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Elina Arminen
University of Eastern Finland
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2810-4560

# Nature, Culture, and the Ideologies of Progress in Anni Kytömäki's Novel *Margarita*

The article explores the human-nature relationship in Anni Kytömäki's novel *Margarita* in the context of social change in Post-War Finland of the 1950s. In her oeuvre, Kytömäki has depicted the history of the modernization of Finnish society especially from the point of view of nature. Both themes, the reconstruction period and the need for the protection of nature, are popular in Finnish literature, but rarely combined. The analysis shows that the novel brings critical perspectives to the mainstream history of Post-War Finland by juxtaposing the ideologies that influenced family planning in the 1950s with the early stages of intensive forestry. In addition, the analysis shows that *Margarita* is anchored in the notion of a material-semiotic intertwining of nature and culture that is characteristic of current environmental discourse.

**Keywords:** Historical fiction, human-nature relationship, Post-War Finland, Anni Kytömäki

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary Finnish authors and readers are fascinated by history. Among the most popular and most awarded novels of recent years, there are many works that, for example, depict the traumatic memory of war, draw on family history, or deal with a common European cultural heritage.[1] Literary enthusiasm in the past has also provoked some critical comments, and Jussi Pulliainen (a columnist of the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*) has argued that Finns are "obsessed with history". His criticism was based on the view that there is only a limited amount to learn from history, and while critical reinterpretations of the past are necessary, it can also offer a valuable means by which to understand issues such as artificial intelligence, social inequality, and the new challenges of geopolitics (Pullinen 31.12.2023). Therefore, it is worth asking what contemporary novels use history for, and what are we discussing when we discuss the past?

[1] Historical novels such as Pirkko Saisio's *Passio* (2021), Olli Jalonen's *Taivaanpallo* (2018), Iida Turpeinen's Elolliset (2023), and Sirpa Kähkönen's *36 uurnaa* (2023), have been candidates for the Finlandia Prize in Fiction, the most important literature award in Finland.

This article focuses on the ways in which the historical novel contributes to the current debate on values and global challenges. The starting point is the idea of historical fiction as a genre that interprets the past, but at the same time is anchored in the present. The subject of the study is Anni Kytömäki's novel *Margarita* (2020, not translated). Kytömäki is one of Finland's most awarded contemporary writers, and has published three historical novels, all of which focus on the human-nature relationship. In her works, Kytömäki rewrites the history of Finland in the 19th and 20th centuries from the perspective of nature as an actor, and in such a way that the human is also presented as part of nature. Her work is characterized by a critique of social institutions whose activities damage nature, and thus human well-being. The critique takes the form of surprising analogues between nature and the various organizations of power. Moreover, the narratives of her novels tend towards realistic mimesis rather than experimental expression. In Kytömäki's debut work *Kultarinta* (2014), the forest offers a place of refuge for people fleeing civilization amidst early 20th century wars, political conflicts, and frenzied economic growth. *Kivitasku* (2017) draws a broad historical continuum from the 1850s to the present day in connection with the exploitation of the bedrock by building an analogy between rock quarrying and lobotomy. In *Margarita*, the well-being of both what is human and nature are threatened by the same institutions that after the Second World War it was hoped would provide the basis for the development of a Finnish welfare society: namely forestry and healthcare.

The article explores what functions the knowledge of Reconstruction-era history has as a part of the discussion on the human-nature relationship, how the work is anchored in contemporary debates on the environment and biodiversity, and what significance the retelling of history from nature's perspective has for imagining the present or the future by means of fiction. Theoretically, the analysis is anchored in the study of history culture[2], which forms research areas that focus on the social production of a consciousness of the past, and its use for different purposes (see Robinson 2011; De Groot 2016). When *Margarita* is compared with conceptions of the human-nature relation in our own time, the neo-materialist theories of Donna Haraway (2008; 2016) and Stacy Alaimo (2010; 2012) provide a key point of reference for analysis as they both emphasize the interconnectedness and interdependence of human and non-human actors.

[2] The term 'history culture' (*Geschitskultur*), which is particularly well established in German historiography, refers to the ways in which images and knowledge about the past have been produced. The term 'public history' refers to the same phenomenon, but places more emphasis on popular culture (Salmi 2001: 134).

