CHAPTER 7

Fictional Literature as a Source for the History of Experience

Jussi Lahtinen and Mikko Kemppainen

Introduction

Finnish literary scholar Alex Matson famously stated that literary fiction "usurps as a model the whole experienced life, of which the visible world is only a part".[1] This insight serves as a compelling starting point for examining literary fiction as a source for historical research. Fiction offers an interesting lens to analyse the complex interplay between individuals and society, as well as the Zeitgeist of various historical periods. But what does this mean in a concrete field of study? In this chapter, we focus on the relationship between the concept of experience and literary fiction (novels, short stories, poems), but we argue that our theses for the most

[1] Matson 1960/1947, 21 (translated by JL).

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part are fruitful for the analysis of other forms of fictional storytelling as well.

For a long time, historical research focused on the question of the "truthfulness" of fictional depictions of society. For example, nineteenth-century naturalism and social realism were often viewed as documents of reality and were compared to the field of anthropology or sociology. Historical novels, in turn, were read as interpretations of historical phenomena, much like academic historiographies. In other research fields—particularly in literary studies—the relationship between the factual world and fictional content has always been viewed as more nuanced. There viewpoints have ranged from the near total rejection of the truth value of literary content analysis to the reflection theory, according to which literary representations act as a mirror that reflects the actual reality.[2] Since the 1970s, with the advent of the linguistic turn, new cultural history, and new historicism, literary theories have also become more integrated into historical research. Today, historians see fiction primarily as a product of the culture in which it is created.[3]

In contemporary historical research, fictional characters are understood as socio-emotional constructs rooted in a specific time and space. Historians can interpret these representations in the context of cultural scripts, narratives, and discourses, illuminating how societal phenomena are formed, shared, disseminated, and contested within communities.[4] Literary scholar Laura Karttunen summarises the basis for multidisciplinary literary studies: "The use of a novel as research material appears questionable from the perspective of literary studies only if literature is

[2] E.g. Sevänen 2018. In the social sciences, fiction has served as useful research material when analysing phenomena that are hard to reach with other data sets. See, e.g. Coser 1962/1972; Lewis et al. 2014.

[3] E.g. Reid 2020/2009. The evolution of the discussion, see Aydelotte 1948; Gerschenkron 1950; Laqueur 1967; Kelly 1974; Walton 1978; Blum 1982; Allen 1983; Greenblatt 1997; Rodwell 2013. See also *American Studies in Scandinavia* Volume 16 Issue 2, 1984. The theme of the issue is "Fiction as a Source for Historians". See Hvidt 1984. On the linguistic turn, see Reid 2020/2009, 162–164; Sevänen 2018, 58–61. On new historicism, see Greenblatt 1997.

[4] Reid 2020/2009. See especially the set of questions at the end of the article. Here, literary scholar Julia Reid has outlined several important questions historians should consider when using fictional novels as source material. Reid 2020/2009, 193.

seen as an objective and transparent document of reality, while overlooking its multiple layers of mediation".[5] In other words—as with all sources—literary fiction needs to be viewed carefully and critically.

In this chapter, we expand the topic to explore the history of experience. How can the multilayered concept of experience be analysed through fiction as a source for historical research? In the history of experience, the goal, as Pirjo Markkola has put it, is "to explore how people's experiences are constructed, how they are interpreted and shared and how they are institutionalised and structured". The field "explores how these processes of experiencing influence people's relationships with their community and society at large".[6] In other words, experience is not understood merely as authentic individual experience, but rather as a culturally and socially constructed mediating category, shaped by memories and embodied emotions.[7]

We emphasise the influence of societal narratives conveyed in the public sphere,[8] while also focusing on the author's intentional objectives and unconscious motives—a theme that is often overlooked in literary studies. The first emphasis underlines experience as a socio-culturally relevant concept. For example, Heikki Kokko and Minna Harjula with the theory of scene of experience/layers of experience[9] and Ville Kivimäki, Antti Malinen, and Ville Vuolanto with the theory of community of experience[10] have this focus in their studies of the history of experience.

[5] Karttunen 2015, 142 (translated by JL).

[6] Markkola 2023, 5–6. See also the introduction to this book.

[7] Kivimäki et al. 2021, 12–13. See also Kokko & Harjula 2023, 22–26.

[8] Couldry & Hepp 2016; Carr 2014, 59–60. See also Eiranen et al. 2022. Heikki Kokko and Minna Harjula have pointed out that "'narratives' are justifications in the research material that organise and re-organise experiences and expectations." Kokko & Harjula 2024, 93.

[9] Kokko and Harjula summarise the concepts as methodological tools as follows: "the 'layer of experience' is a tool to catch the shared experiences that have been institutionalised and legitimized as social institutions […] the 'scene of experience' is a tool for approaching the contextualized particular temporal-spatial situations in which these socially shared experiences are produced." Kokko & Harjula 2024, 93.

[10] Kivimäki, Malinen, and Vuolanto explain the concept as follows: "[…] we use the concept to refer to people who recognise similarities in their experiences, who share and negotiate these experiences and their meanings with each other, and who start to identify themselves as a group, bound together with a sense of shared experience." Kivimäki et al. 2023.

The second emphasis—recognition of the author—is connected to the traditional field of history: biographical research.

