

Minna Canth

The Workman's Wife
Anna Liisa



Translated by Alisa Manninen

Dialogue Books

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Translated with an Introduction by

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Contents

Introduction	1
<i>THE WORKMAN'S WIFE</i>	23
<i>ANNA LIISA</i>	113

Introduction

Minna Canth (1844–1897), author and playwright, became a national icon in her own lifetime and beyond by being unafraid to be political. It was a bold act simply to write in Finnish, which had only recently begun to be the language of fiction, but Canth did more than that: she challenged injustices that industrialisation had created or intensified. Determined to point out flaws in order to inspire reform, she built herself a reputation for artistic excellence and popularity with audiences. In a land that had been ruled by Sweden, was then ruled by Russia, and turned to the cultivation of Finnish culture to argue why it deserved to rule itself, Canth set out to reshape her society through literary participation in public debate. As a middle-aged woman, she hardly ever left her provincial city. Yet by writing, she championed her causes and helped their reach extend across Finland.

Canth's society was primed to listen to messages of reform, such as her call for women's and workers' rights. Finland was, for the first time, becoming Finland — a nation that conceived itself as distinct from either Sweden or Russia. The fight to win cultural recognition and equal legal rights for Finnish, the language of the majority population, was key to the developments that led to parliamentary democracy in 1906, with universal suffrage followed by the election of the world's first women members of Parliament, and then to independence in 1917. Swedish was the language of Finland's established elite and institutions; Russian gradually began to be imposed on the people. In the 1890s Russification reached unprecedented proportions that outraged speakers of both

major languages and brought them together as Finns. Writing in Finnish was a way for Canth to claim her own right to participate in dialogue about the shape the country was to take.

Canth became famous as a woman who was willing and able to argue for her causes. She grounded her words in fact and experience in order to disarm her opponents, who ranged from conservative political and religious authorities to younger liberals in agreement with many of her ideas yet wary of her feminism. Canth brought social realism to the forefront of literature in Finland through her ability to hone in on structural weaknesses just as society's efforts to contain or hide them were about to falter. When Canth struck at her chosen target, the combination of her dramatic skill and the ugly reality of the scenes she staged lent her works a force that could not be ignored: she inspired reforms on local and national levels. Canth broke away from the romanticised rural and mythological settings that had characterised literature to portray Finland as a modern industrialising country, where greater opportunities were accompanied by accelerating inequalities that cried out to be seen.

Canth carried out her work in an era that remade Finland. The region was conquered by Sweden in the Middle Ages, but it did not exist as an entity until Russia took it from Sweden in 1809 and created the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland, with the Emperor of Russia as its Grand Duke. This political transformation necessitated the founding of administrative institutions and a rethinking of the structures that were controlled by the Swedish-speaking elite. The search for a new identity led to a national awakening in the nineteenth century: the embrace of the Finnish language by the elite, the demand for equal rights by the Finnish-speaking majority, and the use of Finnish in all fields of public life.

Minna Canth was born Ulrika Wilhelmina Johnson in 1844 and named in honour of her parents, who came from the poor Finnish-speaking peasantry. Her father had risen from child worker to foreman in the Finlayson textile factory, her mother was a former maid. Gustaf

Wilhelm, an illegitimate son, was given the Johnson surname by the factory; Ulrika received only a patronym from her crofter father. With no support from their rural kin, both set out for the southern city of Tampere as teenagers to earn a living. When they married in their twenties, Gustaf's relative prosperity allowed Ulrika to leave her job; she later carried out small-scale business enterprises at home. Canth, the eldest of their three children, attended the Swedish-language factory school.

Tampere was the birthplace of modern industrialisation in Finland. The 1820 founding of the Finlayson factory, which became the biggest industrial enterprise in the Nordic countries, created a new class of urban workers. Tampere drew people like Canth's parents to try their luck when the countryside could no longer provide for its growing population. It became the first major city to be dominated by Finnish speakers. Though its rise meant that individuals from the old Swedish elite also arrived in search of better opportunities, Tampere's factories created a culture in which social mobility was within reach and the Finnish language was no longer something to be discarded upon success. The Johnsons became bilingual. The parents learned Swedish when it was expected of those who interacted with the elite in service or trade; the children were part of the generation that attended Swedish-language schools but refused to abandon Finnish in their adult lives.

