Self-Reflective Essay #1

The subject I wanted to explore was how Vaino Linna’s *Under the North Star* was able to represent Finnish nationality as seen by people from many different walks of life, as well as tie into the majority of works we have read by other Finnish writers.

In terms of my understanding of Finnish literature, *Under the North Star* made all of the other authors’ work come full circle. While I understood the other readings, they were never long enough for me to fully grasp the Finnish sentiments and develop relationships with the characters. They left me with a lot of questions regarding the lives of the Finns over the changing times. I was fascinated by Linna’s apparent understanding of all of the genres we had studied in class and his ability to subtly include many of them in his novel. I thoroughly enjoyed reading the novel, and it gave me the perfect opportunity to reflect back on all of the other readings in order to better understand them, and add even more dimension to this versatile, thorough novel.

The wide time span in Linna’s novel allowed him to weave a complex story with evolving characters. This is what gave me the idea to draw parallels between the comments and questions I had about our other class readings to scenes in *Under the North Star* which helped me better understand Finnish identity.

This course began with a reading of sections from *Kalevala*, which left me somewhat confused as to what was defining the Finnish identity. The more I looked at the *Kalevala*, however, the more I came to understand the true symbols behind the mysticism. In my initial response to *Kalevala*, I wrote “The themes that reoccur throughout *Kalevala* represent the aspects of life that the Finnish people hold sacred. The elements of nature, mysticism, family, and agriculture play large roles in society…It’s
more direct purpose was to show Finland’s different groups of people that they shared a common history; common ancestors who they can take pride in. These ancestors strove to protect their country, as well as bring its people luck through the creation of the Sampo” (10/3, my portfolio). I don’t think I fully understood this until I began to see connections between the hard work and repetition in *Kalevala* until I saw it reflected in *Under the North Star*. The repetition of work in the *Kalevala* served to show Finnish people how strife can benefit them and the greater good. Many elements, like the “Mist-daughter” and the “Air Daughter” serve as obstacles for Vainamoinen. For Ilmarinen, the Sampo must be forged out of nothing, and only with a lot of hard work and repetition did he “forge the Sampo with skill” (*Kalevala* 116). In *Under the North Star*, Jussi works hard at clearing the fields so his family will have a place to grow and blossom. His hard worked is talked about throughout the village for decades to come, and is of special consideration even in the parsonage. He has created something his ancestors will look back on with pride and defense, for his hard work is the epitome of the Finnish identity. “Thrusting the blade into the earth, he set his foot on its upper edge, and drove it down with his body’s weight. Half-audible words interspersed with grunts burst from his lips. “And so… here… it…. begins” *Under the North Star*, 7). Jussi’s relentless work, albeit without the mysticism, is reminiscent of *Kalevala’s* ability to give the Finnish people a basis to work off of in creating their self awareness and ideals.

Our next poem of major focus was Runeberg’s “Paavo of Saarijarvi”. At first glance, I felt that this poem was trying to set forth a Finnish ideal of hard work, family, and benevolence toward one’s neighbor. In my initial response, I wrote “He is patriotic in that he tries against all odds to keep his family fed and happy, which is his national duty”
(10/5, my portfolio). As we further discussed this poem in class, the religious undertones started to show. “He repeats “god-forsaken” several times in order to show the hopelessness of the situation, which also includes repeating the work formula, which was the process of digging the ditches and waiting over and over. The prayer of Paavo was also repeated to show how despite his seeming abandonment by God, he never gave up faith” (10/5, my portfolio). Paavo turned to religion for solace, even when times got hard, especially when the weather turned bad, he sought out God. “He loves his land, but it still gives him trouble. Nature is not flawless and can be a cruel master, but Paavo plays his role well, like a true Finn” (10/5, my portfolio). Even his wife seemed to give up hope: “Take your staff! For we are God-forsaken; Hard it is to beg, but worse to starve” (“Paavo of Saarijarvi, 250). For me, it seemed like Paavo was an odd case, a romanticized version of a Finnish ideal. As I read Under the North Star, I found that it Paavo was not indeed an overly romantic character, but rather a fixture in the beginnings of Finnish literature. Linna brought this character to an understandable level in his engaging novel. As Jussi battles the frosts that attack his fields, he keeps his faith in himself. Although not out rightly religious, he is respectful of God, and tolerant of his wife’s prayers and religious rites. It is because of the parsonage that raised him that he was able to have his land. “Well. Here we are, sleeping the first night in our new home. A prayer is in order right now.” And Alma prayed, voicelessly mouthing the words. While she did, Jussi was silent out of respect for the prayer, but he did not join in” (Under the North Star, 36). Jussi is Paavo brought to life in a way that any reader, of Finnish descent or not, can relate to and respect. He keeps up his Lutheran piousness even when the Vicar, the very embodiment of religion for Pentti’s Corners, takes back
some of his self-cultivated land. As Alma explains: “Yes. We must learn to be content with what God decides. Arguing about his intentions does no good…” (Under the North Star, 189). Even though he should feel “God-forsaken” as Paavo had, Jussi still does the best work he can do.