Fictional content as a socio-cultural representation of the world can also be analysed with the three levels of experience as conceptualised by Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Maria Toivo (everyday experience, experience as a process, and experience as a structure).[11]

(1) *Everyday experience* can be understood as a concept that describes the daily experiences. These experiences are part of social reality—what happens to individuals and how they understand it.[12] As interpreters of individual experience, literary authors are uniquely positioned to highlight the connections between a person's inner thoughts, emotions, and the social world. (2) *Experience as a process* highlights mediated, shared experiences inside communities. Here, the focus moves away from the individuals and towards the social relationships and processes that shape and generate experiences.[13] Socially oriented realist authors, in particular, depict the collective experiences that engage with phenomena affecting communities, offering insights into how these communities respond to conflict-driven situations. (3) *Experience as a structure* includes social behaviour and trains of thought that can be seen as culturally hegemonic. These experiences are shared in a way that going against the grain means challenging the fundamental ideas of the community.[14] With fiction, authors can challenge experiences that have become these unquestioned components of cultural and societal structures. For example, through impactful counter-narratives, they question the hegemonic master narratives that have traditionally defined the "right" way to experience society.[15]

These premises offer three distinct components for analysing fictional worlds and the experiences they mediate. Firstly, we highlight the role of the *author* as an agent of experience. Literary fiction is a fruitful source for biographical analysis: it provides depictions of the individual's emotions,

[11] Katajala-Peltomaa & Toivo 2022, 10–15. See also the introduction to this book.

[12] Katajala-Peltomaa & Toivo 2022, 10–13.

[13] Katajala-Peltomaa & Toivo 2022, 13. Cf. "Communities of Experience", Kivimäki et al. 2023.

[14] Katajala-Peltomaa & Toivo 2022, 13–14. Cf. "The Layer of Experience", Kokko & Harjula 2024.

[15] On master narratives and counter-narratives, see Lueg et al. 2021.

thinking, and ways of experiencing society, which can be difficult to find anywhere else. Fiction can offer insights into the inner, more irrational aspects of how authors experience the world. Secondly, *literary content*, text itself, can be interpreted as a contemporary document portraying societal and cultural phenomena such as mediated experiences or interactions between members of communities. Realist novels in particular create fictional worlds that operate according to the same basic rules as the real world. The novel serves as a testing ground for exploring human behaviour within specific temporal and spatial contexts. Thirdly, the relationship between the text and *the reader* can be a central focus of the research. Then certain questions arise: How does the text affect the readers' experiences of the world? How does fiction shape the world we live in, mediate ideas, and trains of thoughts?[16] These three analytic components—together or separately—make fiction an interesting source for the history of experience.

In this chapter, our examples concern the working-class experience portrayed in working-class literature.[17] Our focus is on this specific cultural sphere, illustrating how fictional literature created within this context can be analysed through the lens of the history of experience. First, we examine a political poem from the early twentieth century (highlighting the concept of the author), followed by an exploration of the everyday realism of the interwar period (highlighting the concept of literary content). Following this, we analyse impactful historical novels published during the post-war era (highlighting the concept of the reader). Even though the examples are from Finland and concern a specific societal sphere, we encourage readers/scholars to think of similar examples pertaining to other socio-cultural traditions.

[16] On the analysis of the author, the content, and the reader, see Harker 1988. This division overlaps with the traditional way in which literary studies understand their field of research. See, e.g. Meretoja et al. (eds) 2024, 5–8 (the table of contents).

[17] Here, working-class literature refers to literary works that depict the lives, struggles, and perspectives of the working class, often written by authors from working-class backgrounds themselves. It typically focuses on themes such as labour, inequality, economic hardship, and social justice. Nilsson 2017, 95–96.

The Author

When analysing literary content, literary scholars often ignore the author and focus mainly on the text itself. Some scholars have even applied Roland Barthes' concept of "the death of the author", which draws a strict distinction between the text and the author.[18] In historical research, however, the text itself and the author both are at the centre of the study. In short, the research interest is in the meaning of the text and its societal and cultural context. Biographical sources can illuminate what the author meant and why they wrote the specific text. As historians such as Barbara Caine and Irma Sulkunen have noted, biographical research and biographical sources do not merely tell about the life of the person(s) themselves, but also describe the interaction between the individual and the surrounding society more broadly.[19] Here, we demonstrate through an example text how biographical research combines with the study of the history of experience when using fictional sources.

We focus on the poem "Naiselle" (To a Woman) by Hilja Liinamaa-Pärssinen[20] (1876–1935) first published in 1907. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Pärssinen was a popular, recognisable (see Fig. 7.1) and well-known left-wing poet focusing on the poor living and working conditions of the lower classes. Furthermore, she was the leader of the Finnish Social Democratic women's movement and a long-term member of the Finnish parliament. She was the leading figure building a socialist welfare and social political programme and defining the Finnish Social Democratic Party's (SDP) policy towards the (Evangelic Lutheran and Orthodox) state Church and religion. Pärssinen also built a broad international network working with leading European socialists such as Clara Zetkin, Aleksandra Kollontai, and August Bebel.[21]

We use the poem "Naiselle" as an example to demonstrate how a fictional text can encapsulate experiences in a specific historical, cultural, political, and societal context. We focus especially on religious aspects in Pärssinen's poem and her attitude towards the Church and other religious

[18] Barthes 1977/1968.