## 2. Historical Fiction and Imagining a Better Future

In literary studies, the importance of the historical novel for readers has often been associated not only with the pleasure of reading, but also with knowledge and referentiality (Robinson 2011: 28). In his classic study of the nineteenth-century historical novel, Georg Lukács associates the 'truthfulness' of the genre with the fact that the historical novel should capture, in its mode of expression, the mentality of the period it depicts and reveal the developmental tendencies associated with it (Lukacs 1969/1937: 242). However, the historical novel always involves a tension between the period depicted and the present (Cowart 1989: 8; Johnston and Wiegdant 2017: 10). The present expectations and fears about the future influence the way we re-structure the space between memory and forgetting (Jalava, Kinnunen and Sulkunen 2013: 9).

Alongside depictions of the past, the historical novel can also give expression to the values of its own time. The aim of historical novels that are topical can be to use historical analogies to provide an understanding of the present. From a communicative point of view, the reader relates the work not only to historical frameworks, but equally to the reality of the present (see Robinson 2011; Cowart 1989). The tension between the past and the present has been central especially in historiographical metafiction, which considers the problem of depicting the past as an epistemological question (Hucheon 1988). Of course, the theory of historiographical metafiction does not capture all the ways in which historical fiction reflects on the relations between past and present. As Johnston and Wiegandt (2017: 14) have argued, the genre of the historical novel has become very permissive and has developed a variety of ways of understanding the otherness of the past and, its implications for the present.

According to Jeremy De Groot, historical fiction not only creates images of past events, but also influences how the past is epistemologically framed. As he argues, historical fiction contributes to the imagination of history and thus, in a pedagogical sense, illustrates and enables an understanding of the past. It also provides tools for critiquing, conceptualizing, and engaging with or rejecting the story that we call 'history'. Fiction not only reproduces models created by historiography, but also offers its own. It produces knowledge of the past by imagining, creating opportunities for empathy, and relating past events to new contexts (De Groot 2016: 2). This kind of re-articulation connects historical fiction with the contemporary discussion of values.

De Groot (2016: 21–22; 51) sees the historical novel as a kind of intervention of the past into the present that makes visible the haunting of the past in the present, and asks what could be different. Fiction has the potential to challenge, carnivalize, and to pervert conventional ways of representing history (De Groot 2016: 1–2). Fictional representations of the past can open up discursive spaces for debates about issues such as nationality, identity, and the authenticity of history.

De Groot (2016: 49) is particularly concerned with the potential of historical fiction to challenge and reimagine national history. According to him, novels, films, TV series and documentaries are key elements in the construction of national identity, and also in the public debate about the national past. In the best case, popular interpretations have the potential to serve as a critique of, for example, myths of nationalism and imagined communities that are defined too narrowly (see Anderson 2006). Historical fiction may thus offer a kind of "extended historiography", whereby representations of history primarily provide models for actors in the present (De Groot 2016: 50).

Although historical fiction is at least on some level a genuine attempt to understand the past, it does not claim to be true. When historical fiction extracts aspects of the past that are relevant to the present, it can be accused of creating anachronisms. Like De Groot suggests, I will approach such anachronisms and other elements that highlight the tense relationship between the present and the past as a possible means of criticism. Specifically, historical fiction can make visible the paths that past actors have not taken, or that historiography has not been interested in. Fiction has the potential to ask 'what if' questions, to extend from individual perspectives, and also outline the directions that groups of people and nations have not taken into account when making decisions. Through these kinds of approaches, we can consider alternative histories, recognize lost possibilities, and find new connections between past events (De Groot 2016: 51).

