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The minor as major: Outsiderness and social class in Saara Turunen's prose

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Abstract

Saara Turunen's *Sivuhenkilö* is a work of autofiction, which tells the story of a year in its unnamed protagonist's life. Despite her success as an author, the protagonist feels like a minor character in her own life: an outsider both because of her gender and her profession as a writer. In this article, I offer a critical reading of Turunen's prose by asking what political implications are attached to her handling of outsiderness. I approach outsiderness not merely as a theme, but also as a genre-specific feature peculiar to the tradition of feminist rewriting. Based on my reading of *Sivuhenkilö*, I argue that regardless of its feminist potential, framing oneself as an outsider can function as a way of smoothing out differences and privileges, such as social class. Following this, I argue that the feminist stance explicitly presented in the novel is strongly connected to liberal and popular feminism.

Keywords

authorship, minor-character elaboration, *Sivuhenkilö*, social class

Introduction

Why does a young woman feel that she is a minor character in the exemplary land of gender equality? Even after receiving a notable literary prize and emerging into the limelight? These are questions presented by the literary critic Mervi Kantokorpi (2018: B4) based on the Finnish author Saara Turunen's (2018) second autofiction novel, *Sivuhenkilö*. Translating literally as 'The Minor Character',[1] *Sivuhenkilö* handles the

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theme of outsiderness experienced by its unnamed narrator-protagonist, an author who has just published her first novel. At first, her novel receives harsh critique in a widely circulated newspaper, which is devastating for her. In the course of the novel, the reception of her work changes and she is awarded an esteemed literary prize – by the same newspaper that initially panned her book. Despite her eventual success, the protagonist is constantly disturbed by the odd sensation of not being in control of things, feeling that she is a minor character, 'following the events of one's own life from the sidelines' (S: 222). As Turunen herself put it in a radio interview (Yle Puhe, 2018), the overarching theme of outsiderness in the novel is strongly connected to gender inequality and the status of artists. In *Sivuhenkilö*, women are portrayed as actively sidelined in private life, the contemporary artistic sphere and the literary canon.

After its publication, *Sivuhenkilö* quickly became an important reference point in the Finnish-speaking literary debate. This discussion was not strictly limited to the book itself and its literary merits, but covered a wider range of issues of inequality and misogyny in the literary field and society in general. The novel has been described as 'intellectually an exceptionally inspiring work' (Martin, 2018) and an 'important contemporary description' of patriarchal power structures (Kantokorpi, 2018: B4). Even commentators otherwise critical towards the novel noted how the 'book's political themes are truly important' (Säntti, 2018), although they did not consider them successfully handled. In a short period, *Sivuhenkilö* was framed as a landmark in contemporary feminist literature in Finland. (On the reception of the novel, see also Ylikangas 2019).

Due to the status acquired by *Sivuhenkilö* as a book – and by Turunen as its author – the novel requires a more detailed political analysis. In this article, I do this by focusing on the political implications of outsiderness. I approach outsiderness both as a theme and as a genre-specific feature related to the narrative structures of the novel by asking: How is outsiderness constructed in the novel and what is its political significance, especially in relation to social class? I argue that, even as autofiction, *Sivuhenkilö* utilizes features of feminist rewriting (Plate, 2011) and especially its subgenre minor-character elaboration (Rosen, 2016), and that these genre-related issues are pivotal to understanding the meaning of outsiderness in the novel. In addition, I argue that the feminism portrayed in *Sivuhenkilö* is largely popular and liberal (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020), that is, it is strongly rooted in individualism and undoing intersecting axes of inequality, in this case mainly that of social class. As parts of *Sivuhenkilö* were published as one essay (Turunen, 2016a) and two short stories (Turunen, 2016b, 2017) prior to the publication of the whole novel, I include these texts in my analysis where relevant.

To offer context, I begin with a short description of *Sivuhenkilö* and its relevance in the Finnish-speaking literary field. I then outline my theoretical framework and how the politics of outsiderness can be analysed in relation to genre and liberal feminism. My analysis consists of four parts. First, I analyse Turunen's prose from the viewpoint of feminist rewriting. Second, I describe how the protagonist discusses personal class position. Third, I analyse the politics of outsiderness in the novel. Fourth, I focus on how it is used to undo privileges, despite an ostensible confession of them, and represent 'ordinariness'. I conclude with remarks that sum up my analysis.