Due to the expansion of the domestic market in the 1850s, Finlayson founded a draper's shop in Kuopio, a city in Eastern Finland that became a major trading hub. Canth's father moved the family there after he was chosen as the new shop's manager in 1853. He was so successful that he made himself its owner in 1860. Canth helped out in the shop as a child and learned how the business was run, but she was locked out of it as a career by the social norms of the middle class that her family had entered. Marriage seemed the only future for a young woman who did not have to work for a living the way her mother had done.

When industrialisation led to ever bigger markets on regional and national levels, the rise of merchants further unsettled the old order that was based on birth. Finland's estate-based society changed into a class-based one. If Canth's working-class childhood shaped her character, her father's financial success shaped her prospects. After some debate, in which Gustaf Johnson's money triumphed over his birth, she was accepted into a school for girls from the Swedish-speaking gentry. She prospered in that environment, helped by her fluent Swedish and bright mind, but the education she received was only that which was deemed suitable for a young lady. Canth was seventeen when it ended. In the years to come, she would fight to expand the number of girls' schools and the quality of the lessons they offered. It was sheer luck that an opportunity came within her reach that had not existed before.

Canth became one of the first students of the Jyväskylä Teachers' Seminary. Fennomans, supporters of the Finnish language and eventually of nationalism, wanted to remove the requirement that civil servants must use Swedish. The Language Decree of 1863 stated that in twenty years' time the Finnish-speaking population should be able to use Finnish in its dealings with the administration. This meant a transformation of institutions and those who worked for them. The first step in building a new generation of Finnish-speaking civil servants was to provide universal education, which required teachers who spoke Finnish. Thus, the seminary was founded in 1863 under the leadership of the clergyman Uno Cygnaeus, the father of the public school system. The male students largely came from the Finnish-speaking peasantry, seeking social mobility and a chance to help their communities. For women, teaching offered an independent career that was socially acceptable. Single women teachers, initially from the Swedish gentry yet increasingly from the Finnish peasantry as well, would feature prominently in the movements for women's and workers' rights.

Canth embraced the first cause of her life and delighted in studying. However, the seminary did not accept married women as students. For

reasons that she never fully made clear, she accepted the proposal of the lecturer in natural science, Ferdinand Canth, a Swedish-speaking clergyman's son who was a dedicated Fennomans. She recalled it later as a betrayal of her ideals. After Minna Johnson became Minna Canth in 1865, she spent years trying to be the most obedient of wives, a sacrifice of her self that was the only thing she could offer to atone for her abandonment of the Fennomans call for teachers. In the small Lakeland city of Jyväskylä, famed for its educated people, she had solidified her social position at the cost of her dreams. Canth stumbled along, learning by bitter experience, until she knew how to manage her children and her husband's money.

As Canth slowly regained her confidence in her own opinions and won her husband's respect, he gave her a path out of domesticity. The lecturer was offered a second job as a journalist by the newspaper *Keski-Suomi* in 1874, but it was his wife who did the work. For the first time, Canth reached an audience through her writing. She discovered that she loved to debate, ventured into statements about girls' education, and got her husband fired due to her support for the temperance movement (the owner of the newspaper also owned a distillery). When the lecturer was hired by another newspaper, *Päijänne*, it was the wife they wanted from the beginning. Though only locally and still either anonymous or under the cover of a pseudonym, Minna Canth had made herself a reputation.

The swift rise of Finland's press in the 1870s created the concept of public opinion. Fennomans founded Finnish-language newspapers whose circulation rose ever higher, Swedish-language newspapers multiplied in response, and the written word became influential on a new scale. News and literature were accessible in a way they had never been before, which was particularly impactful for Finnish speakers. Canth realised that she could work for the good of her local community, which she reached through her written words. These initially took the form of reporting and commentary, but it was *Päijänne* that published her first short story in 1877.

In 1879, when she was thirty-five, Canth was left a widow with seven children. In despair at how she was to provide for them, she decided on the gamble of taking over the draper's shop. The ripple effects of the Great Finnish Famine had led to her father's bankruptcy in 1873. Ferdinand Canth had used his savings to buy the family house where the shop was also located, allowing the Johnsons to continue to trade on a smaller scale. Now that both men were dead, Canth moved back to Kuopio in 1880 and set to work as a merchant. Soon enough her ability, despite the lack of formal training, became clear. Her brother-in-law had estimated that 600 marks per year would be a reasonable profit. A few years after Canth assumed control, she made 6 000 marks in profit.

