e-mail letter, 14.4.2004). Aina Lahti in Laitala's account looks back on her life. Describing the Mesabi strike, she compares it with the Winter War, skilfully reconstructing the iconospheres of these historical events:

"Emily ... I'll tell you what happened to your grandfather. They saw that the Finnish women knew that their men were doomed when they went off to fight the Russians. The women knew, but the men still went." "But Finland maintains its independence today because all those men were willing to die." "Yes. And that's how it was with the strike as well." "You mean you knew it was doomed? Weren't you a socialist, too?" "I knew we couldn't win the strike." "But if people hadn't been willing to strike over and over again for an eight-hour day and better conditions, they never would have gotten reform." [...] "It's easier to find two sides in history than in life." (Laitala, 2001: 178-179)

Looking back after so many years makes it easy for Aina Lahti to recreate her iconospheres and also to analyse these huge historical events more objectively, one event being far away from her immigrant life in America and the other, just too near, creating an anxiety in her everyday life. In fact, images of the Winter War were strongly romanticized in the United State. The amazing traits of Finnish soldiers gained similar descriptions as in the admiration of repayment of the debts in the 1930s. The only difference was that Finnish virtues, such as sense of duty and justness, were set into war environments (Paasivirta, 1962: 112).

The Second World War and the Great Depression also caused trouble, for instance, in the Virtanen family. A similar poster to that which Robbins was talking about, 'Uncle Sam wants you', was discussed by Alan and her sisters when they were emptying their mother's house after the funeral. As it happened, the reactions of the two mothers were alike, as Caraker's description reveals:

Mama especially hated that one, she was so afraid for you. Remember Pearl Harbor day, how she cried? I couldn't understand it. To me you were a gawky fourteen-year-old boy, but she already saw you going off to war. (Caraker, 1995: 58)

The worries of mothers over their sons were only natural. In addition, diverse doubts occupied the fathers in the families. Damrell depicts Harry's thoughts about his grandfather in the grip of the Great Depression:

I was no better than my grandfather, whose old country ways, far from being lost in his attempt to internalize the demands of his adopted country, made him stand apart all the more. [...] To him the misery of the Great Depression was a simple test, easily passed. The eventual failure of dairy farming in the area – due in part to climate but mostly to the rise of corporate farming, which like corporate everything else, tended to upset the myth of individualism [...]. In my grandpa's tunnel vision, nothing should have stood in the way of worldly success for the righteous. (Damrell, 1992: 46-47)

Both Robbins and Damrell describe the unfortunate fates of men in the societal pressure of Ameri-

can society. The common schema, 'achieving anything', proved to be just an illusion for August Grönlund as well as for Harry's grandfather. Their self-images as respectable Finnish workers who were willing to make their living in any conditions had collapsed. They lost their self-respect, accusing themselves instead of analysing, or understanding the changes in American society. They had a strong cultural schema which they were not willing to alter. Their stubborn Finnishness prevented it. Thus, their assimilation into American society never really began, not even on the behavioural level. They did not accept the American way of life, and, as a result, they did not have a sense of belonging, or of acceptance. They were left alone in their anxiety, feeling themselves to be on the margin.

Not all Finnish farmers up in the North liked the new laws enacted by the American government. Caraker (1995: 86-87) describes one vivid conversation between Alan and his father about comments by Alan's teacher Miss Perry. Alan, knowing his opinions about president F. D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, provokes his father thus:

"She says that Roosevelt is the greatest man of our time. That the New Deal pulled us out of the depression, that it got people working again, and that it even helped the farmers." "Baloney!" Daddy gave a disgusted grunt. "You'll have to admit it raised farm prices," Alan insisted. [...] Daddy raised his voice. "Subsidies! Paying farmers not to raise crops! Is that any way to run a country? And where do you think all the money that man's spent came from? Spending – it's

all he knows. He'll leave the country bankrupt, wait and see." [...] "You've got to admit we're better off than we were ten years ago." "That's the war," Daddy said. "It's got nothing to do with Roosevelt."

Consequently, different opinions were permitted, and, therefore, Finns in different areas working in different places applauded president Roosevelt more or less for the New Deal laws. Through Damrell's and Caraker's description the situation for Finnish farmers is revealed as a loss of independent farming. In Damrell's novel, the truth about Finnish immigrants lies in grandfather's thoughts:

To the old man, making something of yourself was the measure of the man. [...] In his view, he should have made it and should have gotten rich or, if not, then at least comfortable. (Damrell, 1992: 46)

I think that the above lines construe the images which most Finnish immigrants had of the 'free country' of the United States. Many of the first-generation Finnish male immigrants were disappointed with their lives in America. Apart from the men, several Finnish women standing by their husbands suffered as well, but men were supposed to bear the main responsibility for family's income in those days. Life was too hard, with all the rigours of their work exceeding their tolerance. According to Keltikangas-Järvinen (1996: 222), 'culture' teaches what feelings people may have, and thus, role models taught by society guide both men's and women's ways of acting. As Strauss and Quinn (1997: 211-216) emphasize different schemas among Ameri-

cans concerning their attitudes to their work, and the risk of losing it, there must also have been a cultural schema in the minds of those Finns who came to the United States. In most cases it was probably the 'achieving anything you want' schema, as the above citations imply. Unluckily, the American system depressed some Finns who fought for an independent life. Something like this happened to Harry's grandfather, paralysing him once and for all. The optimistic schema altered to the very pessimistic one of not being able to fight the system. However, what was left was the 'feeling responsible for others' schema. That is the schema that a large number of immigrants have internalised and followed since their arrival.