Saara Turunen's *Sivuhenkilö* in context

Saara Turunen's *Sivuhenkilö* is a work of autofiction and the author's second novel. With the voice of an intradiegetic first-person narrator, the novel tells the story of 'a year in its author's life' (S). The protagonist is a 30-something writer, who has graduated from a university of arts with a master's degree. She lives in Helsinki in an apartment owned by her father and is struggling to overcome a creative block that has appeared after finishing her first novel. The main storyline has two key turning points: a negative review of the protagonist's debut and later the award of an esteemed literary prize for the same novel. The critique comes to represent the gendered power relations of the literary sphere. The critic, 'a grey man' (S: 74–75) who remains anonymous, but resembles the real-life critic Antti Majander, serves as an epitome for old patriarchal power structures, manifested in the underestimation and overlooking of young women writers and their artistic contribution. In a nutshell, *Sivuhenkilö* has been described as a story of how a woman, even a successful and recognized one, can feel like a bystander in her own life (Kantokorpi, 2018).

As a rule, *Sivuhenkilö* does not give individual characters, places or publications names, real or imaginary. The novel includes characters, such as 'my famous friend', 'a grey male critic' and 'my older sister', and the review of the protagonist's debut is printed in 'the leading newspaper of our country' (S, passim). Turunen (2012: 124–125) has commented on her literary policy of not naming characters, stating that made-up names would feel fake or like fabrication. Despite this quest for anonymity, several events of the novel can be attached to specific real-life occurrences, such as parallels to the reception history of Turunen's work. Such connections are not made in order to gossip about the author's life or critique the book for misrepresenting 'reality', as the assumingly insulted critic Majander (2018) did. The review written by 'the grey male critic' in 'the leading newspaper in our country' in *Sivuhenkilö* can be linked to a specific review written of Turunen's debut *Rakkaudenhirviö* ('Love Monster') by Antti Majander (2015b) and published in the major Finnish daily, *Helsingin Sanomat* on 26 April 2015. This makes it possible to read the review as an intertext when analysing the novel. The description of the review provided in the pages of *Sivuhenkilö* is easy to connect to Majander's specific critique, which the novel refers to rather directly. The same applies to connecting the prize in the *Sivuhenkilö* to the 'literary award' by *Helsingin Sanomat* for the most outstanding debut novel of the year.[2] Turunen received this in 2015 for her novel *Rakkaudenhirviö* (Majander, 2015a).

In terms of feminism, *Sivuhenkilö* is very explicit in its political message: the narrator-protagonist is 'fed up with the stink of old long johns' in the corners (S: 172), building her own canon of female writers instead (S: 184–185). The novel handles women's self-loathing, claiming that 'all women hate themselves in some way' (S: 183). This message is focalized by the unnamed first-person narrator-protagonist. When discussing feminism, she is presented as a lone wolf. Most of the other characters in the novel do not share her feminist analysis, and there are no contemporary feminists present to join forces with. The most comforting voices belong to a past generation of female authors, such as Virginia Woolf (S: 170). Many of these themes recur in Turunen's work, especially her drama (see Turunen, 2019b). According to the literary critic Maaria Ylikangas (2019: 112), one key feature in the political reading of *Sivuhenkilö* is the novel's tendency to cherrypick the incidents that support the narrator's worldview.

As noted by the literary critic Joonas Säntti (2018), the gender roles presented in *Sivuhenkilö* are stagnant in an emphasized manner, as the role of men in the novel is to go hunting, fix bicycles or write harsh critiques of women's books in newspapers, whereas the role given to women is mainly to hate themselves, feel insecure and look after children. Exaggeration and irony serve as tools for stressing the inequality between genders (Hämäläinen, 2018; Rantama, 2019). Laitinen and Tapanainen (2018), hosts of the literature podcast *Sivumennen*, also noted how such descriptions can feel a bit commonplace, while acknowledging that many readers felt addressed by them. In general, the reception of *Sivuhenkilö* has been twofold: while some have characterized it as 'intellectually an exceptionally inspiring work' (Martin, 2018), others felt it does not present feminist analysis (Säntti, 2018). As a countermove to Majander's belittling critique of *Rakkaudenhirviö*, some feminist commentators have framed Turunen as a 'genius' (Särmä, 2019) and an 'auteur' (Saarikoski, 2018), both concepts attached to the masculine tradition of authorship and artistic work (e.g. Battersby, 1989; Gilbert and Gubar, 2000 [1979]: 66–67).