Her father had lifted his family into the middle class and given his children the best educational opportunities offered by Swedish-speaking schools. Her husband had brought her the prestige of being a lecturer's wife and her first ties to men who saw writing and literature as a way to shape society for the better. This time, it was Canth who claimed sole responsibility for her climb. She demonstrated initiative in her dealings with businessmen, adjusted her stock in response to shifting trends, and kept careful track of her expenses in order to avoid debt. The draper's shop brought more than money to her: it showed her the joy of working for a living.

Canth was able to seize the opportunity because of the timing. Widows were already legally independent and controlled money in their own right, but freedom of trade ended the dominance of the burghers' estate in 1879: an apprenticeship was no longer required to set up a business. Growing numbers of women built careers as merchants and employees in trade. Canth's shop assistants were part of a new group of single women who became respected professionals. Financial security gave them the means to make decisions about their lives. The money from the draper's shop proved key to Canth's second career as a Finnish-language author. Though she insisted on author's fees as a sign of respect for the work she had done, she could not have

supported her family on them. The shop took up time she could have spent writing, but it also made it financially possible for her to write at all in this era when the market for Finnish literature was in its early stages. Money freed her to express radical ideas too, for she did not need to depend on her community's goodwill.

In 1878, inspired by a performance of the Finnish Theatre on tour, Canth began to write a folk play, *Murtovarkaus* (1882, translated as *The Burglary*). She portrayed its idealised rural setting with a combination of charm and authenticity: young lovers, a prosperous farm owner's son and a poor crofter's daughter, are parted due to a misunderstanding, but all is well once the truth is revealed. *Roinilan talossa* (1885, translated as *The House of Roinila*) switched the social ranks of the lovers and built its plot around a different crime, the discovery of a stolen will, but otherwise it offered more of the same, to the delight of audiences. At a time when people were creating new words for concepts that had not been discussed in Finnish before, from kitchen utensils to scientific terminology, Canth brought existing regional dialects to the stage and demonstrated their vibrancy.

After her husband's death, Canth sent her first play to Kaarlo Bergbom, the director of the Finnish Theatre in Helsinki. He was among the Fennomans who founded it in 1872: if theatre showed that Finnish could be the language of high culture, how could the establishment deem it unworthy of being the equal of Swedish? The Finnish Theatre began by staging translations of popular European classics and modern plays, but it had to be able to sustain itself. It needed new authors to write about what resonated with Finns. Bergbom's goal was twofold: to show that paying audiences wanted theatre in Finnish and to stage original Finnish plays that had artistic or topical value. This new friendship with Canth gave him the means to achieve both. To her, it gave the title of trailblazer: the first woman to write plays in Finnish, who did it with such success that she became an indelible part of Finland's literary canon.

Canth's two folk plays were praised and profitable, but she felt drawn to the rougher city life that she saw around her. Social realism combined criticism of society's flaws with a touch of idealism: if only those flaws were brought to light, they could be set right. This proved to be a natural fit for Canth's strengths. Whenever she had a moment to spare from her work in the shop, she worked on a story that was inspired by the everyday trials faced by working-class women, honing it until she felt a sense of genuine creative achievement. The result was *Työmiehen vaimo* (1885, translated as *The Workman's Wife*), the first play to bring the urban worker to the Nordic stage. It marked the merging of the author and the journalist. From fiction that pleased, Canth shifted to fiction that challenged. The suffering of a wife who loses the profits of her labour to her husband portrayed the injustice of financial abuse; the imprisonment of a Roma woman made Finland's most visible ethnic minority another symbol of how the law can subject to its power those groups to which it denies full participation.

The debate that followed was all that the Finnish Theatre could have wished for: this play was modern, political, unafraid. Finnish, in the form of *The Workman's Wife*, made the urban working class a worthy topic for a tragedy, breaking new ground. Public opinion showed its strength: the legal reform that had stalled now moved forward and married women gained the right to control their income in 1889. From this point onwards, no one would ignore what Minna Canth had to say.

When she returned to Kuopio in 1880, Canth found that the city had become home to women who were determined to advance their causes through cooperation. She had engaged in charity and written newspaper articles, but now she was part of a social circle that moved beyond individual action to agitating for change. The meaningful friendships that Canth formed with women, some of them born into the gentry, others rising in life with the help of education, would give her emotional sustenance when she found herself in conflict with the world. Canth became the most famous feminist of her era, but she was not alone.