[19] Caine 2010, 116–120; Sulkunen 2009, 65–67. For criticism of Barthes' concept of the "death of the author", see, e.g. Stanley 1995, 16–17.

[20] From now on we use her official surname, Pärssinen. See the full poem (translated by MK and the language editor) at the end of this chapter.

[21] Kemppainen 2024, 4–6. Pärssinen's full biography, see Hentilä et al. 2018.

Fig. 7.1 Hilja Pärssinen writing at her desk in the beginning of twentieth century (1900–1907). *Source* Työväen arkisto (Finnish Labour Archives), photographer: Thorvald Nyblin, Vyborg

institutions. Since Pärssinen was one of the most influential Finnish Social Democrat politicians, the poem does not merely depict her personal experiences but illuminates also broader shared experiences among socialists in Finland at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Pärssinen's poem summarises excellently the socialist criticism towards institutional religion. For instance, Finnish historian Jussi Pikkusaari has used the poem as an example of "aesthetic" criticism to generally demonstrate how fierce and openly aggressive socialists attacked the state Church using fiction. According to Pikkusaari, the main criticism was directed at the Church's teaching, which demanded passive obedience and humility before authorities. The Church stated that the hierarchy of the society and living conditions were determined by divine order and therefore people should not question them.[22]

[22] Pikkusaari 1998, 100–102.

As the title, "Naiselle", ipso facto suggests, the poem was targeted at women, and Pärssinen was particularly concerned that the false message spread by the Church was harmful especially to women. According to the Church, women were subordinate to men in marriage. Pärssinen saw the subordinate position of women and their chattel status in marriage being reflected more broadly in a society where the economic and social position of women was often poor. Moreover, women as mothers had the main responsibility for raising and teaching children, hence women had a key role in the ideological development of society and the whole nation-building process. If women did not wake up to the question of the prevailing societal conditions and hierarchies and demand their own freedom, no change would be possible, as Pärssinen clearly states in the eighth and ninth verses in the poem:

> You will not rise to raise brave men,
> nor create a great family,
> Who would only seek the common good
> and notice the cries of the wretched.
>
> To your children you teach humility
> and provide their food and clothing
> but you forget enthusiasm and courage
> and the beautiful, enduring ideas.

However, besides the socialist criticism of Church and institutional religion, Pärssinen's poem reflects a gradual but drastic transition from dogmatic Church-led institutional religion towards a more liberal personal faith. From the 1880s onwards, the state Church began to lose its dominant position in Finland, and the Dissenters' Act enacted in 1889 allowed for affiliation with other Christian congregations, such as the Baptists, Free Churches, and the Evangelical Revival, which emphasised personal, direct religious experience. Moreover, new religious movements—for example, Tolstoyism, Theosophy, and Spiritualism, which opposed institutional religion and sought a personal knowledge-based relationship with God and the afterlife—gained considerable visibility and numerous followers in the late nineteenth century. The fragmentation of religious life and new religious movements put pressure on the Church. At the beginning of the twentieth century, around the time of the publication of the Pärssinen's poem, there was also a debate within the Church.

The liberal wing of the clergy proposed reforms to renew religious life towards a more personal experience of faith and the reconciliation of science and religion.[23]

In historiography, the transition process from institutional religion towards a more personal faith has been described as "lived religion". The concept emphasises religious daily practices, individual beliefs, and the variety and plurality of religious societies that were established outside and/or beside religious institutions. In the field of the history of experience, lived religion has become a key concept when exploring belief and religious practices of the past. Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Maria Toivo have underlined the intersectional approach when scrutinising religion. Age, ethnicity, social background, regional and geographical location, gender, and so on must be considered when studying religion. For example, Pirjo Markkola has pointed out that Finnish working-class women's personal faith and religious practices could differ greatly from the official teachings of the Church and even from their family members' beliefs. This religious experience, or "inner calling" as Markkola calls it, motivated numerous women to engage in political and societal activity.[24]

The expressions Pärssinen used, such as "misleading", "mesmerising", and "threatening with hellfire", especially in the first half of her poem, were typical of working-class literature and highlight the shift in Finnish religious ideas. Additionally, the poem conveys a personal attitude towards the Church and religious experiences. To understand these experiences, it is important to study also the author "behind" the actual text. Biographical sources and an analysis of Pärssinen's texts show that, despite her fierce and systematic criticism of institutional religion, she was not an atheist or anti-Christian. On the contrary, for her, opposing the Church was about reforming religion. According to Pärssinen, the Church had distorted the true message of Christ and used it as an instrument of secular oppression. True Christianity had to be seen in everyday life and society as empathy, solidarity, and altruism among all people, but especially towards the poor and suffering. For her, socialism represented precisely the core values of Christianity in its striving towards an

[23] Markkola 2002, 52–95; Harmainen 2018, 5–14. On the Dissenters' Act, see Murtorinne 1967, 1–11.