There are several reasons for studying *Sivuhenkilö*. In a short period, the novel was made a landmark of contemporary Finnish feminist fiction. Turunen, described as 'the most talked-about writer of the Finnish art world and an intelligent feminist' (Supinen, 2019), has gathered a lot of praise in traditional and established terms, such as prestigious literary and other awards,[3] followed by good sales figures. Her plays – which she has both directed and written – have been received positively: works such as *Tavallisuuden aave* ('The Ghost of Ordinariness', 2016) and *Medusan huone* ('A Room of Medusa's', 2019) have always been Events with a capital E and hot topics in Helsinki's cultural circles. In March 2020, it was announced that the rights of *Sivuhenkilö* had been sold to a film company, so a film adaptation is likely on its way (Kanerva, 2020). Following this, it can be argued that *Sivuhenkilö* is an excellent example of a cultural product of popular feminism – it is not directed to a niche audience of readers steeped in the latest feminist theory, but to a larger public who shares a general interest in feminism.

Outsiderness, genre and the minor characters of liberal feminism

One well-established practice when handling outsiderness in literature has been the practice of rewriting. In feminist rewriting, canonical literary texts are reinterpreted from a feminist viewpoint, often with the aim of 're-member[ing] the past differently' (Plate, 2011: 3). One specific form of such rewriting is a practice in which a canonical work of fiction is retold from the viewpoint of a previous minor character, a somewhat outsider figure who is now raised to be in the centre of the events. The literary scholar Jeremy Rosen (2016) has named this a genre of its own with a specific history and conventions, calling it the minor-character elaboration. With the concept, Rosen (2016: 2) refers to 'a genre constituted by the conversion of minor characters from canonical literary texts into the protagonists of new ones'. Examples for minor-character elaboration include works such as Jean Rhys' (1966) *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Kamel Daoud's *Mersault, contre-enquête* (2013) both retellings of canonical literary texts narrated from the point of view

of the originally marginalized characters, be it the "madwoman in the attic" (see Gilbert and Gubar, 2000 (1979)) of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or "the Arab" of Albert Camus' *L'Étranger*. On a general scale, different forms of feminist rewriting have been pivotal in addressing feminist viewpoints in the (re)interpretation of classic literary texts and the whole literary canon (Plate, 2011). Rewriting ancient and often misogynist myths have also been a source of inspiration for a plethora of feminist authors (Karkulehto and Leppihalme, 2015; Zajko and Leonard, 2006).

According to the literary scholar John Frow (2005: 5), genre is 'a universal dimension of textuality', and as such is not limited to works of 'genre fiction', as it is commonly seen. For Frow (2005: 19), a central aspect of genre is that it does not serve merely as a stylistic feature of a text but participates in the construction of reality, shaping it with its political aspects. Frow's (2005) understanding of genre therefore comes close to the Foucauldian concept of discourse, both of which can be understood as 'performative structures that shape the world in the very process of putting it into speech' (p. 18). In this sense, minor-character elaboration does not refer only to a specific literary genre, but also to the political discourse peculiar to it. As a work of autofiction, whose protagonist is a minor character in 'real life', *Sivuhenkilö* does not fit neatly into Rosen's definition of minor-character elaboration as a literary genre. Nevertheless, *Sivuhenkilö* can be read as a work that draws elements from the cultural logic of minor-character elaboration by emphasizing the role of its narrator as literally 'a minor character', a position that enables the protagonist to narrate her story simultaneously as a protagonist and an outsider. As such, the novel can be understood as a genre-hybrid (Karkulehto, 2012).

The voicing of a previously marginalized (female) character is not a new practice in literature (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000 (1979); Plate, 2011; Rosen, 2016), but seems to be a particularly appealing strategy in the era of popular feminism (see Banet-Weiser, 2018). Contemporary examples of minor-character elaboration 'frequently adopt the perspectives of female and socially marginalized characters', with the aim of raising sympathy and identification within readers (Rosen, 2016: 35–36). Rosen also argues that minor-character elaboration serves not only as a tool for feminist literary practice, but also as a marketing strategy in the contemporary literary marketplace (Rosen, 2016).