Interconnections between the human and nature have been conceptualized, especially in the ecocritical research that emerged from New Materialism. Such perspectives have been offered, for example, in Donna Haraway's (2016) concept of nature-cultures through which she has made visible the interdependence and entanglement of human and non-human actors in various interactions, and Stacy Alaimo's (2012) view of "trans-corporeality" which expresses the idea that the body connects us at its material level to the rest of nature, so it is actually impossible to separate nature and culture into two different domains. As these perspectives both emphasize, taking ethical responsibility and working for the well-being of the environment are not optional because we are intertwined in the material world, and an awareness of this should draw us towards interaction, cooperation and partnership with other species, not just the use of them (Alaimo 2012: 2). Both thinkers also emphasize the importance of narratives. Fiction can show what kind of choices people have in imagining the relationship between humans and other species (Haraway 2016: 118–117). However, it cannot be assumed that *Margarita* refers exactly to these thinkers. Rather, the novel participates in a conversation with the environment, and gives artistic form to topical questions.

Applying De Groot's idea, in this article *Margarita* is understood as an intervention in national history from the perspective of nature. In *Margarita*, the nature-centered perspective on the post war era in Finland consists of two analogous themes. First,

the novel depicts the way health care of the time approached the human body, and second, it illustrates the effects of intensive forestry on the fragile natural environment of rivers.

## 3. The Baby of the State

In Finland, the Reconstruction period after the Second World War has been an important part of the national narrative. Although some marginal sub-narratives can be discerned in the history of Reconstruction (e.g. queer history), its image has been primarily dominated by aspects of modernization, urbanization, and the democratization of society, with representations related to education, public health, and the pluralization of cultural life (see Holmila 2008; Hytönen 2014). *Margarita* puts nature at the center of the story and gives the human a role as part of nature.

According to Alan Robinson, as referents of historical fiction, periods or epochs can be thought of as representing a kind of "present past". Such a present past is constituted by the lived past, but also by written documents and later representations, as well as by collective perceptions of the period in question (Robinson 2011: 47). Robinson has argued that many contemporary historical novels are characterized by revisionist interpretations, which are built on discontinuities in relation to, for example, the ideologies of the period. The novels highlight elements of the past that have been latent in earlier representations, but which resonate particularly with the values of the present. They may pause to examine blind spots in the past, and produce a world that would be possible, but different from the dominant values of the past. From such interpretations a kind of "past future" is constructed (Robinson 2011: 49). In *Margarita*, such a revisionist interpretation is built on notions of the interconnectedness of what is human and nature.

The starting point of *Margarita* is quite familiar from many literary depictions of social transformation in the mid-1900s. *Margarita* is set in a little spa town, where the protagonist (26 year old Senni) works as a massage therapist. She experiences a sexual relationship with a married man and becomes pregnant, pondering the possibility of an abortion. This classic theme has been dealt with in Finnish post-war literature, for example by Marja Liisa Vartio in her novel *Mies kuin mies, Tyttö kuin tyttö* (1959) and Hannu Salama in *Se tavallinen tarina* (1961). In these novels, among many others, pregnancy outside marriage has been a means of picturing the failure of safety nets in society, or problematic moral concepts. In these cases, the focus is on social issues, especially the limits of the social role for women. However, *Margarita* represents the situation differently, wherein the pregnancy is a starting point for picturing nature in the role of an actor, and pondering why it is difficult for social institutions to confront nature in the role of a human being. By doing this, the novel incorporates the values of the present into the representation of the past.

Everything goes wrong during Senni's pregnancy. Unlike the abovementioned novels about pregnancy outside marriage, in *Margarita* it is not the pregnancy itself that is the problem for the protagonist, but the fact that she suffers from such severe nausea (*hyperemesesis*), to the extent that she cannot eat anything and loses her health and ability to work. In *Margarita*, abortion is represented as a possible solution for a difficult situation. Senni finds out that under the new legislation she could have an abortion, although she is not entitled to it. The reasons for the decision are based on the hopes of population growth that guided the health institutions of the time, as well as assumptions of motherhood as the primary biological role of the woman (Helén 1997: 133–137). In the novel, the depiction of Senni's struggle for the right to an abortion is constructed on detailed information taken from the demographic policies in place during the Reconstruction era, and the ideologies behind them.