When it comes to nationalist writings, Linna’s characters involve many of the ideals presented in what we read in class. Snellman’s views on nationalism lay a lot in “the knowledge that can maintain and preserve them as a nation (Snellman, 48). “The more a person understands what they are capable of, through a series of mental trials and accomplishments, the more they know of their self worth. In order to fully understand a national identity, a group of people must have some embodiment of their intellectual progress to look to and inspire a sense of unification within them” (10/10, my portfolio). This idea is extremely reminiscent of the tailor, Halme, and his involvement with educating the people in Under the North Star. Halme played a role in the construction of the schoolhouse, the fire department, and the worker’s hall, he gave the people something to be proud of, and look to as their own doing. “But Halme vetoed any notion of a violent demonstration and presented his own program” (Under the North Star, 234), Halme was crucial in helping people understand their own potential for political organization. Svecoman’s views of nationality are presented in the opposite extreme in Linna’s novel. “Svecoman defines a nation as individuals who speak the same common tongue. On the other hand, he advocates a national movement for all people who inhabit Finland, but not at the cost of the oppression of Swedish speaking citizens” (10/10, my portfolio). In Linna’s novel, this idea is represented in the vicaress, Ellen Sapakari, who constantly vies for the furtherance of Finnish language. The opposite of Svecoman, the vicaress believes
that the Finnish people will be united through their language. She comes from a family that believes in these ideals, which was displayed through the words of the Vicar’s father-in-law: “You will become my son-in-law under the following conditions. You are to learn the Finnish language thoroughly. We won’t listen to that pig-German you gabble. Secondly, you will change your name, first and last, to Finnish” (*Under the North Star*, 86). Linna’s novel really helped me further understand the political ideals of the time.

*Sibelius*, the film we viewed, had many scenes that evoked the leadership that was often seen in *Under the North Star*. One scene that struck me the most was one that we discussed in class, wherein Sibelius’ music is put to a scene of revolution, as “Our Land” leads people into protest. Although his music is very powerful, the movie brings realism to him. “Sibelius as a realist in that he worked hard to live up to his “child prodigy” status, but still had an addictive personality and many vices, such as women, smoking, and drinking. He doesn’t have the “qualifications” of the ideal Finnish nationalist hero we have seen in other writings” (10/19, my portfolio). I was surprised at how well this realist hero concept was mirrored in Linna’s novel. Just how the composer in Sibelius said their was no point in his composing due to the genius of Sibelius, Halme and the out-of-town visitor, Salin have a lot of faith in the youth, which was shown through their interest in Janne Kivivuori. At the same time, Salin’s genius is compromised by his vices. Taking Janne aside under the pretenses of getting a book about law, Salin practically begs of the boy “I’d like a little drink. Couldn’t you get hold of a little bit somewhere?” (*Under the North Star*, 282) Linna brings in the national “human hero” to his novel.