Many of the contemporary feminist forms of minor-character elaboration resonate with politics of liberalism and liberal feminism, both sharing a strong emphasis on nurturing the idea of a personal and authentic 'voice' that struggles to be heard and recognized (Rosen, 2016: 94). As famously argued by the political theorist Nancy Fraser (2000, 2005), there has been a general shift in feminist politics from 'redistribution to recognition', and even further to 'representation', with a strong emphasis on identity politics. As feminism, at least in popular discourse, has become arguably more about identities and less about economic conflict, it has also become easier for the general public to digest. Feminism has become 'popular' (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020), which has made it a lucrative business for a range of enterprises from retailing to book publishing (Zeisler, 2017). Diverging from postfeminism, liberal feminism[4] does not claim that feminism has achieved its goals and is therefore unnecessary (see McRobbie, 2004: 255). Rather, a liberal feminist stance actively promotes feminism, yet by concentrating around privileged subjects. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) writes in *Empowered,* in popular feminism the logic of empowerment is largely directed at 'girls

who are the most visible in the media, such as white middle-class girls, [who] are the ones seen as in need of being empowered because of issues of low self-esteem and self-confidence' (pp. 27–28). The goal of popular feminist ethos, the 'evolved' version of a privileged woman is the one who 'owns her own success' and overcomes issues of low self-esteem. Against this background, it is easy to see why minor-character elaboration is a suitable genre for communicating such an ideology: it offers a platform for the previously ignored and flattened minor characters to speak their mind and become 'empowered'.

Rewriting outsiders in Turunen's prose

Feminist rewriting is a recurring practice in Turunen's drama and prose: her most recent play *Medusan huone* (2019a) is a reinterpretation of the Greek myth of Medusa. Turunen writes in the programme of the play how 'Medusa's point of view on the events regarding herself is often left untold', and that the place reserved for women in the Western art canon is that of a 'desirable object' or 'terrible monster' (Turunen, 2019a: 164). The feminist interpretation presented by Turunen aims at challenging these assumptions and places Medusa at the centre of the events. One part of *Sivuhenkilö* published before the whole novel, a short story titled 'Hanna', is a reinterpretation of Minna Canth's (1844–1897) novel *Hanna* (1886). Canth, a canonized Finnish author and proto-feminist, is well known for her societally involved realist drama and prose. In Turunen's interpretation, Canth is a somewhat sidelined figure in the history of Finnish literature when compared with nationally acclaimed male authors such as Aleksis Kivi or Väinö Linna. Even though a character called Hanna is the protagonist of both Canth's novel and Turunen's short story, in the latter, the former is portrayed as sidelined in the Finnish literary canon, and the character Hanna personifies this sidelining. Turunen (2017) writes, 'My name is Hanna and I am left in the shadows. I sit behind the plants in the furthest corner of the room, and you don't see me. My story is left in the shadows' (p. 168). Later, in the text, it turns out that this sidelining is what makes Hanna an appealing character for the author: 'The author is intrigued by my insignificance [. . .] The author wants to raise me into the daylight where the ray of light falls' (Turunen, 2017: 177).

Without downplaying the general tendency of literary histories to neglect female and marginalized authors, a critical reader might ask why Minna Canth and her work were chosen as representatives for women's outsiderness. After all, Canth is perhaps the most canonized Finnish author. Her works are read and taught in schools and universities, and her personal legacy is maintained by statues and streets that bear her name. Since 2003, Canth's birthday has been a national flag day in Finland, also celebrated as the Day of Equality. Thus, although Canth has undoubtedly had more than her fair share of neglect, the trope of outsiderness attached to her work by Turunen is strongly metaphorical and reflects general attitudes towards women in a patriarchal society, rather than making a literally forgotten author visible.

Even though as a character Hanna did not find her way into the pages of *Sivuhenkilö,* her legacy is strong in the novel, as the protagonist shares many of her features. The novel is dedicated to '[t]hose whose writings have turned into dust', referring to the mass of female authors forgotten or at least doomed to be outsiders of literary history. Yet again,

when the novel's protagonist decides to redefine the canon of literary classics 'as arbitrarily as [it has been done] before', she ends up writing a list consisting mostly of highly canonized works by writers such as Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Marguerite Duras and Toni Morrison (S: 184–185). Without questioning the idea of one arbitrary canon, which even in *Sivuhenkilö* is discussed in the singular, the novel seems to suggest a liberal feminist ethos of 'bring[ing] more women to the table' (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 12), rather than getting rid of the table itself or at least questioning its function. It seems that the prevailing structures are mainly critiqued in order to include oneself in them, without considering who else remains outside.