Introduction

The organising of women began in the 1830s when the wives, daughters, and sisters of the first Fennomans listened to men debate civic duty. Born into the Swedish-speaking elite, they were drawn to the patriotic dream of a brighter future for Finland. They could not take part in politics, but the first ladies' associations took them out of the home in the name of apolitical charity. These associations, initially exclusive in their membership, evolved and expanded. Temperance became the first cause that united people across class, gender, and language in the 1870s and placed women in leadership positions. The path was clear for the first women's organisations, political agents whose goals emphasised feminism and social justice.

Canth wanted her daughters to have the right to a better education and joined the women who were fighting for the creation of co-ed schools. She called for girls' education to be reformed, with lessons in the same subjects that boys studied, and for reform to extend to spheres that were deemed naturally feminine yet not truly taught to girls; as a young mother, she had been at a loss when it came to childcare, cooking, and household finances. Canth argued, no longer anonymously, that all educational and professional paths must be open to women. She had longed for education but found it limited in girls' schools and was forced to abandon her second chance because of the seminary's rules against married women. It was her business career that made it possible for her to educate herself by filling her library with books about the latest political and scientific developments that were being debated in Europe, from socialism to Darwinism.

Canth's responsibilities to her children and shop kept her in Kuopio. Unlike many other Finnish artists, she did not travel abroad to enrich her understanding of European cultural movements. Yet if she could not leave, she could invite Finns to her home. Referred to as Kanttila, it became famous as a salon for cultural figures. Canth welcomed those who challenged her opinions. She did her best to ensure that guests, no matter their birth or politics, felt free to speak their minds in Kanttila. As a hostess, she created an environment of friendly debate that

differed from the spite and personal attacks with which the same topics were frequently discussed in newspapers. Canth herself was shocked to face exclusion by religious circles when she considered her own Christianity to be compatible with and in support of her faith in progress of all kinds, whether moral, scientific, or technological.

Canth continued to evolve as an author of novellas and short stories. Her early newspaper fiction had focused on simple, patriotic moral lessons, but now she turned to intimate psychological studies and illustrations of everyday injustices, often seen from the perspective of women. Some of them resulted in tangible consequences. The poorhouse system, formerly under the Lutheran church's control, fell into disarray after it was handed over to municipal authorities. When Canth's novella about the mental illness of a working-class mother, *Köyhää kansaa* ('Poor people', 1886), exposed the conditions in Kuopio's poorhouse, an official investigation eventually triggered reforms. Kanttila was Canth's pulpit as she brought national attention to local abuses of power.

Though mutual causes had begun to create unity among people who worked to reform society, sometimes social barriers reasserted themselves. One notorious controversy was the debate on sexual morality: it brought women's organisations into conflict with liberal men, who shared many of their political goals but still embraced the sexual double standard. Canth was an uneasy public speaker and preferred to support friends who led organisations over seeking to become active in politics herself: her arguments were better made in print. On this occasion, however, her fame meant that she was dragged in all the same and experienced the most hurtful newspaper publicity of her life. Her friendship with Juhani Aho, one of the most celebrated authors of the younger generation, took years to recover from the columns he had written, first mocking the views of several famous women and then attacking Canth in particular.

Canth witnessed the consequences of the sexual exploitation of working-class women and could not view it with the indifference

Minna Canth is one of the most important figures in Finnish literature, famous as a champion of social reform and observer of human nature. Translated by Alisa Manninen, the author of the biography *Minna Canth: Writing to Challenge*, these classic plays show Canth at her finest.

The Workman's Wife (1885)

When Johanna marries Risto, the money she had earned becomes his. Risto's drinking drags them into poverty and Johanna searches desperately for work. Meanwhile, he turns to Homsantuu, the Roma woman he abandoned. Though she is defiant when scorned by society, Homsantuu's longing for love leaves her vulnerable. The two women face a world in which the forces of law and justice are turned against the powerless.

Anna Liisa (1895)

A farm owner's daughter admired by all for her beauty and moral principles, Anna Liisa is in love with a fine young man. Just before their engagement is about to be celebrated, a secret from her past resurfaces to threaten her hopes for the future. As Anna Liisa struggles to keep her life from falling apart, it is her own conscience that must grow stronger than the people who seek to control or help her.

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