In Finland, the post war period was a time for the reorganization of family policy. However, decision-making was still influenced by the values of pro-natalist demographic policies which had dominated considerations about population since before the war. The drive for population growth had defined population policy in Germany, and also in Scandinavian countries in the 1930s, leading to eugenics (Hiilamo 2006: 66–76). As part of the population policy reforms, the Abortion Act came into force in Finland on 1 June 1950, allowing abortion for health and social reasons (Helén 1997: 32). However, a feared increase in the number of abortions brought about the need to exercise control by health authorities, and in practice, this meant adhering to medical reasons for decisions concerning abortion. According to Ilpo Helén, the focus of the abortion debate changed from condemnation or approval to questions of how to nurture and at the same time to control the capacity of the female body to produce life (Helen 1997: 33).

In *Margarita*, decisions about abortion are motivated by the hope for population growth and efforts to produce a new workforce to replace the generations lost to war. In the novel, this is connected to a nationalist discourse in which women are called upon to identify with the nation, and to fulfil their reproductive role. The attitude of the health care authorities is represented, for example, in the following statements by the doctor and a nurse who are treating Senni:

> But you must understand that the basic role of the Family Counselling Clinic is to prevent abortions, not to promote them. Family Federation recommends six children per woman […] The important thing is that you do not regret it when you are old, but at least start doing your duty. (Translations EA.)
>
> We do not always think that matters which seem to be private, such as starting a family, affect the whole nation. The family is the beginning and the root of society. Wars have taught us that the number of our citizens has not risen as high as it should.

> Mutta teidän on ymmärrettävä, että sosiaalineuvolan perustehtävä on estää, ei edistää raskaudenkeskeytyksiä. Väestöliitto suosittelee kuutta lasta jokaista naista kohti. […] Tärkeintä on, ettette joudu vanhana katumaan, vaan ainakin aloitatte oman sarkanne. (187)
> Aina emme tule ajatelleeksi, että yksityisasioilta tuntuvat seikat, kuten perheen perustaminen vaikuttavat koko kansakuntaan. Perhe on yhteiskunnan alku ja juuri. Sodat ovat opettaneet, että kansalaistemme määrä ei ole kohonnut niin korkealle kuin olisi suotavaa. (192)

As the extract illustrates, the depiction of Senni's struggle for her right to an abortion is accurate in terms of the historical facts. However, if we read the novel as an attempt to write history differently from nature's perspective, it is noteworthy that, for example, the social aspects of illegitimate pregnancy and abortion (such as shame, economic challenges, or ethical struggle) are not highlighted in the novel, even if in the context of 1950, this would be expected (see Kytömäki 2020: 186). Instead, the work directs a critical gaze at discourses that instrumentalize the human body, and shows them as a problematic part of the value system on which the Finnish welfare society has been constructed.

In *Margarita*, the health care system represents a biopower. In Michael Foucault's thinking, biopower refers to power-generating discourses and practices that focus on life as a biological matter, life management, or as a matter of existence. It is divided into disciplinary power directed at controlling the population. Biopower shapes the forces of human life into practices that serve the social good, and is based on normalization (Foucault 1980: 82–89, 92–93; Helén 1997: 15–16). In *Margarita*, biopower is expressed in discourses that medicalize the human body and emphasize the 'natural' reproductive role of women. It also gives the protagonist the feeling of having no control over her own body. In this discourse, the human body is objectified as a resource. However, this (in its own way materialistic) conception of the human body ignores the agency of nature that is inherent in the materiality of the body (see Alaimo 2010: 1–4). In the novel, discourses of biopower used by health care authorities construct a distinction between the human and nature, and thus make it difficult to see that the body can also make a mistake in performing its 'natural' task.

The depiction of Senni's difficult pregnancy expands into a reflection on the role of nature as an actor. Rather than the 1950s, this topic is anchored in the discussion of the intertwining of nature and culture of the 2000s. The novel emphasizes that nature as an actor is not good or bad, but still, humans may have difficulties understanding its logic. When Senni's body starts to reject the child inside, her body takes the leading role. Senni becomes aware of how dependent she is on her material body, and the fact that her body can act against its own well-being. The experience of physical illness forces her to redefine her relationship with herself. Senni reflects on this contradiction based on knowledge that she has acquired in her work:

> Back in the summer, I was calling for people to be nature wise. I urged clients to listen to nature itself, to abandon tight corsets, to get enough rest, and to eat when they were

