
Ellen Key in the Swedish Cultural Canon

PER-INGE PLANEFORS

Introduction

Questions are raised as to whether Ellen Key (1849-1926) and her multifaceted intellectual legacy have relevance over time, is valuable in the present, and will also exert influence in the future. The opposite is also possible, that thoughts and ideas become sedimented and lie ever deeper in what becomes petrified, and that ideas actually go out of date. Associate professor in Literature Göran Hägg (1947 – 2015), (1996, p. 397), asserts this latter view almost brutally in *The History of Swedish Literature*: “Nowadays [Key] lives only through a slogan in one of her book titles, *The Century of the Child* 1900. With prophetic airs reminiscent of Heidenstam, she celebrated women's power. But her philosophical essays have, to our knowledge, not even attracted latter-day feminists to read them. The grotesque prose is surely the explanation.”¹

A contrasting example of Key's significance, and completely contemporary, almost topical, is the fact that *The Century of the Child* is now listed in *A Cultural Canon for Sweden* (2024). This rather confirms the image of Ellen Key given by professor of literature Claudia Linden in the *Swedish Women's Biographical Dictionary* (2017), where she is described as: “a leading intellectual and significant opinion-former both nationally and internationally around the turn of the century 1900. Her thoughts on love, marriage, sexuality, child-rearing, pedagogy, and aesthetics have shaped generations.”²

During the autumn of 2025, in the section for learning and non-fiction, *The Century of the Child* was listed as one of 100 works/phenomena in Sweden's cultural canon. Thus, the work is regarded as a particularly important part of the cultural heritage.³ Worth noting is that this cultural canon is a Swedish state public inquiry (SOU 2025:92). Broad opportunities for comments and responses have also been provided until January 7, 2026. Below we will reflect on the assignment and how it has been presented. Finally, the work that awaits is problematized with some

¹ My translation. In Swedish: ”Numera lever [Key] bara genom ett slagord i en av sina boktitlar, *Barnets århundrade* 1900. Med profetlater påminnande om Heidenstams hyllade hon kvinnokraften. Men hennes filosofiska essäer har veterligen inte ens lockat sentida feminister till läsning. Den groteska prosan är säkert förklaringen.”

² My translation. In Swedish: ”en ledande intellektuell och betydelsefull opinionsbildare både nationellt och internationellt kring sekelskiftet 1900. Hennes tankar om kärlek, äktenskap, sexualitet, barnuppfostran, pedagogik och estetik har format generationer.”

³ Eight right wing politicians, Carl Dahlin among others, from Kalmar County, south east Sweden, were pleased that four authors from the county were listed, and drew the conclusion in a debate article, published September 5, 2025 in the regional newspaper *Barometern*, that Kalmar County is located “in the middle of Swedish cultural history.” Erik Johan Stagnelius, Ellen Key, Astrid Lindgren, and Carl Boberg, all four cultural figures had their roots in the county and are now listed in the canon. This made the elected politicians proud and they wrote, in the same article about children and their reading, that when it takes place “they are connected to something greater than their home region, while at the same time they feel that their region is part of Sweden's soul.”

glimpses from the comments and responses, from mayor institutions and organizations in Sweden.

The Century of the Child

The motivation for the selection of *The Century of the Child* from those who worked on the cultural canon reads (SOU 2025:92, p. 179):

The Century of the Child (Ellen Key, 1900). This work had great significance for its time and also for posterity. About the work: Book by Ellen Key (1849–1926) on the theme of children. Motivation: Our most famous female intellectual who irritated her contemporaries and posterity but was also active during the turn of the century that discovered children (Topelius, Carl Larsson, Selma Lagerlöf, among others). For the Swedish 1890s which Ellen Key represented, beauty and imagination were central things. She preached a gospel of art. For her, love was more important than marriage, children more important than books. The prophetess built a monument to herself through her Strand (as did others of her contemporaries Selma Lagerlöf, Verner von Heidenstam, Carl and Karin Larsson, Anders and Emma Zorn, among others). Ellen Key was translated primarily into German and became a European celebrity.⁴

The two proposers, anonymized and quoted on the website (www.kulturkanon.se), argues in the following way: *The Century of the Child* is "A groundbreaking and internationally well-known, widely distributed and cherished work that places individual children with all budding competencies at the center" and:

Ellen Key's *The Century of the Child* (1900) is one of the most influential works in Swedish intellectual history. The book advocates children's right to freedom, creativity, and respect, and has influenced both pedagogy and child-rearing for over a century. Key's vision of a more humanistic and forward-looking view of the child has guided Swedish school policy and children's rights work. She was also a feminist pioneer who united the idea of women's liberation with children's rights. Her ideas live on in topics from preschool pedagogy to legislation on children's rights.⁵

What is a Cultural Canon?