[24] On the concept of lived religion in historiography, see, e.g. Hall 1997, vii–xi. In the field of the history of experience, see Katajala-Peltomaa & Toivo 2022, 1–10; Markkola 2022, 235–239.

egalitarian society. As an educated woman and daughter of an Evangelic-Lutheran pastor, she was very familiar with the Bible. Biographical sources also show she was highly influenced by Leo Tolstoy's religious thinking and the ideas conveyed by the Theosophic Society.[25]

In the last verses of the poem, Pärssinen seems to have taken a very optimistic view of the future. The poem suggests she felt she was standing on the threshold of a new era. To Pärssinen, this meant the collapse of the power of the Church and full freedom of religion. This would also mean that women would finally be freed from guardianship and become full citizens. The poem challenges the master narrative in which the state Church had the power to define the ideal of the good Christian and the boundaries of (religious) life. Moreover, the poem creates a counter-narrative to the common perception in Finnish historiography that at the turn of the twentieth century avowed leftists rejected Christian beliefs and based their worldview on scientific secular socialism.[26]

In her poem, Pärssinen created an image of a new, independent, strong woman who had awakened both in her intellect and spirit. The "new woman" was by no means alienated from God but rather walked in the "bright path of light" following the true spirit of Christ, having been freed from the prejudices fomented by the Church.

> Away with the dark yoke of the prejudices
> from the spiritual, bright path of light.
> Away with the wavering self-consciousness
> when the calling asks for the mind!
>
> It demands the will and the heart
> it calls the woman to fight.
> Oh dark, miserable is the world
> the light of God does not shine.
>
> But see, woman is now enlightened
> and breaking the grim shackle.
> And the powerful, emerging progress
> gains the momentum of a new vigour.

[25] Kemppainen 2020; 2024.

[26] In addition to Pikkusaari 1998, see Soikkanen 1961, passim.

The end of the poem summarises how Pärssinen's own religious beliefs were influenced by new liberal religious ideologies that emphasised a personal relationship with God and the idea of lived religion. The poem's optimism and the vision of the "new woman" also depicts the experience of societal change more broadly. The year the poem was published, Finland held its first parliamentary elections. These elections were exceptional, as for the first time in Europe, women were also allowed to stand for election and vote.[27] Pärssinen herself was elected as a member of the parliament among 18 other women. Furthermore, the Social Democratic Party was the biggest party in the parliament with 80 representatives.

As we have shown above, reading fictional text—for example, even a single poem—as source material can open different perspectives in historical research. It is important to study fiction in its cultural, social, and historical context, but fictional sources also open views to broader experiences and the Zeitgeist of the time. Furthermore, when exploring experiences in the past, it is pivotal to pay attention to the authors and their biographical sources and other texts. The former purely textual analytical interpretations of the "Naiselle" poem, as in Jussi Pikkusaari's study, have focused only on the "aesthetic" criticism of the Church. This interpretation neglects the last verses of the poem and sees the expressions such as "path of light", "new woman", and "calling" merely as utterances of secular socialism. In Pärssinen's case, this interpretation fails to acknowledge the religious meanings and her personal faith. To Pärssinen, socialism did not represent merely secular ideology but the higher spiritual experience of true lived religion, which she clearly expressed in the last verses of the "Naiselle" poem.

The analysis of the "Naiselle" poem serves as an example how a fictive text can encapsulate the three levels of experience presented by Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Maria Toivo:

(1) The poem reflects author's inner thoughts and experiences. Personally, Pärssinen did not see political socialism merely as a secular ideology but an expression of "true Christianity", which manifested in altruism and

[27] The new universal and equal suffrage was the result of a general strike in 1905, in which Finns demanded greater self-government. The strike was preceded by Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, which weakened the empire's grip on its dependent territories. The Election Act was enacted in 1906, and the elections themselves were held in March 1907.

solidarity among people and should be the guideline for societal decision-making and individual everyday life. (2) Pärssinen was one of the most prominent socialist authors, popular politicians, and leading figures of the SDP shaping the social welfare reform programme and policy towards Church and religion. Her popularity and high rank in the SDP show that her worldview was shared broadly in the Finnish working-class movement. Hence, the "Naiselle" poem highlights collective experiences within the socialist movement. The aim was not to abandon Christian ideals but to reform the social and economic reality to follow the true message of Christ. (3) Even though the Freedom of Religion Act, which also allowed resignation from the Church, came into effect as late as 1923, Pärssinen's poem serves as a source for describing the gradual change in religious life from institutional religion towards a more personal "lived religion".

Literary Content

As social documents, novels are often interpreted as narrative tools that give a voice to those who are voiceless or unable to express themselves. Since the 1960s, the emergence of new social history and the concept of "history from below" have shared a similar foundation.[28] In many ways, the contemporary history of experience builds on this tradition. There is an underlying need for emancipation and a desire to highlight the values and experiences of the underprivileged or those without an equal possibility of societal agency.[29] Novels often critique societal institutions, structures, cultural norms, and interactions between individuals of different social statuses, especially from the perspective of those without dominant roles in society. Here, fiction can be analysed, for example, with the concepts of the scene of experience, layer of experience, or community of experience. Novels provide imagined glimpses of life at a specific time and space (scene of experience) affected by institutional, cultural, and structural reality (layers of experience), inside the specific communities (community of experience). The narrative form highlights a need for a clear scene, context, and characters, which can be analysed with the tools of the history of experience.

[28] Burke 2001/1992; Sharpe 2001/1992.

[29] Markkola 2023, 6–10. Cf. history of childhood (Alexander et al. 2023), history of queer and trans experiences (Peake 2023), and history of disabilities (Blackie 2024).

