

Female Stars and the Tricky Question of Drinking

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As I started to work with my PhD on female celebrity interviews in the late 1960s and early 1970s and read through the research materials, the women's magazines and popular family magazines from the period, I was quite amazed how the style and tendency of the stories differed from both previous years and present day conventions of the genre. The most striking characteristic was the wallowing in misfortunes, sorrows and personal life tragedies that seemed to be overwhelming the life of the interviewees, the female stars and celebrity personalities. Celebrity interviews certainly deal with tragic incidents also nowadays, but I think the style and tendency of the stories is different. In general, rather than excessive recount of the downfall process, the focus is in the therapeutic recovery and analysis of the tragic episode of life already put behind.

From the early 1960s onwards, the 'ideal woman' constructed in the popular magazines, was perky, clever and whitewashed. I suggest that the turn towards 'tragic' in the early 70s reflects the shift in cultural understanding of contemporary women's lives. Themes of unhappiness and mental restlessness popularised effectively notions of women as psychologically complex beings, and gave room to discuss previously silenced social problems, such as women's alcoholism, within the frames of newly found respectability.

Tragedy is one of the basic modes of drama. The basic plot of tragedy, according to Aristoteles, is the most effective creator of pleasure for the reader. With the tragic hero the reader experiences pity, joy, fear and finally relief of catharsis. In tragic plot there is a hero with modest starting conditions, which are followed by success and then difficulties and destruction, both hastened by *hamartia* – the hero's mistakes in behaviour, bad choices and excess. After the enemy has made the final attack and the fallen hero is dead, the audience forgives and awards the hero.

Richard Keller Simon (1999) has compared tabloid tragedies to the classic tragedies of antiquity, and noted similarities in the level of themes and structures. According to Simon, the tragic stories of fallen stars answer in the same way questions about what kind of world we are living in and what we include in the definition of the good life. Tragedy as a cultural overall structure does not, however, explain its particular significance to the readers of women's magazines and popular family magazines in the early 70s. Nor does it explain *why* female celebrity personalities began to talk about their misfortunes precisely in the early 70s. Furthermore it fails to explain the visible role of alcohol in the downfall processes of the period. Answers to these questions have to be searched for elsewhere; in the local, historical and material conditions of culture.

A scandal-seeking press, specialized in private life exposures of famous people, developed later in Finland than in many other western countries. Its origins lie in the midpoint of the 1960s, when the monthly magazine *Hymy* [Smile] began, following its British model example, *The Daily Mirror*, in adding scandalous touches to its articles. However, the broader turn towards intimate, private and personal within popular family magazines and women's magazines did not take place until in the early 1970s and was due to growing competition in terms of market shares between parallel magazine brands at a time of economic recession. The growing interest in the private lives of celebrities, which was further increased by the influence of television, does not, however, explain the growing interest in tragedy as a mode of writing, and in the tragic downfall processes of female celebrities.

It is more likely that this tragic turn has got to do with the increasing divorce numbers and the disintegration of traditional family structure within which the individual choices and alternative relationship models were coming in the public discussion. The return of women in the workforce following childbirth, disintegration of

sexual taboos and the growing interest in women's sexual pleasure awakened outbursts of dissatisfaction and unhappiness. The traditional marriages of necessity were strongly questioned, and romantic love as an ideal point of relationships was highlighted – perhaps in ways not seen ever since the arrival of bourgeois novel in the late 17th century.

One important context for the tragedies of women is the breaking of norms concerning women and their consumption of alcohol. Within at least the Finnish context, it would be problematic to speak about women's drinking only in negative terms. As Hanna Kuusi (2004) reminds in her dissertation about drinking in Finnish fiction films, the possibility of going in to a restaurant without a male companion was actually a groundbreaking issue in the awakening of the Finnish feminist movement in the mid 1960s. Drinking alcohol was, therefore, indeed a feminist issue.

During the 1960s, Finnish alcohol culture changed rapidly. After the alcohol law renewal in 1969 total consumption of alcohol rose 45 per cent. Alcohol use became more common among women, including amongst previously completely sober women (Kuusi 2003, 127). In Finnish films and literature throughout the 1960s, heavy drinking implied a modern, urban, lifestyle and loosened bonds between the uptight, war-experienced generation and the younger generation born in the post-war baby boom years. Women's drunkenness was used as a metaphor for the urban rebelliousness of the younger generation, or of losing control of life. Women's drinking was also used as a "scene of truth", the moment of letting the true self, the inner personality, of characters come out within the narrative. Women's drinking, like that of men, was thus a common theme in Finnish fiction. However, just as in the case of the sexual revolution, the changes in real life attitudes towards women's drinking were somewhat slower.

