

# Sisu As a Central Marker of Finnish-American Culture: Stubbornness beyond reason

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***Abstract:** This article analyzes one of the most interesting and perhaps best-known characteristics of Finnishness—Sisu—stubbornness beyond reason. In the text, Finnish 'sisu' is examined from fictional points of view, as it is depicted in the central works of some chosen authors and works: 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. I point out some of my notions related to Finnishness in the texts, and study the image of Finnish 'sisu' which has affected the authors' auto-images (images of the group a person belongs to), and I also investigate how this image mirrors the hetero-images (images of outside groups) of the surrounding society. Consequently, I present some of the aspects that I believe most clearly characterize the guts of Finnish immigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and which concurrently have affected the identity of the authors, their texts, as well as images of life in North America.*

***Keywords:** Comparative literature—imagology—cultural models—schemas—stereotypes—emigration—assimilation—Finnishness—sisu*

## **Image studies—a way to analyze literary texts**

I have been looking at the function of cultural heritage and certain cultural schemas of Finnishness within the literary context investigating the select-

ed texts in a multi-dimensional setting of cultural models and schemas with imagological mechanisms (Image Studies). This calls for an analysis of the indices of Finnishness and the authors' attitudes towards their cultural heritage. The study is concerned with how the ethnic identity of Finnishness appears in the literary production of second- and third-generation Finnish-American authors. My research asks what sorts of Finnish characteristics are discernible in their narratives, what the authors' interpretations of these characteristics are, and how these indices of Finnishness can be related to Finnish-American immigrants.<sup>1</sup>

I have built my argumentation on the assumptions that cultural meanings/models of Finnishness have been preserved in the cultural memory of the selected Finnish-American authors. The traits of their Finnish ancestors and their own Finnish identity (roots) have been evoked consciously or unconsciously in their work. As regards the methodological framework, I have adapted an interdisciplinary approach that draws upon a discussion of the cognitive theory of cultural meaning and also on the discipline of Imagology in Comparative Literature. This article represents one part of my dissertation *Stubborn and Silent Finns With 'Sisu' in Finnish-American Literature: An Imagological Study of Finnishness in the Literary Production of Finnish-American Authors* (2007), analyzing 'sisu' in the chosen works.

### **Finnish Americans—a tiny group of immigrants**

The history of emigration from Finland to America between 1870 and 1929 conceals a number of reasons why particular populations left their precious homeland. Those who emigrated often faced economic difficulties or were landless workers, or there were social or religious issues involved, and so on. America was the land of hope for some 350,000 Finns at that time, prompting them to make the long voyage in search of a better future, work, and/or a piece of land of their own.

Finnish Americans are a relatively small ethnic group. Of the total number of immigrants to the United States up to 1920, Finns made up less than one percent. They settled in highly localized, often rural, areas limited to

1 In this article, the term 'indices' has been used to describe various characteristics of Finnishness. 'Indices' refer not only to 'signs' of characters but to the atmosphere, and the actions of the characters in the texts (Barthes, 1987: 106-107).

a relatively few states in northern United States (Hoglund 1980, 368). As Kivisto (1989) suggests, "the geographical destination of immigrant Finns resulted in a rather distinctive settlement pattern—a pattern that continues to be of significance" (79).<sup>2</sup> Finns were propelled by an industrializing economy into the ranks of the proletariat. They tended to settle in smaller cities. Thus, they were found in larger numbers in Duluth rather than Minneapolis, in the iron and copper mining communities in Michigan's Upper Peninsula rather than Detroit, in the Oregon coastal town of Astoria rather than Portland (79). Thus, Finnish immigrants were living in small cities and villages in the northern mining areas. Good examples of these Finnish settlements were also isolated farming communities where ideological commitments related to religion or politics strengthened togetherness (Glazer 1954, 165-166). Consequently, the assimilation to mainstream America was not always the primary concern of these small ethnic groups. As Toivonen points out, Finns frequently remodelled their ethnicity in relation to the neighboring culture, but at the same time they preserved some core values of Finnishness (102). According to Gans, the threefold process that newcomers experience includes economic, cultural, and social assimilations (33-34). For Finnish people economic assimilation began right away because they came for work. Thus, finding jobs moved them inside the economic world of the host country. Cultural assimilation began almost as quickly, because learning the habits of everyday life made living much easier in a new environment, but social assimilation was slower and demanded joining non-immigrant groups. More importantly, the acceptance of native-born Americans was required before assimilation was complete. Moreover, the Finnish language and the presence of strong religious groups opposing assimilation were reasons for the continuation of isolated ethnic communities (Kostiainen 273).

In the 2000 US Census, the number of people claiming Finnish ancestry was 624,000. The approximate number of second-generation immigrants is about 80,000. As the 2000 US Census indicated, over half a million Finnish Americans of the third, fourth, fifth, and even sixth generations identify their Finnish heritage—as either the first or second ethnicity (Korkeasaari and Roinila 99).

2 All translations of quotations in Finnish are my own.

### The authors and their work

The Finnish-American authors in this study—Anderson, Caraker, Damrell, Laitala, Robbins—represent second- and third-generation immigrant descendants. These five authors have been chosen as the subjects of my research because they represent literary production from a wide range of the areas (Oregon, Minnesota, Michigan, Massachusetts, Wisconsin) in which there are still descendants of Finnish immigrants. My interest is focused primarily on the second- and third-generation immigrant offspring among whom there would supposedly be unique experiences of Finnishness without too much intermingling with cultures of other nationalities. However, I think that the collection of texts in this research offers a good cross-section of the existing narratives by Finnish-American authors, and that they represent a versatile range of Finnish-American texts for illustrating the various indices of Finnishness. My research was concerned with how the ethnic identity of Finnishness appears in the literary production of these authors.