Class privileges, checked

As argued by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018: 14), popular feminism largely focuses on white, privileged and middle-class subjects. These attributes apply to the protagonist of *Sivuhenkilö*: race is not even mentioned in the novel, if not including a short reference on 'white classrooms' (S: 14) in which the protagonist has spent the lion's share of her life. Social class, however, is. The protagonist's class status is stated rather clearly in the first pages of *Sivuhenkilö*. The novel begins with the protagonist remembering how she moved to her current apartment some years ago; her father had bought the apartment in Ullanlinna, one the most expensive areas in Helsinki and the whole of Finland. Departing from *Sivuhenkilö's* otherwise thorough policy of not giving real names for places, persons or publications, Ullanlinna is named instead of being described as 'an affluent neighbourhood of Southern Helsinki'. This underlines the confessional manner of stating economic realities before moving on with the narration. As put by the novel's narrator,

> Someone could describe me as a spoiled brat, and by all means they may do so, I don't mind, because who knows, I might as well be one. It is clear that I live in this neighbourhood and in this apartment because of my father, thanks to him working his whole life like a dog. (S: 11)

Despite its location, the apartment is not situated in an Art Nouveau building that the neighbourhood is known for, but in a 'rickety' prefabricated house inhabited by lonely old women (S: 8). This block of flats reflects the role of the protagonist: surrounded by accumulated wealth and conservative taste, the newcomer stands out with a shabby appearance. Yet the field is shared and equally valuable.

While openly admitting her father's role in providing her economic security, the narrator does not attach this privilege to class politics, but to patriarchal structures and her father's hard work. It is notable that the narrator-protagonist does not get economic support from her mother, but consistently from her father. Her interdependence with her father resembles her relationship with other men in the novel, especially her sisters' husbands. The narrator-protagonist wants to be independent from men, but still relies on their charity because she doesn't have the skills or equipment to fix her own bike or clean her own windows. She claims, 'Every time something breaks, when there is something heavy to carry or when a fuse blows, I have to call my sisters' husbands for help' (S: 113). In the course of the novel, the protagonist starts to gain some independence from these men, for instance by learning to fix her bicycle chains (S: 235). The literary award might

mean that she does not have to borrow money from her father anymore and can pay back some loans (S: 194). Yet she does not even consider moving out of her father's apartment. The class privilege continues to provide a safety net or 'venture capital' (Flisbäck, 2014), allowing her to keep pursuing her artistic career despite difficulties (see also Friedman et al., 2017). Poverty is pictured almost as a lifestyle that one can pursue when there is no real fear of losing one's home or other essentials.

Class privilege is confessed in the very beginning of *Sivuhenkilö*, after which the reader can hardly blame the narrator for hiding the economic resources that enable the protagonist's lifestyle. Later in the novel, the narrator mentions the impact of class inequalities, stating in an interview that class society effects what individuals pursue in their lives (S: 197). As a writer, Turunen has publicly commented on this, stating how 'Finland is a class society just like any other country', and also on how she is 'aware' of her own privileges, such as her whiteness and middle-class background (Rantanen, 2019). These examples show that on the thematic level of the novel, class is not a completely dismissed issue. Nevertheless, the way it is handled is almost the rhetoric of confession. In the act of confession, a sin or a wrongdoing is verbalized with the aim of being released from its burden. Still, absolution does not mean that the sinner's acts will necessarily change.

As sociological research has repeatedly shown, social class is a major factor in explaining feelings of outsiderness among women who have climbed the social ladder from the working class into artistic and academic occupations (e.g. Friedman et al., 2017; Lawler, 1999; Roiha, 2019; Scharff, 2018). Christina Scharff (2018: 89) noted in her study of women in classical music, how middle-class musicians were willing to discuss the significance of class in artistic work, but did not experience feelings of outsiderness in relation to their own class origin.

The author as an average outsider

> I know I should be grateful now. I should be able to enjoy the fruits of my labour in a humble but joyous manner. Yet for some reason I keep watching everything from the sidelines. (S: 209)

The figure of an artist as an outsider is an old trope, even a cliché, which has been commonly used to romanticize the life and work of artists and authors (see, for example, Rader, 1958). As 'exceptional individuals' (Bourdieu, 1993), artists and authors have been considered as not confined by the rules applied to common people – they need to be given freedom to express themselves. Such cultural stereotypes have often allowed artists to behave in ways that would not be considered appropriate for regular folk (Rader, 1958: 307–308).

In *Sivuhenkilö,* outsiderness is a central theme, but in a manner that lacks all the extravagant dimensions often attached to being an artist. The anonymous narrator, a writer who has just published her debut novel and who in many respects resembles Turunen herself, describes her life as dull and monotonous, consisting of biking, eating cheap noodles, taking care of houseplants and occasionally meeting friends and family. Even the highlights of the protagonist's life seem somewhat flattened. Her book launch ends early as the guests need to hurry to their families, and to top it all, she even has to

pay the restaurant's rent for the evening because her guests did not drink enough to cover its costs (S: 29–30). In her own party, she feels herself 'overwhelmed' and 'observes everything [. . .] slightly from the margins' (S: 28–29). When she finally gains recognition in the form of a prestigious literary prize, the presenter of the award does not even remember her name correctly (S: 203).