As narratologist Matti Hyvärinen has argued, published fiction is a useful source for the study of individual human behaviour and emotions[30] because it is accessible to anyone and can be analysed without the "burden" of privacy protection. The everyday experiences of fictional characters are considered common property, available for interpretation. However, Hyvärinen also notes that "even the cruellest interpretation" cannot hurt the feelings of the characters.[31] This claim is problematic, as characters in fiction represent identities, ideas, social positions, and thought processes drawn from reality. Historians must be cautious when making interpretations to avoid uncritically reinforcing potentially harmful stereotypes or misunderstandings that may appear in fiction. The history of working-class literature provides an insightful example of this.

The industrial revolution and progress of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gave rise to a distinct working-class culture. As E. P. Thompson observed, this culture was shaped by the lived experiences of working-class communities.[32] The rise of the labour movement—particularly the emergence of the labour press—introduced a new form of collective experience. Newspapers and affordable books provided platforms for self-expression, as well as for sharing news, ideas, and emotions.[33] In Finland, the political turbulence of the early twentieth century culminated in the Civil War of 1918.[34] Here, political radicalism was not always connected to the actual progress of society. As historian Pertti Haapala has pointed out, compared to rural workers, the urban industrial workers' living conditions and income improved considerably in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Haapala has stated that poverty, poor housing, and

[30] Cf. the history of emotions, Boddice & Smith 2020.

[31] Hyvärinen 2015, 13.

[32] Thompson 1963, 9–10. For Thompson's conception of experience, see Middleton 2016.

[33] E.g. Turunen 2021, 67.

[34] From 1809 to 1917, Finland was an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian empire. The Civil War between the "Red" army, consisting of workers, peasants, and revolutionary socialists, and the "White" army, representing the bourgeois, landowners, and other propertied class, broke out in late January 1918. It was preceded by a long-lasting political crisis in Finland and the October Revolution in Russia, as a result of which Finland gained independence from Russia in December 1917. The rise of the Reds was partly the result of food shortages caused by World War I, the October Revolution, and domestic supply speculation. The war ended in May 1918 when the White army, reinforced with German military units, defeated the Reds. See, e.g. Haapala 1995.

especially unemployment were real problems in the urban environment, but the workers' misery was often exaggerated in left-wing agitation.[35]

Working-class literature depicted poverty in industrial centres and accused greedy employers and factory owners of intentional oppression to maximise profits. As literary scholar Kati Launis has noted, the often-used stories of suffering workers were a political tool to ponder ethical questions and make societal changes. Hence, fictional literature did not only depict reality but partly created new ways of experiencing it.[36] Authors were active agents in the political layer of experience during a time when the space of experience (the experienced past and present) and the horizon of expectations (the imagined future) were changing drastically—that is, the basis of the scene of experience was challenged. Here, the problem of representativeness emerges. If historians fail to grasp the context of the literary content, they risk oversimplifying the complex relationship between emotionally driven texts and the mediated experiences they convey.[37]

In Finland after the Civil War of 1918, vulgar left-wing agitation disappeared from the national public discourse. Noticeable working-class literature of the interwar period can be compared to nineteenth-century social realism, where social criticism was not connected to the political party—such as the SDP—but to universal humanism. Authors created fictional worlds, critically analysing the relationships among the community's members. Typically, fiction can thus be seen as a portrayal of the everyday life of an individual who does not fully integrate into the community, highlighting the angst and experiences of an outsider

[35] Haapala 1986, 138–161. Cf. Turunen 2021.

[36] Launis 2015, 15–17.

[37] In Finland, a notable example of this issue is the debate surrounding the dissertation by Jari Ehrnrooth (1992). In his work, Ehrnrooth argues that the grassroots of the early nineteenth-century labour movement were mobilised primarily through hateful and vengeful rhetoric, particularly disseminated via handwritten newspapers. According to Ehrnrooth, this dynamic may even help explain the origins of the Finnish Civil War. However, critics have contended that Ehrnrooth misinterpreted the historical context and misunderstood the newspaper culture of the period. In other words, he draws an overly simplistic connection between inflammatory agitation and the lived experiences of the working class. Turunen 2021, 29–33, 322–341. See also the analysis of Jussi Pikkusaari in the previous chapter of this article.

across different time periods—and at the same time it reflects phenomena connected to more general layers, scenes, or communities of experience.[38]

One interwar working-class author, Toivo Pekkanen (1920–1957), published the highly praised novel *Tehtaan varjossa* (In the Shadows of the Factory) in 1932. The novel is set in a medium-sized Finnish industrial town and tells the story of a factory worker who lost his father after the Finnish Civil War—his father having been a prisoner of war, labelled a "Red". In the novel, the social class experiences are depicted as part of the daily life of the worker. The death of the father, the feeling of being part of an underclass, and political oppression shape the main character's life. However, despite these hardships, he does not become an angry or bitter figure. As a worker with literary ambitions, he chooses to live a quiet life, working hard and writing aesthetic stories. At the same time, he embodies the optimism of the 1920s economic boom while also reflecting the anxieties brought about by the rise of the far-right political movement in the early 1930s.[39]

Toivo Pekkanen lived during the interwar period in the scene of working-class experience, and he wrote stories where this scene is the narrative background. *Tehtaan varjossa* highlights a central mental dilemma of the working-class: conflict between the political layer of experience (post-Civil War era) and the economic layers of experience (the booming wage-based society of the 1920s/the recession of the 1930s). The main character lives within both realities, experiencing relative material wealth while also feeling oppressed. Ultimately, he chooses to ignore both aspects and focuses solely on writing. The story ends as follows: "[The main character's] task is to live here in the world, to take part in its joy and sorrow, and to grow greater than his father was and to see further than his father saw".[40] Here, it can be interpreted that the main character sees in his horizon of expectations a life without the burden of the Civil War—in the new, politically neutral scene of experience.