Mary Lumijärvi Caraker was born in 1929 to parents and grandparents of Finnish descent. Today, she is a full-time writer living in San Francisco, California. Caraker, who has several published novels, considers herself a minor author within the field of American literature and is usually classified as a science fiction writer or an ethnic Finnish-American writer. Born in Astoria, Oregon, she was raised in a rural, Finnish-American community. Her novel *Growing Up Soggy* is a description of a young girl, Ruth Ann (Ruthie) Virtanen, living in the Pacific Northwest during the Depression and World War II years. Caraker is a captivating fiction writer. In her novel *Elina, Mistress of Laukko* she conveys the reader from modern American surroundings to the historical places and events of Finland in the fifteenth century. The novel is a historical work portraying three women from different eras.

Besides Caraker's novels, I chose texts by writers Lynn Laitala, Lauri Anderson and Joseph Damrell who describe some of the lives led in the upper Midwestern areas that a great number of Finnish immigrants inhabited at the height of the migrations from Finland. The youngest of these three, Lynn Laitala, is a skilful storyteller. Her grandparents were born in the 1880s, three of them in Finland. Laitala's parents spoke Finnish, learned English at school, but did not teach Finnish to their children. Laitala was born in Winton, Minnesota, in 1947, spending much of her childhood in a community made up of Finnish immigrants. Laitala's fiction attempts to reflect themes relating to cross-cultural brotherhood. In her book *Down from*

*Basswood—Voices of the Border Country*, she chronicles the lives of the North Country people among whom she grew up. The work makes for a better understanding of the unique interaction of immigrants and Native Americans who shaped the culture of the northern frontier. Laitala's stories express deep sympathy for the Finnish immigrant as well as the Native American, exploring the values and experiences they share in the northern areas of Minnesota.

Lauri Anderson was born in 1942 and grew up in Monson, Maine, surrounded by Finns. His grandparents were Finnish. He is a professor at Finlandia University (former Suomi College), in Hancock, Michigan, and has written several stories about the Finns in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan where he describes the Finnish characters by incorporating humor, satire, and irony into his fine stories which are set in historical contexts. Anderson's fictional work profiles the comic aspects and tragic moments of Finnish characters whose lives he sets in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Stereotypical "Yoopers" (Upper Peninsula People) in his novels and short stories are stubborn Finns, silent drinkers with 'sisu.' Anderson's collection of stories, *Heikki Heikkinen*, depicts his characters with a sympathy that understands their faults and weaknesses.

Joseph Damrell was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1944, but was raised in Colorado and California. He is a writer and ethnographer who earned his Ph.D. at the University of California, Davis, in 1972. He moved to the Upper Midwest in 1978 and has been teaching at Central Michigan University as well as Northland College, Ashland, Wisconsin, where he works at present. Damrell has moved to the family homestead in Ewen, Michigan, living there on the farm founded by his grandparents. He has published several books describing Finnish immigrants living in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Damrell fictionally describes the Finns of the Upper Peninsula in a tale called *Gift*, going through tender, mystifying, Native American and environmental issues.

The last of the five writers in my study is Paula Robbins. Her story *Below Rollstone Hill—Growing up in the Finnish Quarter of Fitchburg, Massachusetts*, depicts a Finnish working-class family in an industrial city on the Eastern coast of the United States. Her story dwells in the area where many first-generation Finnish immigrants crowded the big factories. Herself born in 1935, Robbins had parents who were born in Finland. Both of her parents' families moved to the United States for better jobs. Her parents, active in the Finnish-American community, spoke Finnish at home.

## Methodology

What are the most recognizable indices of Finnishness in the authors' works? How do the cultural models of Finnishness preserved in the cultural memories of Finnish-American authors reflect earlier encounters and experiences in their literary production? These were the main research problems to formulate the methodology for the analysis of Finnish-American literature.

To generate a mode of reading that would acknowledge the uniqueness of these novels, the methodological framework offers an interdisciplinary approach that foregrounds the various indices of Finnishness depicted by the selected Finnish-American authors. Actually, cognitive research stresses the communicative aspects of literary texts; the different parties of the communication are the author and the reading public (Kajannes 54). In line with communication, cognitive theories of literature emphasize the meaning of narration. In fact, people communicate and transmit reality by means of language, making their world comprehensible by creating meanings (Sintonen 43). Identity (cultural, ethnic, or the identity of oneself) is a way for individuals to locate themselves in a society, or in their relations to others (123). To act according to cultural models and schemas is expressing one's identity; on the other hand, schemas direct narration because they are knowledge structures in people's heads (D'Andrade 158). They help to analyze the world by interpreting meanings. Complex schema collections are models but "every schema serves as a simple model in the sense that it is a representation of some object or event" (151-152). There are several types of schemas (images, stereotypes, imagemes) which have been analyzed using imagological tools in my study.<sup>3</sup> In this article the focus is on the characteristic of 'sisu'.