Despite the protagonist being young and promising on paper – with a degree from an esteemed art school and winning a notable prize – there is definitely no glamor in *Sivuhenkilö.* The award serves as sort of an anticlimax of the novel, after which the narrator wants to hide the winning book even from her own sight: 'Suddenly the whole book starts to feel repulsive to me and I don't want to lay my eyes on it anymore. I grab my copy from the table and hide it at the bottom of the bookshelf' (S: 209). Such an attitude to one's own achievements seems almost antithetical to the success narratives of popular feminism; the protagonist of *Sivuhenkilö* most certainly does not 'lean in' or portray herself as a high achiever (see Banet-Waiser, 2018: 19). In this sense, rejecting success and emphasizing one's position as a bystander could be read as refusal to adhere to the neoliberal ideals related to popular feminist discourses. Such a viewpoint on contemporary women's autofiction has been offered by Yanbing Er (2018) in her analysis of Sheila Heti and Jenny Offill's autofiction novels as critique of postfeminist discourse.

Instead of a successful and confident individual who serves as the 'evolved' ideal subject of liberal feminism, the protagonist of *Sivuhenkilö* resembles more the figure presented by Banet-Weiser (2018: 27–28) of the white middle-class woman suffering from low self-esteem, who as a rule does not feel comfortable taking the place to which she has access. The narrating 'I' is most at home in her home, in everyday surroundings, keeping her feminist politics mostly to herself instead of explicitly getting involved in societal debates. Yet there are a few instances in the novel where the protagonist breaks out of her individual cocoon. In these instances, the narrator alienates herself from these events by shifting the focus to her alter ego. After winning the literary prize, when the protagonist starts getting a lot of media attention, 'the other', not the 'I' embraces it:

> It feels as if I had split into two, first there is I and then there is the other one. And while the I would want to disappear out of sight, the other one wants to come forward. [. . .] The other one fluffs her hair and puts make up on her eyes. It starts living my life and basks in publicity's glory. (S: 211)

At the beginning of the novel there is a similar episode after the protagonist has read the harsh review by the 'grey male critic'. The review hits the protagonist hard, and shame 'sears' her from the inside (S: 78). The narrating 'I' feels that she should 'hold herself down' (S: 78) probably in the sense of keeping her feelings to herself. However, the strategy does not seem to work:

> Again it feels like someone else is operating on behalf of me. That someone finds the review, publishes it on my Facebook page and writes an ironical comment about middle-aged men and their problems with their hair loss. People must think that I have lost my mind. I would like to write under the post that it was not me, it was someone else, I have more important things to do than to cling to something like this. (S: 78–79)

How should one interpret such episodes in the framework of liberal feminism and minor-character elaboration? As already stated, one possible reading would be to claim that the protagonist is actively refusing to adhere to the liberal success rhetoric (see Er, 2018). Yet it also seems reasonable to argue that the protagonist's will to differentiate herself from her public image, the person who looks dashing in interviews and has the courage to speak up against the chauvinist male critic, is one way of dismantling one's own power and denying one's privileged position, therefore emphasizing one's status as a one-dimensional victim of patriarchy. In this regard, the rhetoric of minor-character elaboration can be particularly useful, as it serves – at least in its contemporary forms – as a cultural model that pictures the protagonist as a univocally sidelined figure. In a sociological study by Friedman and O'Brien (2017: 370–373) of typecasting in British acting, it was noted how women from privileged backgrounds found it easier to resist gendered typecasting than working-class women did. If we assume this is even somewhat applicable to Finnish literature, it seems a disservice to present oneself as more marginalized than one is, as if voluntarily giving away one's power.

There is one exception to the suppressed rage in the story world, in a sequence where the protagonist's washing machine has broken and fitters – two young working-class men – come to her apartment to replace it. The fitters cannot do their job on their first visit, because the protagonist has not got the bathroom ready. A glass wall has to be removed, which is not the workers' job (S: 108–110). This episode is one of the very few parts of the novel in which the protagonist openly opposes men and aims to confront them in action and not (merely) in writing, by demanding that workers perform a task beyond their job description. The men that the protagonist feels equipped to stand up to are working class, young and inexperienced – they are called 'interns'. Similarly to the protagonist's critique of the masculine literary canon, she addresses her rage in a way that cements the status quo: despite patriarchy, a white middle-class woman is still equipped to chastise working-class men.