In the world of popular fiction, alcoholism is used metaphorically as a sign of inner crisis. Ien Ang (1985; see also Elsasser 1995) refers to the drinking problem of Sue Ellen Ewing "as a visual sign externalizing of her feelings of impotence in a life-situation in which she fettered". In soap operas such as *Dallas* alcoholism serves as a plot twist expressing the psychological state of the character rather than alcoholism as sickness and a social problem in itself. In studying journalism it is important to keep in mind that a magazine interview is never entirely a fiction, but it always has at least some level of engagement with real life issues and incidents. Thus interpreting the tragic celebrity personalities simply as carriers of a tragic function in culture is slightly problematic. It also raises questions about the real life experiences of both the celebrities and their loved ones.

Drinking as a Gendered Action

The Finnish desire for heavy drinking has traditionally been explained by their allegedly melancholic national character. These kinds of stereotypes have been questioned, and, the problematic relationship of Finns to alcohol has instead been explained by reference to the tight alcohol legislation that characterized drinking as similar to criminal activity. The complex relationship of alcohol and drunkenness has continued to play a significant role in current discourses of Finnishness. The tragic Finnish hero with a personal talent and personal weakness is, typically, a musician or a former athlete with an alcohol problem.

Ethnomusicologist Marko Aho (2003) has followed the mythic structure of the downfall process of four Finnish tango and popular music artists from the 1950s to the early 1990s. All four were celebrated because of their talent and the mocked because of their misbehaviour caused by their reckless alcohol use. After their premature death for alcoholism, their reputations have one after the other been rehabilitated, their life story remembered and their works declared immortal. Importantly, alcohol signifies not only the downfall process of these heroes, but prior to that, it signifies the carnivalescent celebration of the wrong kings, rising from the primitive hatred of masters.

What is significant here is that these kinds of carnivalescent dimensions of drinking do not belong to women. Women's alcohol use is still highly limited and sanctioned by social norms. Drinking that goes beyond suitable is considered in every case appalling and is always articulated within a framework of sexual promiscuity – or, in woman's magazine terms, in relation to fortunes and misfortunes in love. A mythical understanding of woman with alcohol problems has resulted from the morally coded dual roles of woman as mother and wife. The female alcoholic is seen as having given up her respectability as a woman, as failing her reproductive work as a mother, and thus becoming a despised being. Even if the attitudes towards women's drinking have been liberalised, female alcoholics are, still frequently characterised as "fallen angels". (Hyttinen 1990, 51–52.)

To discuss one example, Laila Kinnunen, a Finnish singer, became a national celebrity at the age of seventeen with her first recording in 1957 and a possession of reading audiences for the next few decades. Her stormy love

life was dashing reported in popular publications. Popular magazines reported her marrying a famous actor, divorcing him, marrying someone else, divorcing and then dating again. Later there were scandal-filled headlines about her having financial troubles, being drunk on the stage and cancelling shows because of her drunkenness. Dragged down by alcoholism, she finally died in 2000 at the age of 61 of sickness caused by alcohol abuse.

In discussing the cultural specificity of women's alcoholism, one of the important aspects is how and by whom a woman is being labelled as alcoholic (Hytinen 1990, 55). Interestingly, the tragic turn of Laila Kinnunen's career can be seen dated at the very moment her alcohol problem was exposed publicly *by her ex-husband* in the women's magazine *Jaana* in July 1970, in an account of their marriage which had ended up in divorce.

Then [...] she started to drink. Not much, but every day. It might sound crazy that I am talking like this, enjoying myself sitting with friends a glass under my nose, but I don't like to drink every day, and I don't like that a woman smells of alcohol.

After this story Laila Kinnunen's celebrity persona was inseparably attached the aura of fallen angel, and in the following years the magazines kept her denying, confessing and figuring out the various reasons of her drinking. In 1974 she no longer denied the problem but begged for empathy in *Jaana* magazine:

[...] I Have to admit that I have made mistakes [...] the past years has been a difficult time for me. I am happy to be in my senses after everything I have been through. Alcohol is a good medicine for misery...I didn't know how to control it, and didn't always even want to. [...] I didn't care, as long as I didn't have to feel the pain the failure in my private life caused me.

I admit that I have done wrong and disappointed my audience. But that's because I am just a weak person and don't know how to separate my work and my private life [...] I beg earnestly that people understand and forgive me and help me to start fresh again, and not to condemn me. (*Jaana* 30. 4.1974.)

The story is framed with a picture of Laila Kinnunen standing alone in a shore in a cloudy, windy, day. The emotional effect is finished in the writer-narrator's discourse, where the tears rolling in her cheeks and the sad look in her eyes are touchingly accounted. It is obvious, that these kinds of highly emotional stories dealing with delicate private life issues provide a special kind of closeness, trust and confidence between the interviewer and the interviewee. In order to make the fallen stars to confess the journalist has to engender trust and show a willingness to defend the falling star. Typically this is carried through within women's magazine context, in the name of sisterhood.