Furthermore, I was studying not only the image of the Finns, but also the background in relation to the attitudes of the authors. One of the basic insights in image studies is that the mechanism of the representation of national traits can only be analyzed properly if the attitude of the author has been taken into account. On the one hand, my reading, interpretation, and theoretical analysis of the texts, and, on the other hand, my interviews with the authors as well as the written reviews of these texts will shed light

3 National 'imagemes' are defined by their Janus-faced ambivalence and contradictory nature (Leerssen, 2000: 279). Janus (Ianus) was a Roman protector of doors and passages, observing entrances and exits. He had two faces, so he could look inside and outside simultaneously.

on the Finnish indices of their works. According to this view, I consider that the opinions of the authors (our internet correspondence) have been central to the analysis of the texts. The study considers the ways in which the imagery of oneself is intermingled with the imagery of oneself through the eyes of the others.

Imagology is a study of national/ethnic/racial/cultural images or stereotypes as they appear in literary contexts. The essential function of imagology in literature includes the study of literary images of other groups (hetero-images) and images of one's own group (auto-images), a task given additional amplification by the fact that contemporary "anthropologists and social psychologists were beginning to criticize their own ethnocentrist and essentialist inheritance" (Leerssen 2003, 1). Seen in this way, imagology is a discipline which aims at clarifying not only the origins and meanings of national characteristics but also the motivations and the effects of people's habit of thinking, speaking, and writing in the form of prejudices, stereotypes and clichés (Leerssen 2007a, 27). Notions of 'national character' have, from the early modern period onward, become the main discursive rationalization for cultural difference. Within this discourse, the term 'image' can be used as the mental shape of the other, who appears to be determined by the characteristics of family, group, tribe, people or race, although it may also be worth remarking that 'image' in a psychological sense may be usefully understood as a cognitive 'knowledge structure' or schema (Karvonen 29).

All in all, I have on the one hand been asking how inevitable the cultural identity of Finnishness is in the authors' self-image and, on the other hand, how the cultural confrontation with American society and the other nationalities, such as Italians, Germans, and Native Americans, has been taken?

### **Finnishness—national identity**

Finns— who are they?

Nations do not have unequivocal roots. Instead, there are plenty of interpretations for each individual case (Ruuska 91). According to Ruuska, the questions where the Finns come from and who they are are extremely interesting because the varying answers describe the different periods of time when they are perceived to be true. A nation is an image, suggests Halonen (146). It is a group of people who have decided to build a nation. This group has a collective memory along with a shared history (146). In

particular, among Finnish people a shared history has been written—often in the spirit of nationalism—through an interpretation of past events which draws attention to certain things while ignoring others (146). Accordingly, as Halonen makes clear, national historiography has tended to emphasize shared moments of fate which the nation has overcome. Characteristically, these relate to situations created in times of war or glorious events and heroic deeds which are shored up in a nation's memory. Generally, Finnish historical time is divided into three main segments, namely, the period under Swedish rule, the period of autonomy (as a Grand Duchy) under the Russian Empire, and the period initiated by independence (146). In addition, as Halonen points out, numerous important visions of Finland's past may help to analyze its position between the West (Sweden and Western Europe) and the East (Russia). Central differences between the West and the East have helped to define Finland's position in Europe. As a final argument, Halonen maintains that these historical events have become national symbols that still constitute important elements in Finnish national identity.

Consequently, the most significant and fundamental way of approaching a characterization of Finnishness may be to examine those ideals and symbols of virtue through which the Finnish national identity (as well as patriotism) has been built. In his interpretation of national identity, Klinge argues that neither Finnishness nor any other collective identity is solely arbitrated by an awareness of historical, geographical, or financial position (170). Identity is always made up, or planned, by people. Do Finns actually have a history of their own? Does the rich imagery of Finns lack a relation to historical events and signify nothing more than amazing mythical stories? Furthermore, as Peltonen argues, Finnish identity is just a common energy experienced through symbols and rituals (22). According to Peltonen, identity is a short-term experience helping people to identify themselves in a group in the course of familiar and recognizable incidents, whereas national stereotypes are long-term cultural images of a nation maintained by education and media. They are often pessimistic observations or at least teasing images of neighboring nationalities.

A stereotype is widely thought to be a set of beliefs about the members of a social group. In particular, Cinnirella maintains that stereotypes are "belief systems which associate attitudes, behavior and personality characteristics with members of a social category" (37). As he points out, "stereotypes can be individual and/or shared entities." However, he accentuates that there is a difference between 'active' and 'dormant' social stereotypes

(38-39). Besides, he voices the opinion that "active stereotypes are those which are currently circulating in society but with the help of dormant stereotypes we can better understand historical bases of prejudice and intergroup relations." As Cinnirella emphasizes, both ethnic and national stereotypes are dissimilar to most other stereotypes because ethnicity as well as nationality are relatively conventional elements of an individual's sense of identity and "come to impact upon one's life from a very early age" (48-49). In particular, ethnic commitment is a firm factor of social identity for most people since, as he asserts, "one cannot normally change one's ethnic origin" (49).

