



Introduction

Between Health and Illness. Literary conceptualizations of physical and mental suffering in contemporary Nordic literature

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Abstract

The present text serves as an introduction to the special issue of *Folia Scandinavica Posnaniensia*, “Between Health and Illness,” which is devoted to contemporary discourse on health and illness in Nordic literatures. Even though Scandinavian countries rank highest in happiness and well-being, illness as a literary motif maintains constant popularity and interest among both writers and scholars. The editors provide brief presentations of each contribution, some of which originate from conference speeches held in December 2022 in Poznań.

Keywords: illness, health, Nordic literatures



INTRODUCTION

The present issue has emerged in response to the increased interest in illness as a literary motif in the Nordic context, which can be noticed among writers of fiction, as well as scholars and critics of Nordic literature. From a sociological point of view, illness has long been perceived as a state of detachment from the mainstream of everyday life. And yet, in spite of its alienating effects, the experience of being ill is, to varying extents, one of the most commonly shared realities of existence. Hence, as noted in cultural studies, every era in human history can be seen as challenged and shaped by a distinctive malady, fused into the framework of its socio-cultural landscape. This malady imaginarium of the Western world has been preserved by a number of renowned Nordic authors rendering the Middle Ages as struck by the deadly plague (J.P. Jacobsen), Romanticism as the age of melancholy (S. Kierkegaard), the Modern Breakthrough as struggling against tuberculosis (J.P. Jacobsen, P.-H. Haugen) and syphilis (H. Ibsen, H. Jæger), as well as the 1980s as the height of the AIDS crisis (E. Brodin, J. Gardell).

Following this route, one could expect the focal point of contemporary illness narratives to be cancer, as it still poses a highly formidable threat to humankind. As far as the Nordic context is concerned, this area of interest proves, however, to be much more multifaceted, spanning works devoted to health issues regarded as universal or symptomatic for the present era, as well as shedding new light on the challenges of the past. The ambition of the present volume is thus to grasp the internal diversity of contemporary Nordic illness narratives by bringing together a variety of perspectives representing different strands of research into this growing field of literature in Scandinavian countries.

The immediate starting point of the present volume has been the conference *Mellem sundhed og sygdom. Litterære konceptualiseringer af fysisk og psykisk lidelse i Nordens samtidslitteratur* (Between health and illness. Literary conceptualizations of physical and mental suffering in contemporary Nordic literature) held in December 2022 at the Department of Scandinavian Studies at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. The speeches given by various scholars who attended the event, both from Scandinavia and from Poland, as well as the fruitful discussions that followed, served as an incentive to broaden the perspective on Nordic literature on illness in the form of a special issue of *Folia Scandinavica Posnaniensia*. Hence, some of the papers in the present volume are authored by the conference participants, while others are written by researchers who did not attend the event but specialize in the relevant field as well. As a result, we have succeeded in gathering texts from eight scholars representing five academic centres of Scandinavian Studies, including Berkeley, Gothenburg, Stockholm, Cracow, Trondheim, and Poznań.

The primary focus of the contributions is contemporary Nordic literature, but the present volume also contains new findings on older works of fiction, such as J.P. Jacobsen's *Pesten i Bergamo* (1881, *The Plague in Bergamo*) or August Strindberg's *Inferno* (1896–97). Employing a variety of approaches and contexts, such as Bakhtin, Kierkegaard, Lacan, Kristeva, disability studies, adaptation studies, phenomenology, and, finally, the theory of value, the authors both uncover new potentials of classic Scandinavian works on illness (or malady) and investigate newer ones.

The volume opens with **Joshua Lee's** (University of California, Berkeley) examination of J.P. Jacobsen's *Pesten i Bergamo*. In his reading of Jacobsen's short story, Lee applies the Bakhtinian concept of the *carnavalesque* to describe the inversion of the medieval societal structure. Here, the medieval plague serves as a pretext for expressing universal truths about the nature of social unrest and hopelessness in the face of imminent danger.