> hungry. Nature knows best, I repeated, like a maid in a divine rapture. [...] My thin blood feeds the baby through the placenta while the internal organs try to flush the parasite out through the top or bottom. The body is nature, nature is simple.
>
> Vielä kesällä väitin luontoa viisaaksi. Kehotin asiakkaita kuuntelemaan luontoa itsessään, hylkäämään kireät korsetit, lepäämään riittävästi ja syömään silloin kun on nälkä. Luonto tietää parhaiten, toistelin kuin jumaliseen hurmokseen yllytetty piikatyttö. […] Vähäinen vereni ruokkii vauvaa istukan läpi samalla kun sisäelimet yrittävät huuhtoa loisen ulos ylä- tai alakautta. Ruumis on luonto, luonto on yksinkertainen. (196)

The novel does not offer a simple answer to what is natural and what is not, and the question of reproduction and biological parenthood is one of the most controversial of its topics. More important, however, is to notice how the novel seeks a balance between biological parenthood and its alternatives. Senni feels that the child inside her is killing her, and several extracts see her focusing on the child as a parasite. Yet Senni also ponders the possible grief related to infertility (229), and these contradictory feelings are evident, for example, when Senni is thinking of her mother:

> She has come to my aid against the parasite, when by natural order she should be concerned with passing on our names and our genes. I am more important to her than the chain of generations.
>
> Hän on lyöttäytynyt avukseni loista vastaan, vaikka luonnon järjestyksen mukaan hänen pitäisi kantaa huolta nimiemme ja perintötekijöidemme siirtymisestä eteenpäin. Minä olen hänelle tärkeämpi kuin sukupolvien ketju. (182)

The contradiction between the biological and social dimensions of parenthood is expressed in the novel by representing Senni's mother as a parent who takes care of her child. Paradoxically, taking care in this case means breaking the chain of the generations. The desire to save the lives of those who are already living is reflected in the mother's reaction to the rejection of the decision to have an abortion. She states: "This is infanticide, the murder of my child" (179). As the novel represents the conflict between the need to reproduce and the need to limit reproduction, it is possible to recognize similarities with Donna Haraway's views on care. She argues that one should be able to imagine communities in which people tend to care for those who have already been born, rather than always having to produce new human life. She has summed this up in the slogan "Make kin, not babies". The idea is grounded in an understanding of the family as not being based on reproduction along biological lines, and its radical extension into interspecies relations (Haraway 2016: 139). With her provocative argument, Haraway (2016: 1–8) aims to stimulate debate on ways to respond to the climate crisis and population growth. Her proposal is also linked to a feminist critique of naturalizing and heteronormative reproductive thinking. Haraway's proposal has also attracted criticism: for example, Nikolas Matheis (2022: 515–516) sees the idea as a backdoor into the debate on restricting

reproductive rights, which would put the rights of the already vulnerable at risk (Matheis 2022: 517). *Margarita*'s reflections on the problematic nature of reproductive claims deepen towards this kind of cross-species solidarity. In Kytömäki's novel, the criticism is primarily aimed at the state-led and nationalistically motivated pronatalist family policy of the 1950s, that does not recognize women's right to decide about their own bodies. In the depicted situation of the 1950s, however, there are points of convergence with the concern of prosperous countries in the 21st century over the decline in the birth rate and its effects on the national economy rather than a global increase in population.

Finally, in the novel, Senni gives birth by cesarean section to a baby she calls "a baby of the state" (195). The baby dies of serious health problems, and the cesarean section leaves Senni permanently infertile, but at no point does *Margarita* offer an answer to the question as to what is the will of nature. Rather, the policies that ostensibly listen to nature's agency turn out to be destructive, and an abortion is represented as being more in line with the needs of nature than something that prohibits it. The novel allows for an interpretation that "the baby of the state" represents the supremacy of medicine and nationalist population policy over both nature and people. As a rewriting of the post war history of Finland, *Margarita* makes visible that institutions which have played a key role in the construction of the Finnish welfare society have, in fact, been guided by the idea of a separation of what is human and nature.