Caraker's way of building an iconosphere (Johnson, 2005: 4) across several lived historical periods is comprehensible and explicit. She carves small pieces of history, building her image world by combining historical events together with her own life as a young girl (Ruth Ann) in an immigrant family from Finland:

It was 1939. Roosevelt was in his second term and I was in the fifth grade; Hitler was stealing Poland and I had stolen my mother's letter. The depression was still being felt in rural Oregon, but to me it was nothing like the depression I had sunk into over my guilt. (Caraker, 1995: 7)

Another extract from a later period of their family life connected to iconospheres of the surrounding society:

I sat with Winnie, as I usually did, on the ride up and down the family roads. It was the fall of

1946, and we were both in our last year of high school. The war was over, Truman was president, and though our chicken farm prospered and Daddy had lots of outside work, he continued to predict that the Democrats would ruin the country. Alan had joined the navy, and he was safely ensconced at the Great Lakes. Mama, relieved of that worry, channelled her energies into her garden, the church and the Ladies'Aid, and vicariously into Shirley's and my activities. (Caraker, 1995: 94)

Caraker skilfully winds up the intimate landscape of household with a relationship to the world outside, even in Europe. The fears for the Second World War were present, the depression on American soil was felt, but the primary concern was her daily problems in their household. The normal practices at home made the world crises seem remote but also easier to comprehend. The everyday routines, the cultural schemas at home, were not disturbed, and then their family members could live their lives on the basis of mutual feelings, values, hopes, and fears. Nothing from outside her cultural landscape distressed her self-image as a Finnish-American girl. However, Caraker drops a hint about her father's cultural models in her writing. This stubborn Finnish man is not willing to change either his auto-image or his cultural model although things have grown to be considerably better for him and his family. He still feels very bitter about what has happened when there is no-one but the President and the Democratic Party to blame. His cultural assimilation did not totally succeed. On the other hand, Caraker's moth-

er was happy for her children, her aim was to acculturate her children into American society, but her own cultural model was securely associated with activities within the church and the safe cultural landscape of their homestead. She was not aware of her own identity. Her self-image was somewhat between the Finnish and the American. She had not discarded her strongly inherited schema, but she falsely felt herself to be American through her children.

After the Second World War, economic advancement became faster, whereupon immigrant descendants created permanent roots by maintaining property, raising families, and exercising citizenships. After the Second World War, life also became steadier with the economic growth. Consequently, the second- and third-generation Finnish Americans graduated from colleges and universities along with immigrants as well as other Americans, facing the opportunity of getting better jobs. Gradually, these Finnish Americans could change their auto-images of themselves and experience a feeling of belonging in society. Their cultural models were about to change; acculturation had begun. Caraker's memories may remind one of the enthusiasm with which some immigrants longed for assimilation:

Something shameful about our heritage; about being so close to the Old Country. We were not Finnish Americans then – the term was unknown – and though we lived in a Finnish community and so experienced no overt discrimination, we felt somehow inferior to real Americans with easy-to-pronounce names like Smith, Brown,

Jones, Taylor. Real Americans had roots in European countries that were fighting on the right side in the war. They spoke English without an accent and went to a Protestant church that wasn't Lutheran. (Caraker, 1995: 49)

In these lines one is able to sense the threefold assimilation of these Finnish immigrants. Economic assimilation had occurred in the early years of their farm business. They were not rich but they, managed. Cultural assimilation was inevitable through school and society's demands that they act as Americans, but the church had a strong hold on those Finns who belonged to it. In most cases, social assimilation had not fully taken place in the 1940s and 1950s. Finnish names, accents, and the Finnish background (the wrong side in the war) could sometimes reveal an inferiority when they were compared with 'real Americans'.³

As Gans (2004: 34) points out, social assimilation was the slowest process in the immigrants' incorporation into the society. They had to be accepted into mainstream groups, churches, and political associations, but most importantly they had to be accepted by native-born Americans.

Conclusions

Thus, historical periods or iconospheres in the chosen texts were seen to reflect the auto-images of Finnish immigrant descendants as well as the hetero-images of the surrounding groups. Historical events described as image worlds in the narratives proved to increase both positive and negative images of Finnish people which have en-

duced in the cultural memory of the authors. Consequently, old images about Finns gained the character of simplifications, developing into imagemes which may represent oppositional pairs of any stereotypical characteristic. In the course of time, these stereotypes lost their original meanings, becoming part of a person's symbolic ethnicity. According to my research, some of the stereotypical characteristics of Finns affected the self-esteem of the actants in the narratives, especially the positive hetero-images expressed by the neighbouring groups which made it easier for them to maintain their positive auto-images in complicated life situations. On the other hand, the acculturation and/or assimilation of second- and third-generation immigrant descendants has approached the point where their Finnishness as stereotypes or clichés is an effortless way of characterizing some basic specifics about their ethnic identity.

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Notes:

- 1 A certain historical period of time, an 'iconosphere', is composed of the physical traces that have endured the pressures of change in the societies that have produced them. Johnson (2005:52) adapts the concept of the iconosphere from the unpublished work of the Polish art critic, Jan Bialostocki (1921-1988).
- 2 Dr. Sinikka Salo gave an opening presentation "The Country That Paid Its Debts" in the exhibition at the Fulbright Center in Helsinki, Finland on 31st August 2005.
- 3 From 25th June 1941 to 19th September 1944, Finland fought in concert with Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union which in turn was allied with Great Britain and the United States. However, Finland wasn't in the war with the United States. Although the conflict was a part of the Second World War, the Finns called this war the Continuation War making clear its relationship to the Winter War (Jutikkala and Pirinen, 1979: 247-249).