Relatively marginalized, relatively average

Referring to oneself as 'ordinary' is also a common strategy for downplaying one's privileges (e.g. Littler, 2018; Sherman, 2017). In her study of the lifestyle and attitudes of the New York elite, Rachel Sherman states that '[b]eing 'normal' thus comes to mean sharing priorities common to the (implicitly 'middle-class') majority rather than consuming luxury goods or experiences' (Sherman, 2017: 94–95). Members of the elite in Finland also tend to emphasize their ordinariness (Kantola and Kuusela, 2019: 18–20). The 'normcore plutocrat', as named by Jo Littler (2018: 120–124), aims at 'performing ordinariness' despite their undeniable elite status. Similar patterns to those of the 'normcore plutocrat' can be found among artists and cultural workers, and such attitudes have been considered as factors reinforcing social inequality (Taylor and O'Brien, 2017). For instance, the emphasis given to meritocracy in the cultural field, where success is only the product of hard work and talent, easily hides the inequalities related to gender, race and social class (Taylor and O'Brien, 2017).

Clearly, the protagonist of *Sivuhenkilö* is not straightforwardly comparable with financial elites, and she does not explicitly describe herself as 'ordinary' – in fact,

'ordinariness' is even considered as a somewhat restricting factor in the novel's narration (e.g. S: 24; 73). Nevertheless, she does perform ordinariness and even poverty in her narration, as she describes her eating habits (cheap noodles), decor (an old mattress with yellowish urine stains) and overall lack of monetary resources. Even her precious houseplants are skip-dived or stolen from the tax office, besides one from her parents' home (S: 8). This seems contradictory since the food and furnishings are in an apartment the protagonist's father bought for her, located in one of Helsinki's most expensive neighbourhoods (S: 7).

Being a bystander of one's own life seems to be something that the narrator of *Sivuhenkilö* both suffers from and finds shelter in. Yet she exaggerates this ordinariness into 'marginalization' by comparing herself with alcoholics, people with mental illness, unemployed workers and poor lonely old women who live in her building. In several episodes of the novel, the protagonist is only one step away from sharing the fate of these 'sad' figures. For instance, during a lonely midsummer in the city, the protagonist wanders the empty streets of Helsinki, where '[t]he only ones left are the outcasts, me and that trudging man' (S: 123), by which she means a lonesome alcoholic. When the narrator's interview has just been published in 'the most notable daily of our country', she looks at her photo in the front cover of the culture section and thinks: 'I look angry and ravaged by the winter, like some kind of a mental illness patient' (S: 202). And when the narrator thinks about factory workers who 'mourn' that globalization has taken away their jobs, she ponders 'whether her destiny is going to be like theirs' (S: 220). It is obvious that comparison between actually marginalized people and the young successful middle-class protagonist is deliberate exaggeration used for literary effect. Nevertheless, it still functions as a way for the protagonist to dismantle her power.

There are positive examples of outsiders in *Sivuhenkilö's* story world. If the protagonist wishes to avoid the fate of the lonely alcoholic, she aspires to be like a solitary art professor. The figure of the old female art professor is a recurring minor character in the novel; the narrator-protagonist bumps into her in exceptional locations. For instance, when washing rugs at the seashore, the narrator sees the art professor in a small rowing boat on the sea, dressed strikingly in a 'flaming red strolling outfit and high heels' (S: 141). Although some other characters in the story world see the art professor as a sad figure – one is said to have made the decision to start a family after seeing the professor alone on a stroll – the protagonist considers the professor 'fascinating' (S: 53). It seems that the art professor is respectably solitary: she lives as she likes without caring about other people's opinions, and, being a professor, is also a professionally recognized figure.

Conclusion

As feminism has become increasingly popular as a political movement, it is worth casting a critical eye upon its most prominent cultural expressions. The aim of such criticism is not to 'cancel' these works, as it could be described in contemporary Internet slang, nor to blame their authors for being 'bad feminists', to borrow the words of Roxane Gay. Rather, the goal is to gain a deeper understanding of a popular form of feminism, to contribute to developing a feminism that is aware of intersecting forms of discrimination and inequality.