## 4. The Dredged River

Kytömäki's *Margarita* is also connected to the history of post war forestry. The novel highlights the early pre-1960s stages of nature conservation as part of the history of Finnish forests. In the novel, forestry instrumentally represents the rational mindset that ignores nature's own agency, similar to that of 1950s health care. In Finland, national self-understanding, culture and economy have been built on forests. Although the forest has provided an everyday environment and has been both a celebrated and mystified object in culture, the Finnish relationship with nature has long been defined by a view of the forest as a resource (Björn 2000). This utilitarian approach has guided the nations's ways of looking at the forest, for example, in the way that traces of felling are seen as self-evident parts of the forest's life cycle, or how when a landowner looks at a snow-covered forest, the perception is not necessarily aesthetic, but may be mixed with a concern about the economic damage caused by the snow (See Haapala 2021: 70). As described in the novel, the 1950s were a time of clear-cutting and the mechanization of the forest industry, especially in central and northern Finland. The aim of intensive forestry in Finland at that time was to boost economic growth and provide material for the rapidly growing paper and sawmill industries. However, Finnish nature conservation also

has a long history, with the first national parks being established in 1938. Many forestry professionals have played an important role in the early development of Finnish nature conservation (Borg 2008: 6), although this history has been overshadowed by the history of welfare which depends on the forest industry.

*Margarita* offers a narrative that deconstructs the utilitarian approach described above, highlighting the interdependence of the forest ecosystem, bodies of water, and with them, human well-being. This theme is illustrated through the symbolism of the river mussel. Senni has lived all her life near a river where endangered pearl mussels that can live to be over 300 years old, are found. However, she sees a change in her habitat due to massive clear-cuttings. As Sanna Karkulehto has pointed out in her analysis of contemporary fiction as a political force for change in the sustainability revolution, the perception of an interconnection between nature and culture permeates the narrative of *Margarita*. According to Karkulehto, Senni's entire perceptual world, including her observations of the urban landscape, is filtered through images of nature. In the narration, the river and Senni are intertwined, for example, in that the flowing water is a part of the depiction of her anxiety (Karkulehto 2025). The novel illustrates the impact of logging on both humans and nature as experiences of uprooting, suffocation, and disconnection. Symptomatically, both human and animal, in this case the pearl mussel, share the same experience.

In the novel, extensive clear-cutting and blasting for log dredging are destroying a sandy river habitat suitable for the mussel. Paradoxically, Senni finds herself lost in a clearing:

> I follow the river upstream and downstream. Everywhere the water runs between the banks. The river has been blasted out of its bends and smoothed out of its thresholds, obstacles removed from the way of the swimmers. The old river bed rests in the sun on both sides of the channel. The ridges are covered with grayed-out stones and cracked clay, with logs that have lain in the river and uprooted water plants. […] The strong current was here, or was it?
>
> Kuljen jokivartta ylä- ja alavirtaan. Kaikkialla vesi juoksee vallien välissä. Joesta on räjäytetty mutkat ja tasattu kynnykset, poistettu esteet uittotukkien tieltä. Vanha joenpohja lepää auringossa uoman molemmin puolin. Harjanteita peittävät harmaiksi kuivuneet kivet ja halkeillut savi, joessa maanneet karahkat ja juuriltaan kiskoutuneet vesikasvit. […] Vuolle oli tässä, vai oliko? (539)

What might be rational from a forestry point of view (for example straightening the bends in the river to allow logs to flow) is shown in the extract as violent and uprooting. This imagery also dislodges the reader from an habitual way of looking at the traces of clear-cutting. The extract also highlights the connection between natural places and human memory, and in her mind, Senni juxtaposes the current view with past memories of the place, trying to navigate the forest as before, but nature no longer guides her as it had previously. The juxtaposition

of the present view with old memories makes the loss visible. In Senni's mind, the places evoke images of childhood play, and the radical change in the landscape creates an experience where even those memories are disappearing: "The familiar bushes of marsh tea are bursting by the shores, but there is no echo of the past. The memories of childhood excursions have faded with the forest" (264) ["Rannoilla röyhyävät suopursujen tutut pehkot, mutta menneisyydestä ei kaiu mitään. Metsän mukana ovat vaienneet lapsuuden retkien muistot"]. In this way, it is also possible to interpret the destruction of the forest as the destruction of history and identity. In contrast, the healthy, growing forest and the river flowing its natural course are also open to interpretation as active participants in a form of communication and, for example, when Senni reluctantly returns to the place where her child was conceived, nature begins to guide her actions, and at the same time, the healing process.