In Kivi’s novel *Seven Brothers* he seeks to show the recklessness of youth. What really shined through to me, however, were the opportunities afforded to these boys who
were seemingly abandoned by their community. In my recollections, I was most stricken by Eero: “Eero, the youngest brother, is 18. He is the bratty wise guy, but also the quickest learner. He instigates fights by exposing others weaknesses. He often commits foolish acts without thinking. His intelligence, however, often puts him in the role of messenger to the outside world” (10/17, my portfolio). I felt he was a good model of a Finn, in that although not the ideal worker, and perhaps described as an “outlaw”, as our guest speaker Dr. Schaad put it, Eero was still quite enrapturing as a character. As I read *Under the North Star*, I was immediately drawn to Janne, because I saw in him the character that I was never able to see fully develop in Eero. “Janne was described as “the worst malingerer”, but also as “the sharpest student” (121). This reminded me a lot of Eero, the smart-mouthed youngest brother from Kivi’s “Seven Brothers”. Like Janne, Eero was the quickest learner, although he seemed the most nonchalant and trouble making. This fact about Janne signified to be that he would be important later in the story, and as the socialist movement and the Workers organization grew, this turned out to be true” (10/28, comment on course blog). It is as though Linna took cues from Kivi’s youthful *Seven Brothers*, deemed the first Finnish novel.

When we began studying realist literature, it became harder for me to identify with Finnish life. Romanticism is somewhat universal, and can be understood by many cultures, but realist literature is a bit more narrow-minded. Canth’s “The Nursemaid” made me very sympathetic to Emmi’s struggles in her life, but I could not empathize with her extreme routine and physical ailments (10/19, my portfolio). Aho’s “The Watch” was a bit more telling of the Finnish lifestyle. “Aho used realism to show the turn to a consumer-esque society, but used a peculiar humor to do so. He makes fun of Martii
because it deflates his uppity attitude and attacks his vanity,” (10/19, my portfolio). These ideals became even clearer to me as I read Linna’s novel. Although not mocking Akseli, Linna shows some relation to Martii in his writings. “Akseli has a great deal of rage in him towards people, which could stem for his love for his father, but also his shame of Jussi’s penny-pinching ways. To distinguish himself from his father, he lives in the moment and sometimes spends money on finery that Jussi deems ridiculous,” (10/31, my portfolio). After spending quite a bit of money on a new suit, vanity gets the best of Akseli: “He opened the coat buttons and let the tails swing comfortably on his haunches. The spruce wilderness was the only witness to the way in which poverty can enrich life. A certain Finnish tenant boy had got a new suit” (Under the North Star, 201). Realism comes to life as it seems the consumer culture had reached even down into Linna’s small Pentti’s corners, to its most humble family.

Our readings in neo-romanticism were probably some of the hardest to fully get a grasp on. They spoke of leadership different from that which we put value into as members of the United States. Manninen’s “Jean Sibelius” uses somewhat contemporary devices. “Manninen praises Sibelius by likening him to a lord or general, in that he commands with authority. He brings in a historical context with comparisons to the Vikings. Manninen also makes him sound God-like, in that he “raises vaults of skies,” displaying some sort of heavenly transcendence,” (10/24, my portfolio). Leino’s poem “Vainamoinen’s Song” is more based on establishing a national vocabulary through symbolism, as we discussed in class. This idea was a bit harder to understand, but certain measures from Under the North Star made it clearer. “This poem stressed how Finland is a peaceful country whose cultural expression is more important than its military strength.
Leino seems to believe that power comes from moving people’s hearts, which unifies Finns, and inspires non-Finns, which was important during this period of Russification,” (10-24, my portfolio). In Linna’s novel the Finn’s take hope in the written word, and are appalled when the Czar goes against his vow. They hold talks and pass petitions to try to get their points across. “‘We’ll put the document in front of the Czar and tell him to sign or he’s heard his last cock crow’” (Under the North Star, 212).

Although there were periods of Finnish writing that were hard to understand and relate to, Linna’s novel Under the North Star helped tie things together by focusing in on a small community full of dynamic characters. Many levels of political reform, as well as many Finnish nationalistic ideals are presented through the goings-on in Pentti’s Corners. I am extremely glad we read this novel in its entirety, because it really made Finnish literature coherent for me. I did not expect to become as enthralled with this book as I did, but I feel it really benefited my progress in understanding this class and all it has to offer.