Images of Finnishness are not typical stereotypes but rather national self-images. Peltonen argues that self-images in general are seldom as self-deprecating as those of the Finns (22). In other words, Finnish people have constantly undervalued their self-images. In principle, there is no such thing as Finnishness, argues Anttila (108). In so far as it exists, it simply continues living in people's minds as an imagined reality. Thus, Finnishness is always connoted through certain objects, items, occurrences or people. For some people 'sisu' and 'sauna,' for example, manifest Finnishness, and in other words they become symbols of Finnishness. Viewing the central aspects of Finnish identity, Räsänen stresses the importance of Finland's history (10). Seeking relevant explanations for the justified traditions of the Finnish nation, historians have located several periods in Finnish history when Finns were pursuing knowledge about their self-image. The rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century sought its supporters among the Finnish elite; on the other hand, the Romantic Movement in Finland, which underpinned nationalist ideology, was derived from German and Scandinavian sources (Kivisto 1984, 53-54). As he points out, "early literary contributions to Finnish nationalism were written in Swedish. The historical novels of Zacharias Topelius and the work of Johan Ludvig Runeberg were infused with the influence of Romanticism seeking to depict the contours of a distinct national character" (53-54).<sup>4</sup> The work of Elias Lönnrot, the *Kalevala*, was particu-

4 Zacharias Topelius (1818-1898) wrote *Maamme kirja*, a 'Book of Our Country' in Swedish in 1875, and it was translated into Finnish in 1876. It delineates Finland and Finnish people at the beginning of the twentieth century. Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804-1877) was the national poet of Finland writing in Swedish. He was the first Finnish writer to achieve a broad national significance and a wide international fame. Runeberg wrote the classical Finnish epic poem *The Songs of Ensign Stål* about Finland's war of 1808-09 in 1848-60. It was translated into Finnish as *Vänrikki Stoolin tarinat* in 1889 and it was used as compulsory reading in schools in Finland.

larly significant, but it evoked several disagreements among members of the Finnish (Swedish-speaking) elite because it was written in Finnish.<sup>5</sup> In time, intellectuals (Finnophiles) had to submit, and agree with, the ideals of Johan Wilhelm Snellman, a political liberal, who did not support the Swedish language as a cultural language of Finland.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the most important notion expressed by Snellman became a national cliché: “We are not Swedes, we can never be Russians; let us be Finns” (in Kivisto 1984, 57). In addition, the periods of Russification and Finland’s endeavor to achieve independence were times when the identity of Finns had to be reassessed. In January 1918, because of internal disagreement, hostilities broke in Finland causing a civil war. Every war that Finland has been forced into has created problems of identity.

According to Räsänen, a national culture is just a theoretical conception created by researchers and others (12). He delineates the ways in which national culture has mistakenly been used to mould a nation and its ideologies. He stresses that a nation’s myths and folklore purposely falsify reality. From this viewpoint, Räsänen maintains that the *Kalevala* along with Topelius’s *Maamme kirja* [Book of Our Country] and Runeberg’s heroic writings have been used to create Finnish identity. As Saukkonen puts it:

The ‘true Finnish folk’ was, according to many authors, discovered in the southern inland province of Tavastia and especially among the independent farmers in that lake-rich region. Tavastia is also the place of origin of the most famous personification of the national character of *Matti* (1875) by Zacharias Topelius (1818-1898). In a condensed form, Matti represents the alleged qualities of the Finnish people. These qualities were usually derived from a phlegmatic personality type, including traits such as diligence, perseverance, obedience and stubbornness. The combination of this adds up to a quality known and celebrated in the Finnish self-image as *sisu*. (Saukkonen 152)

However that may be, the Finnish nation has its ‘Topelian’ culture, which includes strong historical and traditional aspects (Räsänen 12).

5 The first edition of the *Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic, was published by Elias Lönnrot in 1849.

6 Johan Wilhelm Snellman (1806-1881) was a national philosopher and statesman. He was an important person in the movement to establish Finnish as a national language. In parallel, he served as a senator and helped to change Finland’s monetary standard from the ruble to its own currency, the Finnish mark.

### The literary roots of Finnish-American immigrants

According to Kero, the history of Finnish literature in America has its roots in newspaper writings from as early as the 1870s (Kero 147). Finnish immigrants had learned to read and write in their homeland; thus, this ability gave them an advantage over immigrants from several other countries (Virtanen 72). Literacy brought about a need for Finnish newspapers on the new continent. Accordingly in 1899, the first religious newspaper, *Amerikan Suometar*, was published (152). After that time, as Kero describes, other religious and political newspapers were published; and they gained a devoted readership among Finnish immigrants. In addition, several newspapers inspired various people to write poems, novels, and plays which the editors gladly published (166). As suggested by Rayson, such writers depicted both the former homeland and the surrounding environment in the new country as well as hard work in the mines and lumber camps (Kero 166). Ethnic literature mirrors the realities of life. When migrants begin writing texts, they have matured to the point where they are able to analyze the surrounding world as observers of reality (Vallenius 233). In his research on Finnish-Swedish immigrants in the 1960s, Vallenius perceives similar reasons (higher living standard, work, family reasons, and adventure) to emigrate as Finnish-speaking Finns had while moving to America. As Vallenius concludes, the notion of the fatherland springs forth from deep experiences (233). In Finnish-Swedish literary expressions, the Finnish agrarian environment offers the migrants traits of 'Topelian' stereotypes as an authentic way of living in the fragmented modern world while visiting their homeland on their holidays (233). Is it possible that the 'old' stereotypical senses of Finland have survived in the minds of emigrants to Sweden, our nearest neighbor as late as in the 1960s?

Indeed, the roots of the first-generation Finnish-American immigrants were in a Finland similar to that described by Topelius. However, the stereotypical Finns described by Topelius were not completely strange to those Americans interested in Finnish literature because some of Topelius's works had been translated into English as early as in the 1870s. His romantic stories were popular among the most enthusiastic literature collectors, those Americans who also knew something about the Finnish 'national poet' Runeberg and who characterized him as a representative of patriotic poets.