> As I step off the path, the small forest grows thick. The trees reach out their branches as if deciding for me where to walk. With confident hands, they guide me where I do not want to go, and yet I do.
>
> Kun siirryn väylältä sivuun, pieni metsä yltyy vahvaksi. Puut ojentavat oksiaan kuin päättäisivät puolestani, minne kävellä. Itsevarmoin ottein ne ohjaavat minut sinne, minne en tahdo ja silti tahdon. (266)

The most powerful way to illustrate the intertwining of man and nature in the novel is the analogy between the protagonist and the pearl mussel. This analogy ties together the central themes of the novel – the need for nature conservation, an embodied connection with nature, and the continuity of life. Senni's second name is Margarita, and she is named after the pearl mussel living in the streams of her home region (the Latin name of the mussel is *Margaritifera Margaritifera*).[3] In addition to Senni, the mussel is the other protagonist of the novel,, which includes ten short text passages narrated from its point of view. These passages picture its experiences of settling in a clear gravel-based river, meeting fellow species, searching for food, and reproducing. Suddenly, however, it is caught up in a violent turbulence, during which the river water becomes muddy and dirty so the mussel can no longer breathe. The excerpt is analogous with the description of Senni's experience of being lost in the felled forest:

> We have to go! the body demands. We have to go! The little one was the first to suffocate, and since then many others have died. She's on the verge of slipping into the darkness, still trying. She's opening her shell. Water pours in, but she has to close the shell again. The water that used to give her nourishment and oxygen is now a thick, horrible sludge.

[3] In addition, Senni's difficult pregnancy is analogous with the confrontation of the pearl mussel, wherein "the baby of the state" is represented as a stone chip that finds its way into a shell.

> On lähdettävä! ruumis vaatii. On lähdettävä! Pienin tukehtui ensimmäisenä, sen jälkeen on menehtynyt jo moni muukin. Hän on suistumaisillaan pimeään, mutta yrittää vielä. Hän raottaa kuortaan. Vesi virtaa sisuksiin, mutta hänen on suljettava kuori uudelleen. Vesi, joka ennen liidätti hänelle ravinnon ja hapen on nyt tuhtia, kammottavaa lientä. (487)

Of course, unlike the reader, the river mussel cannot know that the monster in the river is a dredging machine. The extract strongly humanizes the animal (the mussel). However, the narration opens the reader to the possibility of imagining an animal as a subject and identifying with what it can feel. In the novel, both Senni's and the mussel's sense of suffocation when they feel they are losing control of their lives is similarly described. In the end, the mussel is saved, and after the shock, she can breathe again in clean, fresh water. The final chapter reveals that the rescuer is Senni, who has transported the mussels to a nature reserve.

Donna Haraway's (2016: 103–104) statement "make kin, not babies" emphasizes a solidarity between species. It highlights that family-like care and a kinship experience which are indispensable for human beings, could also be directed towards other species (Haraway 2008). In *Margarita*, Anni Kytömäki considers the radicality of this idea (that has been topical in the new-materialist debate on nature) by depicting the situation through the eyes of someone for whom infertility is not a choice. The care that Senni gives to the mussels is not the same as the care one gives to a child, and the novel does not naively offer nature conservation as an alternative to family. However, Senni's rescue project and her awakening to a need to protect nature is described in the novel as a powerful experience of integration with nature. During this process she also reconnects with her own body (566), which is possible to interpret as a suggestion for an alternative understanding for the continuation of life.

Kytömäki's novels balance between a narrative that makes room for the intrinsic value of nature and a rich nature symbolism (see also Karkulento 2025). New-materialist literary studies have criticized the fact that literature often reduces nature to a carrier of symbolic meanings (Morton 2007: 21; 75–85). However, the concept of natureculture makes it clear that in fiction, human meanings need not, and cannot be excluded, and such entanglements make visible the interdependencies between human culture and nature (Haraway 2016). Stacy Alaimo (2012: 478–485) also reads representations of human-animal hybrids in fiction and mythic narratives as opportunities to imagine and recognize such material interconnectedness, and although there are problems with texts that strongly humanize nature, she thinks they can serve as a starting point for better understanding and more detailed analysis (Alaimo 2012: 489).