In this article, I have offered a critical reading of Saara Turunen's autofiction novel *Sivuhenkilö* by analysing the question of outsiderness both as thematic content and as a genre-related feature of the novel. Based on my analysis I argue that in *Sivuhenkilö,* the trope of outsiderness reinforces the common-sense understanding of liberal feminist politics, especially in two ways: first by engaging with the politics of 'adding women to the table' (Banet-Weiser, 2018), and second by overlooking intersecting factors, such as social class, when discussing gender inequality. The protagonist of *Sivuhenkilö* is not actually sidelined but, despite her success, *feels* that she is, and uses this feeling to justify the appropriation of the political rhetoric of marginality. The quest for the perfect underdog becomes almost a fetish, valued for its own sake.

The sidelining of social class is not merely a question of the explicit thematic content of the novel, but is rooted in its genre-specific features. According to scholars, such as Frow (2005) and Rosen (2016), genres do not work simply as means of categorization for different forms of fiction, but also as constructors of cultural meaning-making on a wider scale, coming close to the Foucauldian understanding of discourse. Saara Turunen's *Sivuhenkilö* is a case in point, showing how raising the minor to the place of the major carries wider cultural significance than the mere question of genre classification.

When literature is read and produced with the aim of inviting the reader to a 'straightforward sympathetic identification' (Rosen, 2016: 89), there might be a temptation to produce characters that fit neatly into the role of the oppressed or sidelined. In *Sivuhenkilö,* the 'minor character' comes to represent an (emancipated) victim of patriarchy, which might also mean that she is presented in a way that downplays any features that might question her role as oppressed, such as social class. The setting of the novel in which women are represented as always inferior to men – despite class, sexuality or ethnicity – ends up enforcing the idea that gender is a binary system in which no intersecting axes interfere. Even though on the surface level such discourses can be read as challenging the postfeminist ideal of a capable, individual and successful self, a more thorough genre-specific reading reveals something else. In such a reading, the ostensible refusal to adhere to postfeminist ideals is counterproductive, strengthening the liberal feminist ideal of an individual female figure, who alone and despite all odds makes her way to the top.

Despite the novel's approach to outsiderness as a means of describing the position of women in literature, the same theme also functions as a way of dismantling one's own power. Class is mentioned – or, in the famous words of Angela McRobbie (2004: 255) on feminism, 'taken into account' – and then forgotten, not because class inequality is considered resolved, but because it is important for the narrator-protagonist to frame herself as aware of her privilege. What makes such a portrayal difficult to criticize is that the frame of autofiction appeals to the writer's personal, authentic experience, making her the fundamental authority of the work. This being said, it is indisputable that works of literary autofiction offer a relevant point of analysis for the research on creative work and social inequality, as they often explicitly handle the conditions of artistic labour, describing these details in a manner uncharacteristic to research material such as interview or survey data. As my analysis on *Sivuhenkilö* has hopefully shown, a close reading of autofiction can offer a relevant contribution also to a sociologically oriented study on inequality in the context of cultural work.

Sivuhenkilö ends with an emancipatory scene, in which the protagonist learns to fix her own bicycle chains and is able to continue her journey without the help of men. Instead of relying on the help of other women, the protagonist becomes independent from everyone. She keeps cycling on her own.

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Notes

1. The novel has not been translated into English, but is being marketed with the English title *The Bystander*, which is not a literal translation. In this article, the novel is referred to by is original title, *Sivuhenkilö*, or in parentheses with the abbreviation S. All quotes from the Finnish original, as well as other direct references to Finnish texts, are translated by the author of this article.
2. The prize, currently 15,000 euros, is highly valued and receives a lot of media attention in the Finnish literary field. It has been awarded since 1995 with its current name. Its predecessor, a prize named after Finnish author J.H. Erkko, was distributed from 1964 to 1994.
3. Besides the Helsingin Sanomat Literature Prize, Saara Turunen received the Suomi Award (2016, awarded by the Ministry of Education and Culture, 21,625 euros) and the Artist of the Year Award (2018, awarded by the City of Helsinki, 5000 euros). Turunen was also awarded a Thalia Prize for her work as a theatre director and scriptwriter in 2017. In an interview, she stated that awards have a huge impact on the reception of artists' work in general, including her own (Yle Puhe, 2018).
4. Here, I use 'popular feminism' and 'liberal feminism' as synonyms. I consider liberal feminism to be the current form of popular feminism; highlighting its political roots in liberalist thinking is more accurate and informative than merely calling it 'popular', which means different things in different contexts. As the term 'popular feminism' has been established in previous research, I use it to underline that this research influences my analysis.

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