In what follows, I will survey the content of Topelius's *Maamme kirja* [Book of Our Country] in relation to the status of Finnishness at the time of

the great waves of immigration. *Maamme kirja* was published in Finnish in 1876, and it became the most important book in Finnish elementary schools for decades to come. Several new editions were published. Indeed, by 1907, the number of published copies had reached 240,000—Finland's population was about 3 million inhabitants at that time. It is apparent, then, that this book was in many cases one of the most important books that emigrants from Finland had read at school. Of course, as Høglund (1960) notes, many Finns found their literary world through the Bible, Catechism, almanacs, and occasionally through other books (17). In his book, Topelius succeeded in making a synthesis of all the attainable information concerning Finland and Finnish people creating a patriotic impression (Rantanen 200). Topelius structured his wide-ranging work in the form of six chapters related to geography, folklore, folk traditions, history, and social studies. In addition, his aim was conceivably to offer his young readers an extensive picture of Finland and awaken their patriotic feelings towards their fatherland (200). According to Rantanen, Topelius emphasizes national thinking as the main principle as regards the analysis of the world (200).

Even though *Maamme kirja* gave new hope to Finnish people, it narrativized the vicissitudes of a poor and unindustrialized country. Sadly, God had situated the ill-fated Finnish people in the backwoods to lever stones and live on the mercy of natural forces (Rantanen 203). By characterizing the poor conditions in Finland, Topelius taught Finnish people to be humble while facing natural forces. Likewise, he praised the beautiful and picturesque landscape of Finland highlighted by Finnish authors and artists, especially by Runeberg who masterfully described the bright nights, velvet-soft grass, gloomy pine trees along with the quietness of a Finnish nature in which only the euphony of a mavis can break the silence (204). In Wargelin's writings about Finnishness (1924) one finds the same picturesque atmosphere, appreciation, and praise of the Finnish nature:

The Finns have always sung, and when they came to America they had reason to sing of their longing for home, and of their childhood memories and youthful loves, whispered under the "midsummer-night sun," when nature was awake in its sleep, and the evening embraced morning without the shadow of night on its brow. (in Rantanen 207)

Evidently, a national identity is to some degree built on all kinds of national myths (Siikala 141). A far-reaching notion about Finns is the myth that Finnish people have 'come from the woods'; Finns are forest dwellers who

long for solitude. According to Lehtonen, the images of Finnish agrarian life persist in conflict with the latest images of Finland as a developed urban country (55).

One could maintain that Topelius was a bright person who understood the aspects of world and life and, therefore, tried to educate Finnish people in an ethnocentric manner so that they would appreciate their own country's position as an intrinsic value that should not be affected by the depressing qualities of the land (Rantanen 205). In addition, Topelius advised that by looking at others, people can see themselves; but by looking at others they can also change themselves: a development which is extremely important. However, his opinions were anything but extrovert, because he did not encourage people to participate in overt discussions with other groups. His patriotic feelings were possessive and collective (207). Topelius considered foreigners as embodiments of momentary pleasures while Finns were brave and honest workers who looked the truth in the eye and, regardless of all their suffering, worked for the best of their country. In a sense, he banned travelling and emigration (216). Briefly, the antithesis 'us' and 'them' creates problems for Finnish people even in present interactions in Europe (Alapuro 181).

At this point it is relevant to notice that life changed quickly at the end of the nineteenth century; the old folk traditions were disappearing in Finland (Hoglund 1960, 17). Finnish people found other opportunities for mental endeavor and expression in reform activities, temperance societies, trade unions, and cooperatives (1960, 4). Economic liberalism helped new industrial companies to organize work in factories, mills, and workshops. In many ways, then, the Finnish economy became industrialized (1960, 5), while a number of Finnish people still remained in agriculture. As Hoglund argues, agricultural occupations became less important, but the new urban centers did not absorb all rural migrants because thousands of them left Finland for the cities of America. The old folk traditions helped immigrants control their lives in a society in which rural folkways were no longer adequate. According to Hoglund, "through associative activity in America the Finnish immigrant found a new home built with his Old Country heritage in his New World environment" (1960, 36).

Topelius had begun his descriptions of Finns in *Maamme kirja*, which, in effect, disseminated his way of thinking and affected Finnish people for several decades after his death. New geographical books and articles in the 1950s brought forth more specified stereotypical characteristics of Finnish

people. Compared to other nationalities Finns were a silent and peaceful people who had 'sisu' and were used to hard work.

Although the ethnic self-consciousness of Finnish-Americans had become stronger in America, Finns also lost some elements of their ethnic identity; thus, they could not avoid sensing cultural changes in themselves (Hoglund 1960, 127). In the early years of the twentieth century, Finnish Americans lived in a culture that was basically Finnish (Hummasti 90-91). As Kaups (1975) has noted, Finnish immigrants wanted to recreate the same way of life for themselves as they had left behind in Finland. After the First World War, as the Finnish past became more remote, Finns in America wanted to ensure continuity in their history by creating a practical Finnish-American past.

### **Symbols of Finnishness in the texts**

The chosen authors have depicted the most prevailing personality and behavioral indices of Finnishness at the time of immigration in their literary works, such as 'sisu,' diligence, cleanliness, helpfulness, honesty, reticence, and drinking habits. In this study, the discussions explore the constructions of various images of 'sisu' and its cultural content in line with cultural schemas.