In Kytömäki's *Margarita*, the representation of deforestation from the perspective of the mussel allows us to imagine what the experience of losing one's habitat can mean to an animal. This perspective alienates the reader from a view that is based on mere human significance, such as the economic or recreational value of nature.

The analogical narrative of *Margarita* which plays with the cultural meanings of the pearl mussel, draws attention to the similarity between Senni and the mussel as animals in need of oxygen, care and nourishment, and for whom nature ultimately has very similar meanings. In *Margarita*, the dialogue between the symbolic and material levels highlights the idea of the human being – including the human mind – as being a part of nature.

## 5. The Intertwining of Past and Present

Anni Kytömäki's *Margarita* aims to renew the way in which knowledge of the period of the 1950s can be formed by focusing on nature and the human as embodied and dependent on nature, rather than only as part of society. As a historical novel, *Margarita* is constructed from familiar elements such as the mental and material traces of war, changes in economic structure and habitats, and expectations concerning the role of women. The novel highlights that many practices aimed at promoting well-being have taken people further away from nature. Apart from nature's own needs, they have also obscured the fact that the human being, with her/his thoughts and sensations, is also a biological organism. The novel also aims to make visible the early history of Finnish nature conservation. In this way, *Margarita* can be placed on a continuum of the critical historical novel, and Kytömäki does not take on the traditional role of a writer of national history, but rather as an opponent of it. Lukacs's idea of the "truthfulness" of the historical novel was based on capturing the mentality of the era depicted. In comparison, *Margarita*, which is ideologically anchored in the environmental discourse of the 2020s, represents a different kind of relationship with the past. However, Lukács also stressed that history cannot be interpreted without a living contact with the present and without understanding the past as a defining factor of that present (Lukács 1969: 67–68). *Margarita* is about bringing such prehistory to the fore: especially as the novel draws attention to the weak voices that were not listened to in their time, but whose message, from a contemporary perspective, is obvious. And, although the novel focuses on depicting the events of the 1950s, its themes have similarities to the conflicting debates of current environmentalism. One of these is related to reproduction. Above all, the novel emphasizes a view in which all life appears to be valuable, and in which one cannot rationally understand nature's will.

*Margarita*'s representation of the past is anchored in the notion of a material-semiotic intertwining of nature and culture that is characteristic of contemporary environmental discourse, and is present in the new materialist discourse. The novel highlights the role of nature as an agent, but also the fact that the embodied relationship with nature shapes human meaning-making. Throughout the narration of *Margarita,* it is noteworthy that the novel discusses the intertwining of nature and culture through analogical structures. In particular, the novel juxtaposes

the ideologies of 1950s health care and forestry, thus highlighting the institutional and discursive structures that have made it difficult to understand both nature's own agency, and the human material and embodied dependence on nature. The novel also juxtaposes the environmental relationship of its two protagonists – a human and a river mussel. In *Margarita*, the humanization of animals and rich symbolism of nature can be seen as a means to represent the intertwining of man and nature, rather than a sign of human-centeredness. If the novel is interpreted as a post-humanist rewriting of the Reconstruction era, then the idea that the agency of nature and human symbolic meaning-making are not in conflict must be accepted.

In Kytömäki's *Margarita*, the relationship between past and present is tense, and while it does not become the object of verbalized reflection, this tension is still present in the ruptures raised by the current environmental discourse. Such signs are present both in the characters' reflections on their own life choices, and in the novel's linguistic and structural choices. As such, the novel forces the reader to constantly balance themselves between an immersion in the fictional historical world and an involvement in current environmental discourse. Although *Margarita* highlights the problematic values and developments that led to the impoverishment of nature in post-war social and economic planning, it also offers positive perspectives for the future. This hopefulness is based on a better understanding of the agency of nature by human beings, making a dialogue between the economy, science, and the environment possible. Most importantly, however, the novel addresses these themes in a language of experience and symbols that traditional narratives of history cannot reach.

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