Tehtaan varjossa offers a broader frame for understanding the working-class experience during the interwar period. It can also be seen as a sanctioned way of representing the societal experiences of the worker. The novel's wide readership was likely possible because the main character

[38] E.g. Launis & Hyttinen 2017.

[39] For an analysis of Pekkanen, see Pynttäri 2015.

[40] Translated by JL.

distanced himself from the Civil War's traditions. The Civil War victors permitted proletarian aesthetics (see also Fig. 7.2) by politically neutral working-class authors in an era when the working-class experience, as mediated through institutions or media, was subject to strict control. Acts of rebellion or resistance were lived and expressed beyond the reach of the public gaze. Interestingly, here democracies like interwar Finland can be compared to authoritarian societies with restricted freedom of speech. In both, fiction offers a compelling way to explore the hidden political meanings embedded in their narratives.[41]

Fictional realism is a valuable source for analysing experiences of specific historical periods. As seen in the cases of early twentieth century agitation literature and *Tehtaan varjossa*, the key is—again—to contextualise the fictional work within its historical setting. A fictional character's life should not be treated as an anthropological example of a typical life from that era but rather as a commentary on the social reality. When multiple fictional works address the same subject, they collectively offer a more nuanced and comprehensive representation. If certain themes or experiences are consistently emphasised across various works, this suggests a common way of portraying a particular experience. This leads to a critical research question: why did authors choose to highlight specific societal phenomena?

Overall, when analysing the concept of experience through fictional content, historians must consider the societal context in which the author wrote the text and the cultural spheres to which the text itself is connected. This level of contextualisation is essential not only in biographical research but also when focusing on the textual world itself. In this case, the societal experiences created and disseminated by fiction become comparable to other sources. In other words, fiction is a valuable source when it is linked to other forms of contemporary public discourse—when it can be traced to a specific layer of experience, scene of experience, and/or community of experience.

Moreover, fictional content reveals the "borders of imagination", allowing us to explore the limits and possibilities of human experience across different epochs. Literary scholar Hanna Meretoja notes that the relationship between history and narrative fiction should be analysed from the perspective of the space of possibilities. She argues:

[41] Cf. Antić 2022.

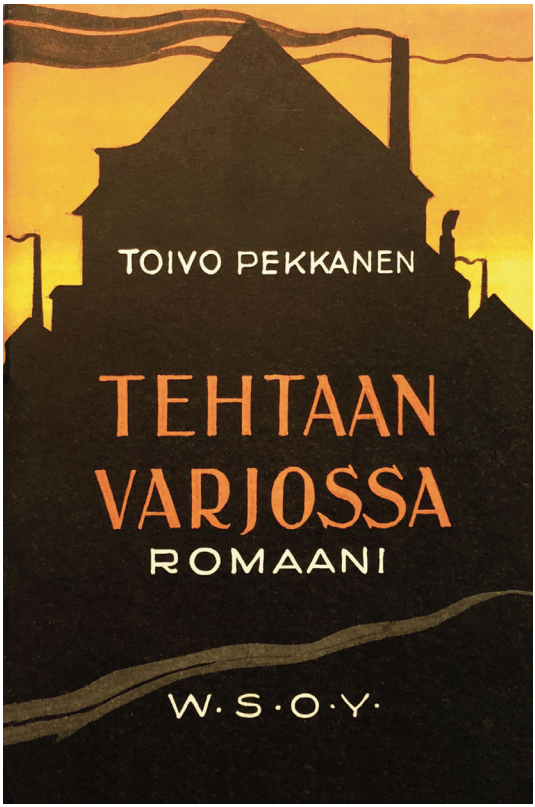

Fig. 7.2 The original cover of Toivo Pekkanen's Tehtaan varjossa highlights the distinctive cultural space the novel occupied. Designed by the prominent graphic artist Aukusti Tuhka, the cover can be read as an expression of industrial proletarian aesthetics—an artistic approach that stood in contrast to the dominant (bourgeois) aesthetic ideals of post–Civil War Finland. Despite its association with the "wrong" societal perspective, the novel was published by the mainstream bourgeois publishing house Werner Söderström (WSOY) and went on to achieve wide circulation and commercial success (© Aukusti Tuhka/WSOY)

> Both historiographical and fictional narratives contribute to our sense that to live in a historical world is to live in a particular space of possibilities. In this space it is possible to experience, perceive, think, feel, do, and imagine certain things, and difficult or impossible to experience, perceive, think, feel, do, and imagine other things.[42]

Fiction reveals the limits of imagination, but it also has the power to expand them. A famous example of this is the research of science fiction. A broadly shared view is that futuristic narratives are not viewed as the prediction of the future; instead, science fiction should be studied in the cultural context of the moment of writing. What does it say about the imagination of the time of its writing?[43] In the field of Finnish working-class literature, a profound example is a utopian novel *Ylös helvetistä* (Up from Hell) published in 1917 by author and member of Finnish parliament Konrad Lehtimäki (1883–1937). Here, the horrors of the First World War were seen also as a possibility for a "better tomorrow". In the novel the socialist utopia rises from the dust of a global war. The important context is that the book was written before the October Revolution in Russia— in other words, during the writing process, the horizon of expectations was not yet broadened to the actual socialist state.