The cultural models of the authors will be analyzed by studying the content of 'sisu' as behavioral schemas of different characters in the texts; on the other hand, an imagological analysis of the indices of Finnishness will facilitate a more accurate examination of this ethnic trait (images and stereotypes). My correspondence as well as my interviews with the authors have enabled me to supplement this image code by gathering more explicit self-images in relation to these materials (Taramaa 201-207). Furthermore, the indices of Finnishness that the personality or behavior of the actors in the stories symbolize may easily be seen to mirror the identity of the group they belong to (auto-images) or the images of outside groups (hetero-images). This study deals with the analysis of 'sisu,' one of the most typical characteristics of Finnishness in the chosen narratives.

### **'Sisu'**

What is 'sisu'? What was/is the immense mental strength that the Finns believe themselves to have—or to have possessed formerly? Where does this

characteristic come from? 'Sisu' can be both inherited and environmental. It has no exact synonym in any other language; but it means something like 'solid'—even 'stolid,' as well as it connotes ideas of obstinacy, patience, bull-headedness, and downright cussedness (Engle 6).

In part, as has been argued, 'sisu' in conjunction with the sauna may have been behind the world-famous achievements of Finnish athletes (Laaksonen 136). Inevitably, Finland is a nation of sports where athletes have become powerful symbols in society. Finnish athletes with their victorious achievements, for instance, in several Olympic Games have been extremely encouraging models for ordinary people and for Finnish youth in their endeavors to conquer hardship and endure pressure. The most important task of sports in a community is to create stories about who we are, or what our goals will be. Stories about athletes have molded national symbols, helping to make Finns a sports nation (Sironen 104). 'Flying Finns' (long distance runners) are one key element among images of Finland because the term has come into being abroad.<sup>7</sup> Such achievements make the athletes of this tiny nation equal to other athletes, or even, sometimes, better (Halonen 102). As mentioned above, a common belief is that nothing like this could have happened without the famous 'sisu.' But here I would like to address the question of how current Finnish research defines this strange stamina typical of Finns. According to Knuuttila (2005), the concrete meaning of the word 'sisu' (the inside of something) has been conceptualized, and it has gained an abstract meaning of a certain type of characteristic or state of mind (25). As Knuuttila points out, numerous old Finnish literary documents include definitions of 'sisu,' and several Finnish linguists have documented meanings for 'sisu' beginning from a malign form which tempts people to do evil deeds. Similarly, it can reflect both stubbornness and pride. A person having 'sisu' can be cruel, unscrupulous but also brave and daring; on the other hand, he or she can be careless, cunning, and furious. The most viable explanation for 'sisu' among Finns today would probably be toughness, patience, and an ability to endure trials and trouble (25).

According to Paasivirta, Finnish 'sisu' became an idiom connected to

7 Flying Finn is a nickname given to several Finnish middle- and long-distance runners, e.g. Hannes Kolehmainen, Paavo Nurmi, and Ville Ritola, in the 1920s and 1930s (Hannus, 1988). Since the 1960s the term has been renovated to mean Finnish rally and formula drivers, and later since the 1990s Finnish professional ice hockey players.

Finnish soldiers during the Winter War (113).<sup>8</sup> In this context, it was a characteristic of the Finns which indicated 'guts,' inner fire, or superhuman nerve-power. Indeed, if one considers the results of various research projects and interviews made about and among Finnish Americans, one must definitely come to the conclusion that the Finnish notion of 'sisu' still exists, at least in the memory of numerous Finnish Americans. Consequently, Aho, who has interviewed a number of Finns and Finnish Americans, gives an exhaustive definition of 'sisu' using the following remarks:

'Sisu' is said to be a tough-to-translate, near spiritual quality which Finns everywhere seem to know about, believe they possess and practice. 'Sisu' is much more than fortitude. 'Sisu' is an old characterization used by the Finnish people, maybe for the last ten thousand years. 'Sisu' is a Finnish word for guts, grit, determination, and the capacity to endure any hardship. As one old Finnish farmer has said: "It's stubbornness beyond reason." (Aho 1)

During the summer and fall of 1991, a national mail survey was conducted to map the opinions of second- and later-generation Finnish Americans about their ethnic heritage and identity. There were 447 respondents. Here, the respondents were asked several questions about 'sisu.' As Aho points out, ninety-one percent believed that people of Finnish heritage have this characteristic (4). One of the most interesting findings in the survey was that quite a high percentage of all respondents, regardless of the age group, thought that their ideas about 'sisu' had affected their own behavior and / or ways of thinking.

Hence, the researcher Eleanor Palo Stoller, analyzing ethnic identity among second- and third-generation Finnish Americans, was able to emphasize the importance of 'sisu' in relation to hard work, stating that "[p]erseverance and tenacity are two words used to define the Finnish characteristics of 'sisu,' which one of the respondents in the research translated as guts, courage, determination, with just a trace of Finnish stubbornness." Another

8 The Finnish-Soviet Winter War erupted on 30th November 1939 when Soviet's Red Army launched an assault on Finland. It lasted 105 days ending on 13th March 1940. The war was based on the Nazi-Soviet Pact in which Finland was left into the Soviet sphere of influence. Finland achieved several heroic wins on the front during the first weeks of the war but finally had to accept a heavily loaded peace treaty. Its terms were that Finland had to cede about 10% of its territory and more than 400,000 Finnish people lost their homes. The Finnish Americans and Canadians established a voluntary military unit consisting of 370 soldiers. They were on the front just before the peace treaty. The Winter War was a part of the Second World War (Jutikkala and Pirinen, 1979: 214-244).

respondent argued: “Sisu is a central marker of Finnish-American culture” (Palo Stoller 154). As we may notice, the properties of ‘sisu’ in both of these studies prove to be parallel.