Unlike her American colleague, **Sidsel Boysen Dall** (Norwegian University of Science and Technology) takes a closer look at two new pieces of literature from Norway and Denmark, Hanne Ørstavik's novel *Ti Amo* (2020, *I Love You*) and Amalie Smith's collection of poems *I CIVIL* (2012, *In Civil*). Her methodology encompasses Julia Kristeva's term *abjection* and the Lacanian idea of *feminine jouissance*; moreover, she argues for a broader view of the genre of "curography" developed and described by Linda Nesby. The scholar from Trondheim focuses solely on cancer narratives told from the perspective of a caregiver to a terminally ill person – a trend in Scandinavian literature and scholarship that enjoys growing popularity.

While Boysen Dall employs psychoanalytical tools in her exploration of cancer narratives, **Krzysztof Bak** (Stockholm University, Jagiellonian University) delves into the world of Birgitta Trotzig's novel *Dykungens dotter* (1985, *The Marsh King's Daughter*) to introduce the concept of the theology of pathology. Bak's reading of Trotzig's oeuvre, including *Dykungens dotter*, is primarily based on Christian theology and is convincingly applied to the Swedish author's explorations of illness as a theological issue.

Suffering is also pivotal in **Sonia Ławniczak's** (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań) article, which investigates a novel published a year before Trotzig's, namely *Bränt barn söker sig till elden: roman* (1984, *Burnt Child Seeks Fire: A Novel*) by Cordelia Edvardson. Edvardson's autofictional work addresses the trauma of a Holocaust survivor and focuses on the mental suffering of the protagonist who attempts to overcome the trauma through writing.

Another major issue addressed in contemporary illness narratives is dismantling the conceptualization of illness as a failure or immanent justice. This culturally ingrained stigma, which can be traced back to antiquity, finds reflection in several canonical works of Scandinavian literature. As illustrated in the two articles by **Aldona Zańko** and **Magdalena Źmuda-Trzebiatowska**, another two scholars from Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, it can, however, be sought to be dissolved by means of adaptation. The first of the two texts examines two contemporary reworkings of Hans Christian Andersen's classic fairy tale *The Little Mermaid*, both of which engage with redefining the view of disability expressed in the original. While drawing upon disability studies, the author explores the transition towards framing disability in biomedical rather than metaphysical terms, as reflected through the analysis of the respective versions of the source tale. Źmuda-Trzebiatowska, in turn, discusses the outcomes of Göranson's adaptation of Strindberg's autobiographical novel into graphic form, published in 2010, and demonstrates how the adapted version manages to retrieve and demystify the latent contents of the original work, which can be read as an account of Strindberg's own mental struggles.

The challenge of defining and approaching mental health also lies at the core of **Cecilia Pettersson's** (University of Gothenburg) discussion of the novel *Hölje* (2021), written by the Swedish-Iranian author Pooneh Rohi, in which the author explores the heroine's lived experience of the postpartum period. The paper by the researcher from Gothenburg disputes the established biomedical framework, within which the book has been read as an account of postpartum depression, exposing the tendency to overdiagnose socially challenging emotional responses as mental disorders. In that respect, Cecilia Pettersson touches upon yet another fundamental question concerning contemporary Nordic illness narratives, which is their critical reception within the domestic context.

This complex area of clashing attitudes has been explored further by **Christian Lenemark** (University of Gothenburg). In his paper, the author investigates a range of critical reviews addressing two recent, highly debated Swedish illness narratives, offering insight into life with respectively breast cancer (Kristina Sandberg, *En ensam plats* [A Lonely Place], 2021)

and anorexia (Sara Meidell, *Ut ur min Kropp* [Where is My Body], 2022). In its endeavour to identify the mechanisms underlying the evaluation of contemporary Nordic literary portrayals of illness, this final contribution prompts further research into the essential puzzle underlying the creation of the present volume, namely what makes illness narratives so highly demanded in a part of the world that continues to rank highest in happiness and well-being.

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