The Reader/Publicity

The final analytical component is the one who reads or otherwise is in contact with the fictional product. In literature studies, readers have been a topic of vivid interest for decades. Even Roland Barthes concluded his famous essay "The Death of the Author" with the assertion: "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author".[44] The relationship between the reader and the literary content has been seen as communicative. This research tradition is often based on interviews or surveys.[45] However, in historical research the focus is on the public discourses affected by fiction. Together with newspapers, political rhetoric, academic research, and other forms of public discussions, fiction affects people's understanding of their own past, present, and the

[42] Meretoja 2024, 64.

[43] See Meretoja 2018, 2024.

[44] Barthes 1977/1968, 148.

[45] See, e.g. Hiidenmaa et al. 2024.

future. Here, fiction affects the impactful cultural scripts, discourses, and narratives. Often novels, movies, and other forms of fictional storytelling provide strong counter-narratives that challenge the hegemonic master narratives. Emotional and psychological social criticism can contest the societal views of the readers and at the same time create disruptions to the layers of experience.[46]

The next example offers perhaps the most well-known Finnish illustration of this theme. After the Second World War, Finland's Zeitgeist changed as the far-left political movement—which had been illegal since the Civil War—was legalised and became a significant political force. However, societal master narratives were still largely controlled by the victors of the Civil War, the bourgeoisie (the "White side of history"). Working-class culture was viewed as a counterculture, and far-left activists were regarded as an unpatriotic segment of the nation. In other words, while society was compelled to be more open to working-class narratives, the deeper structures of the nation continued to marginalise the political layers of the working-class experience.[47]

Author Väinö Linna (1920–1992) published widely read and profoundly impactful novels that shaped Finnish cultural and historical discourses. First, *Tuntematon sotilas* (The Unknown Soldier; 1954) depicted the lived experiences of rank-and-file soldiers during the Second World War, and later, his trilogy *Täällä pohjantähden alla* (Under the North Star; 1959–1962) challenged the dominant historical narrative surrounding the Finnish Civil War. The trilogy offered a national narrative from the perspective of the losing side, sparking debates and discussions. Linna, along with contemporary historians, engaged in disputes over the reasons behind the Civil War. More importantly, Linna's trilogy provided the Finnish masses with a new perspective on the Civil War, giving a national voice to the experiences that had long been silenced within working-class communities and family histories—that is, the different communities of experience.[48]

Linna's narratives offer a renowned example of how fiction can challenge the national status quo. While Linna's interpretation of the causes of the Civil War can be critiqued, more significantly, he provided a socially

[46] On counter-narratives, see Lueg et al. 2021.

[47] Haapala 2021, 48–49.

[48] Haapala 2021, 50–52. See also Hyvärinen 2021, 24; Meretoja 2024, 67–68.

acceptable voice for the losing side of the conflict. After the publication of the trilogy, most Finns who had no personal connection to the "Red" side of the war came to understand that the losing Reds were also rational human beings, not merely evil or brainwashed hooligans. The reading of the trilogy became a collective, societal experience. The cultural process Linna initiated culminated in 2018, marking the 100th anniversary of the Civil War. What began as a fictional work had led to a nearly unanimous understanding of the war as a national, shared tragedy. Emotions like hate, bitterness, and revenge faded from national narratives.[49] Väinö Linna's example demonstrates how fictional texts not only reflect experiences within a particular historical context but also create new experiences and impactful counter-narratives that can shape a society's collective memory.

As a universal example, Väinö Linna is perhaps an extreme case, as he is one of the few authors who have successfully reshaped the national Zeitgeist. However, there are numerous instances where fiction has played a role in broader societal change. During the cultural liberalism of the 1960s, fiction was deeply intertwined with shifting social and cultural values. Similarly, in the 2010s, fiction has contributed to public discourse by helping to redefine social class as a significant societal position and identity.[50] In other words, while fictional texts may not have single-handedly changed the world—as Väinö Linna did—they have been integral to cultural and social movements that challenge the hegemonic ways of living inside a specific community of experience.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have presented examples of fictional texts that can be analysed as sources for the history of experience. Here, literary fiction provides an insightful basis for multilayered historical analysis. As we have shown, in Hilja Pärssinen's case, poetry offers a more nuanced approach to examining lived religion within the political sphere, which has often been perceived as anti-Christian. Here the religious experiences and individual political visions of *the author* are highlighted. Toivo Pekkanen provides insight into the daily dilemmas faced by workers during a time when the social and cultural position of the working-class was under

[49] On Väinö Linna's impact, see Haapala 2021, 51–52; Haapala 2017, 41–46.