Is it possible, however, that ‘sisu’ can diminish? This question worried Harry in Joseph Damrell’s novel when he was thinking about his uncle Gus trying to understand the reasons for his disappearance:

Did ‘sisu’—what the Finns call nerve or guts—diminish with the disillusionment born of decay? Harry had seen the power of ‘sisu’ around himself since he was a little boy. His parents and grandparents had fought for their future with Finnish ‘sisu’ (Damrell 83).

It is evident that Finnish-American writers have to ponder the essence of ‘sisu’ just to give the right impression of a word which is tinged with a variable scale of emotions. This has also been the case in Lauri Anderson’s story collection *Heikki Heikkinen* when Anderson makes one of his protagonists thoroughly analyze the meaning of the word:

All the years that Eddie was growing up, the Finns of Coppertown talked about *sisu*. Eddie asked his Finnish relatives to define *sisu*. Eddie’s Uncle Wilho defined *sisu* as guts. As a small child, Eddie often heard Wilho’s *sisu* rumbling after his uncle had consumed too much vodka and pickled fish. Eddie’s uncle Toivo defined *sisu* as stubbornness, but that only confused little Eddie. He knew that mules were famous for their stubbornness, but did that mean that they had *sisu*? Eddie’s dad defined *sisu* as determination—as choosing a goal and then working towards it in an intelligent way. (Anderson 13-14)

The last statement affirms Palo Stoller’s previous research concerning the strong fortitude (‘sisu’) of commitment perceived by Finns as part of their auto-image (154). In my research three authors out of the five examined contributed remarks, examples or notions about ‘sisu’ in their texts. For example, in *Growing Up Soggy*, Mary Caraker points out the aspects of the term, describing instances of its less laudable sides. One example of the things bothering Ruth Ann as a young girl was the difference between her clothing and that of the American girls. Her mother was very stubborn when it came to the subject of warm clothing during winter. “Don’t tell me about the others” (Caraker 1995, 26), she said, but promised to Ruth Ann that she could wear short socks on the first of May. The day came—it was snowing. The following days were cold, but Ruth Ann wore her socks obstinately. She overheard her parents’ discussion, the word ‘sisu’ expressed by her father, and her mother uttering: “The kid’s a Finn, all right” (1995, 26).

Mary Caraker gives the impression in her books and in the e-mail answers

to my questions that the innermost connotations of 'sisu' were not always exactly complimentary. In a similar manner, as Caraker states, it had its less laudable sides. In many cases it expressed the utmost stubbornness and the taking of unexpected risks. Hence, knowing the meaning of the word, with its internal connotation of stubbornness and bull-headedness, gave Ruth Ann the strength to resist the hard wintry conditions. She had the guts to do it regardless of her mother's intimidation about the threat of pneumonia. The cultural model she had experienced forced her to make her own interpretation of 'sisu' and to act accordingly. Furthermore, her mother's metaphorical utterance gave extra strength and defiance to her. Caraker's definition of 'sisu' is in line with statements made by Finnish researchers and a respondent in Palo Stoller's study when they maintain that there is 'good sisu' and 'bad sisu.' And, the respondent continues: "through adverse experiences, a person can carry on when things might look hopeless [...] but sometimes it is just plain stubbornness and bull-headedness" (Palo Stoller 154). Certainly, if one considers the following examples in Caraker's narratives *Growing Up Soggy* and *Elina, Mistress of Laukko*, the temperamental ambivalence of 'sisu' becomes evident. In the first example Mary Caraker describes father's 'sisu' in the Virtanen family: "When Daddy had trouble meeting the mortgage payments, which was almost every year, it inspired him to somehow scrape up the money and hang on" (Caraker 1995, 26; 2003, letter). In the other example, Lily, in *Elina, Mistress of Laukko*, analyzes her grandmother's behavior:

The woman had always been a cipher. Kind to her, but coldly distant to everyone else. Whatever she had suffered in her marriage she bore with *sisu*: the hard-jawed stubbornness said to be a characteristic of Finns. Whatever happened before the fire or after, she would never ingratiate herself to her neighbors, never try to justify herself, no matter what they thought. (1997, 50)

These two examples represent different stereotypical imagemes of 'sisu.' They are double-faced temperamental ambivalences (good and bad 'sisu'). In the first instance, the stubborn behavior of Ruth Ann's father manifests the fact that he manages his farm, and he has the final responsibility for it, indicating at the same time persistent tenacity, courage, and also the imagination to take care of things. In the second case, Lily contemplates her grandmother's 'sisu' and tries to understand its historical development. Evidently, in her own image world, memories of her childhood grandmother are positive, and grandmother's 'sisu' in her imagination is good. It was the

grandmother of her childhood, but obviously there had been other kinds of 'sisu' in her life, too. Lily's grandfather had been a jealous and abusive man who drank too much. He had married her grandmother because she became pregnant. When Lily's father was a young boy their barn caught fire, and his father was burned to death in it. Unfortunately, the neighbors accused Lily's grandmother of the fire, while another rumor went around that she had been given the opportunity to rescue him but had not availed herself of it. In the village she gained the reputation of a witch. In this case bad 'sisu' destroyed the grandmother's normal life. Her positive schema of 'sisu' altered in time because of all the hardships turning against her original self-image. Her stubbornness prevented her from correcting the rumors of the fire; thus she became a lonely recluse on a remote farm. Her unlucky marriage and suspicions of incest between her husband and their son, Lily's father, were secrets she kept for herself. It was the Finnish way of dealing with family affairs (Taramaa 109).