As I have suggested elsewhere (Saarenmaa 2003), in the early 1970s the women's magazine *Jaana* specialised in offering space for fallen female stars to defend themselves and tell their version of the story. The magazine covered the miseries of celebrities and also of previously unknown women (although often with a rich and famous family background) suffering divorce, loneliness in marriage, or finding out that their husband was gay. Presumably this doesn't mean that women were, suddenly, *more miserable* than before, but rather that women's private life tragedies were seen newsworthy in the context of a women's magazine. Moreover, in the changing cultural climate it became possible for the first time to bring up these kinds of issues in public forums such as women's magazines.

Sociologist Riitta Jallinoja (1997) has stated that women's magazine interviews have made controversial cultural questions 'decent' by balancing the act of revealing and hiding within the collaboration of the interviewee and the journalist. In women's magazine interviews the embarrassing, shameful, previously unspoken, experiences can be brought up and discussed within a framework of respectability. According to Beverly Skeggs (1997), the idea of respectability has been precisely the way the contradictory norms of femininity have been negotiated in culture. I suggest that partially through women's magazine celebrity confessions, drinking came to be seen as an issue that could be openly discussed and dealt with, including amongst those who were not identifying themselves with the radical generation of the 1960s, and were not interested in politics or social movements. As a consequence, the popular public sphere diversified with female personalities no longer having to be so perky, happy and whiter than white. But, why were these kinds of stories written in the framework of popular "entertainment"? Wherein lay the pleasures of writing and reading about the miseries of celebrities suffering from alcoholism?

Tragedy – Going Under the Surface

As Richard Dyer (1986, 18) has stated, "Stars represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society. " From this perspective, the failures and downfalls of stars are as important as their success is.

The process of rising and falling work within the tension between ordinariness and exceptionality and this is how readers get involved with the stories of stars and celebrities in the first place. Profane failures, such as drinking problems, testify to the ordinariness of the star and give room for the reader's identification and empathy.

In a popular magazine context the bond between readers and fallen celebrity is often explicitly written in the text. The celebrity persona is told to be open about his/her misbehaviour in order to help people with similar problems. Articles will frequently mention how people have contacted the celebrity and given their support. John Thompson (1995, 208 ref. Jallinoja 1997, 74) has named this kind of relationship as an *intimacy of distance*. The reader can experience intimacy and closeness with a celebrity dealing with similar kind of life crises to their own such as marital or alcohol problems. Similar experiences bring the celebrity and the reader closer; show that they live in the same world. On the other hand, stories marked by deviancy can give the reader a perspective to consider their own situation and place it in the world. In both cases there is a feeling that private life experiences are familiar to everybody and belong to everybody. (Jallinoja 1997, 75–76.) It is quite easy to see the possible pleasures the celebrity tragedies have had for readers and what has motivated their reading. However, it is much more difficult to figure out the motivations of the writing journalists.

As has been the case in ever since the 1970s, the tragic stories condense the things that are seen the most despicable and unpleasant in both celebrity culture and women's magazines. Celebrity personalities begging for empathy after wrongdoing and greedy journalists taking advantage of people's misery are culturally considered as the lowest of the low. I am interested the more seldom asked question of the *motivation of the journalist*. What motivated journalists to start writing these kinds of stories? What motivated them to persuade female celebrities to talk about their private life problems in the women's magazine interviews?

As I discussed this question with a journalist who worked in *Jaana* from 1970 onwards and was responsible of most of the tragic stories about Laila Kinnunen, she considered herself working for more meaningful journalism. Being against the prissy and prudish women's magazine style of the 1960s, she insisted on women's magazine journalism dealing with true feelings and emotions. As a student member of a 60's social movement working for better living conditions for alcoholics and other outcasts, she was later devoted to writing about real life tragedies and human experiences. For her, the stories were not pathetic trash, but meaningful private life problematics.

She didn't mind that her stories and style of writing was despised by her colleagues and by the cultural elite during the 1970s. Moreover, she insisted that the tragic style was not a typical way of writing, but a style created by her in her stories and lately poorly imitated by others. She refused the idea of exploitation, and emphasized her intimate relationship with the celebrity personalities she wrote about. She considered herself as their trustee and advisor. Instead of taking the advantage of celebrities, and writing pointless trash, she saw her work important and meaningful.

Even though it is difficult to draw conclusions from only one account, it could at least be suggested, that the changes in the agenda of popular journalism such as discussed here in the turn towards tragedy are not just something that just 'happens', but are something that are constructed by thinking individuals with various aims and goals. Secondly, it could be suggested, that female celebrities with alcohol problems were brought into the public domain in a specific historical situation. Thirdly, it could be suggested that women's magazines marked by respectability have had a specific role in bringing problems such as women's alcoholism to the awareness of a wider audience, including those who were not interested in the socio-political debates or social movements. Finally, I suggest that within journalistic self-understanding there are moments of agency and subjectivity in the field of popular magazine journalism, even within the stories considered culturally as lowest of the low.

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