[50] E.g. Lahtinen 2023, 273–274.

governmental surveillance. In this context, *the literary content* offers a broad perspective on the societal atmosphere—distancing itself from both left-wing agitation and the hegemonic ideologies of the Civil War victors. The inner life of individuals was no longer depicted in stark black-and-white terms. Väinö Linna, in turn, crafted a narrative that directly influenced the realm of societal experimentation. After Linna, the working-class experience became recognised as an essential part of the national narrative. Linna affected the societal experiences of *the reader* and the people who were affected by the Linna's narrative otherwise.

In this chapter, we have presented multiple ways of how (literary) fiction can be used as a source for the history of experience. Table 7.1 presents an analytical division that can be used in research. It should be noted that the collective analysis of example texts provides a valuable lens for examining the *longue durée* of Finnish working-class culture and the historical experience of the working-class.

While working-class literature can be seen as a specific form of story-telling, it also contains aspects that allow for more general conclusions. We summarise these claims as follows:

1. If the fictional text can be linked to the author's life, it becomes possible to interpret the fiction as a reflection of the author's "inner thoughts", political beliefs, or other societal views and experiences. In this sense, fiction serves as a valuable source for biographical research, offering a way to analyse how impactful and emotive social messages are conveyed and mediated. When the persona of interest is an impactful public figure, their widespread texts can also shape the social discourse or cultural atmosphere drastically.
2. Fiction does not simply depict everyday life as it is but rather highlights the culturally constructed undertones of society. Portrayals of ordinary people offer glimpses of the experimental spheres in which individuals have lived. Fiction offers ideas, representations, and interpretation of how people lived or felt during different epochs.
3. Fiction can challenge the master narratives of the societal community. Simultaneously, fiction can be part of the cultural phenomena, which challenge the dominant structures or prevalent ideas.

Table 7.1 The content of the analysis

Author	*Author's societal position*	*Empirical evidence*	*Context*	*Research tradition*	*Point of view*	*Research theme*
Hilja Pärssinen	Politician, left-wing author, educated bourgeois background	"Naiselle"/To a Woman, 1907 (poem)	Early 20th−century Finland	Biographical research	Author, author as an agent of experience, individual experience	Lived religion, political narratives, societal reforms
Konrad Lehtimäki	Politician, socialist, left-wing author	*Ylös helvetistä*/Up from Hell, 1917 (novel)	Near Future	Political history	Literary content, experience as a process, scene, and layer of experience	The political horizon of expectations
Toivo Pekkanen	Working-class author, bestseller	*Tehtaan varjossa*/ In the Shadows of the Factory, 1932 (novel)	Interwar period Finland	New social history, history from below	Literary content, experience as a process, scene, and layer of experience	Collective experiences of the working-class
Väinö Linna	Working-class author, "national writer", bestseller	*Täällä Pohjantähden alla*/Under the North Star, 1959–1962 (Trilogy)	Post-War Finland	Narrative studies, discourse analysis	Reader/publicity, experience as a structure, community of experience	Evolving national mastern narratives

We argue that these three dimensions are essential when analysing the history of experience. Fiction, in general, should be regarded as a valuable source. It becomes particularly fruitful for the history of experience when researchers view it as a mediated narrative form, deeply understand its societal and cultural context, and acknowledge the role of the author. Interestingly, in the contemporary field of the history of experience, fiction has been underused source material—and when it has been used, it has been used mostly as a counterpart to histographies.[51] In other words, the focus of these studies has been on the fictional representation of historical experiences. We claim that fiction should also be analysed as contemporary social documentation: it is a multi-functional source to analyse experiences of the past, present, and the future.

Appendix

Hilja Pärssinen: Naiselle (To a Woman)

They fill your head with prejudice
and leave your sense to sleep
and mislead your conscience

They take you to the shrine of churches
and mesmerise you at masses
and threatening you with hellfire
destroy your yearning for freedom.

And having your spirit captured
they take you with them to work,
wanting to regress everything
and plunge people in the night.

When a workman toils day and night
and wealth remains with the few
and "where is the justice, security"
ask the oppressed in despair,

While the rich alone hold the power and the mighty make the laws,
while brute force and cannons

[51] See Rutar 2023; Marculescu 2019; Antić 2022; Andersson & Engren 2022.

throw the bearers of light into dungeons,

While there is much, much injustice,
in which nations, individuals are drowning,
you do not comprehend the zeitgeist
your spirit is in deep slumber.

You live in the ecstasy of emotion
weaving dark belts of darkness.
You walk in the flickering lights of false fires
and raise cretins.[52]

You will not rise to raise brave men,
nor create a great family,
Who would only seek the common good
and notice the cries of the wretched.

To your children you teach humility
and provide their food and clothing
but you forget enthusiasm and courage
and beautiful, enduring ideas.

But once the day will come,
when the old will fall in their graves,
and the new woman will rise,
whose power shall bend everyone.

Away with the dark yoke of the prejudices
from the spiritual, bright path of light.
Away with the wavering self-consciousness
when the calling asks for the mind!

It demands the will and the heart
it calls the woman to fight.
Oh dark, miserable is the world
the light of God does not shine.

[52] In the context, "cretin" is a pejorative expression meaning a person who is prone to suggestion and propaganda and with a low capacity for questioning the authorities and capitalist regime.

But look, woman is now enlightened
and breaking the grim shackle.
And the powerful, emerging progress
gains the momentum of a new vigour.

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