Nevertheless, good or bad, 'sisu' was the strength of Finnish immigrants helping them go forward, even though the whole world seemed to be against them. This is the ultimate opinion of many of their Finnish-American immigrant offspring even today. According to D'Andrade, any culture is a fund of schemas, and human language includes the names of these schemas (185). It is obvious, then, that the short lexical term 'sisu' was better remembered as a descriptive symbol of Finnish strength and stubbornness than some longer and more complex descriptions. On the whole, Finnish people proved to have great courage in the wars against Russia, and the pride in Finnish 'sisu' is inevitable in the texts as well as in the interviews in Palo Stoller's research. The following examples shed light on Mary Caraker's and Lauri Anderson's images of Finnish 'sisu'. Lily in *Elina, Mistress of Laukko*, is confused about the accusations that her grandmother had set the barn on fire, and ponders:

*Sisu*, Lily thought. The kind of stiff-backed tenaciousness Gran could well have inherited from her ancestors. That had enabled Finland, faced with the Russian menace, to survive as a nation. That had inspired Finnish immigrants like her great-grandparents to put down roots in their new country despite prejudice and lifetimes of privation. (Caraker 1997, 89)

In his boastful utterance about Russians, Heikki Heikkinen in Lauri Anderson's *Heikki Heikkinen* proudly expresses something about Finnish 'sisu' as well: "We Finns beat the pants off them in the Winter War" (Anderson 35).

Indeed, most respondents in Palo Stoller's interviews stressed Finland's ability to maintain her independence from the Soviet Union, also to pay huge war reparations after World War II (Palo Stoller 158). These historical events were things that reinforced the positive auto-image of the word among Finnish Americans.

## Conclusions

As far as the cultural model of 'having sisu' is concerned, the selected authors as well as the respondents in the research and in the interviews have preserved the varied traits of 'sisu' very well in their cultural memories. As stated previously, all the things encoded by a well-formed schema will be best remembered. Based on this statement the schema of 'sisu' had been internalized well by learning this typical characteristic of Finnishness both explicitly and implicitly. With regard to the auto-image of 'sisu,' one could state that it appears to have upheld mainly the positive image of 'sisu' all these years since the hard days of immigration. In effect, the image of 'sisu' has been employed as a purely Finnish characteristic by most people who know the word, and as such it has become a stereotype. Yet, in her stories Laitala does not wholly endorse the use of the word as a distinctive Finnish trait, as she points out, because she thinks that "all the immigrants, refugees, occupied, and enslaved peoples have needed extraordinary courage and persistence against all odds" (2004, letter). She did not use the word 'sisu' to describe the Finns because the word could easily label them only as stereotypes, and she wanted to redeem them from being like that.

As Knuuttila points out, where other nations may appear as if they had 'sisu' only Finnish sisu is unyielding and stiff (22-25). The internal feeling of 'sisu' is always present in the texts of my study even though the mere word 'sisu' is not mentioned in all of these works. Accordingly, Paula Robbins sheds light on the notion of 'sisu': "It is maintaining a stiff upper lip, not giving up when things are difficult" (2004, letter). Nevertheless, the atmospheres in Laitala's or Robbins's stories do not suggest anything that could be interpreted against having 'sisu.' On the contrary, in my e-mail correspondence with Lynn Laitala I wondered why the word 'sisu' was missing from her novel, and she answered: "It did not occur to me" (2003, letter). But, in another letter she "rejects 'sisu' as a distinctive Finnish trait; it has only become a stereotype of Finns" (2004, letter).

The research has indicated that cultural indices endure from generation

to generation in an unfamiliar environment even at the time when the identity of the person in question has been changed during the former generation, for example, with respect to his or her native language. The study also reveals that a number of the indices representing the original culture have become simplified over the years, and that the cultural cohort of individuals exhibiting those traits has developed certain stereotypes that have faded in past decades but not yet disappeared. The ethnicity of a minority group of Finnish Americans surrounded by several other more dominant ethnicities has developed into symbolic ethnicity with limited commitments to ethnic cultural activities. The ethnic activities of the symbolic identifiers are likely to have an occasional character and to be acceptable in a multiethnic setting.

As a final comment concerning American literature and in support of my research one has to realize the unavoidable presence of marginality in the form of ethnic writers. American writers have through ages represented citizens and residents from all classes, races, and regions of the country. Assuming that most American readers may not be very familiar with the works in this research, I would like to hope that my study will help to engage new audiences for these Finnish-American texts as well as promote further research of Finnish-American writers and their literary production. As representatives of a literature which deviates from the American cultural norms, minority writers have a power to reflect complicated and uncertain realities in life and society and to understand human relations and feelings from their special point of view. On the topic of migration, above all, the levels of ambivalence, of plurality, of shifting identities and interpretations are many times greater than in many other domains of literature. Creative writing on migration often clarifies the processes of socialization, acculturation, and assimilation. Furthermore, fictional and autobiographical writings describe both external activities and profound attitudinal and behavioral changes. The study of ethnic literature extends the understanding of the long-term impact of migration in a society. Thus, ethnic literature adopts the role of an informal history preserving important information about past experiences that would otherwise be lost.

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