⁴ My translation. In Swedish: "Barnets århundrade (Ellen Key, 1900). Detta verk hade stor betydelse för samtiden och även för eftervärlden. Om verket: Bok av Ellen Key (1849–1926) om temat barn. Motivering: Vår mest berömda kvinnliga intellektuella som retat samtid och eftervärld men också var verksam under det sekelskifte som upptäckte barnen (Topelius, Carl Larsson Selma Lagerlöf m.fl.). För det svenska 1890-tal som Ellen Key var en representant för var skönheten och fantasin centrala ting. Hon predikade ett konstens evangelium. För henne var kärleken viktigare än äktenskapet, barnen viktigare än böckerna. Profetissan byggde ett monument över sig själv genom sitt Strand (Liksom andra av hennes samtida Selma Lagerlöf, Verner von Heidenstam, Carl och Karin Larsson, Anders och Emma Zorn m.fl. gjorde något liknande). Ellen Key översattes framför allt till tyska och blev en europeisk berömdhet."

⁵ My translation. In Swedish: "Ett banbrytande och internationellt välkänt, vida spritt och omhuldat verk som sätter individuella barn med alla spirande kompetenser i centrum." And "Ellen Keys Barnets århundrade (1900) är ett av de mest inflytelserika verken i svensk idéhistoria. Boken förespråkar barns rätt till frihet, kreativitet och respekt, och har påverkat både pedagogik och barnuppfostran i över ett sekel. Keys vision om en mer humanistisk och framtidsinriktad syn på barnet blev vägledande för svensk skolpolitik och barnrättsarbete. Hon var också en feministisk pionjär som förenade tanken om kvinnors frigörelse med barns rättigheter. Hennes idéer lever vidare i allt från förskolepedagogik till lagstiftning om barns rättigheter." A total of 9,558 suggestions were sent in, of these 1,915 are presented on the website.

A Cultural Canon concerns identity and our common conception of who we are together. Canon means approximately, with three biblical references, "measuring rod" (Ezekiel) / "balance beam" (Isaiah) / "guideline, ruler" / "rule of faith" (Paul) and alludes to the books authorized by the church that are included in the Bibles. Goethe's (1749-1832) *Weltliteratur* attempts to transcend the boundaries of time and nations. Ellen Key pointed to humanity's treasures, the eight politicians from Kalmar County in the foot-note above emphasized "something greater." A canon can even become something negative for the nation, as Ellen Key claimed about the *Läsebok för folkskolan* [Readingbook for the Folk school] (1868), when she described it as a "national misfortune." Art Historian Magdalena Gram (2008, p. 116) has in her book *Ellen Key om böcker och läsning* [*Ellen Key on Books and Reading*] pointed to things that Ellen Key focused on: military and patriotic material.⁶ Ellen Key oscillates between "genuinely Nordic content" and widens the perspective all the way up to "humanity's... treasures." An example (according to SOU 2025:92, p. 230) of an influential work following this is Selma Lagerlöf's *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa* (1906) [*The Wonderful Journey of Nils Holgersson*].

The ambitions with a canon can be manifold: to establish a foundation in the social structure, to provide conditions for meaningful educational conversations, and from political perspectives with power ambitions and responsibility to formulate conceptions top-down. A kind of "democratic nationalism" as formulated by the state's commissioner for the cultural canon, professor Lars Trägårdh. When he was asked to clarify this in an interview (*Forskning och framsteg*, 2024: no.7), he highlighted three perspectives: modernism, internationalism, and multiculturalism. A debate on the normative Western canon has been ongoing since the work by literary critic Harold Bloom (1994). The term Western has been criticized in the sense of pretending to be universal (in his book Bloom focuses on 26 authors with Shakespeare at the center). Likewise, important complementary contributions have been made from women's studies, not least with archives, dictionaries, and the *Kvinnsam* library in Gothenburg, showing a canon that widens and opens up. The *Norrland Encyclopedia* can be seen as a regional counterweight; much of what was made available had revolved around Sweden's three big cities Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Lund/Malmö. This encyclopedia serves as a form of canon in, for, and about the region. Thus, several normative lists exist side by side.

If we examine the government's nationalist supporting party, the Swedish Democrats, and their eagerness for a cultural canon, we rather see a conflation of culture, nation, and people (Håkansson, 2025, p. 86). It then becomes almost ironic that the chosen work by Ellen Key, in defense of Swedish cultural heritage, hardly was received with open arms when it was published in Swedish in 1900, while it at the same time had such a clear position abroad. Her own reading lists in *Barnets århundrade* (1900, p. 168-179) is made up by almost exclusively international names: Malthus, Martineau, Galton, Weismann, Romanes, Darwin, Spencer, Wallace, Greg, Nietzsche, Maudsley, groups of English, French, and German authors, as well as Daniel Defoe

⁶ An example of Ellen Key's criticism, quoted in Gram: "the morally sentimental, the military-patriotic and - first and last - the pedagogically correct," nor do the illustrations find favor "a quiet dullness." (my translation)

and Rudyard Kipling, among others. Furthermore, Key argues (Key, 1900, p. 77) that the cultural development has progressed much further in many other countries, in contrast to Sweden: "In terms of labour legislation, freedom of assembly, thought and belief, as well as in terms of the development of the legal system, we Swedes are thus very backward."⁷

Even though it was a right-wing government that gave the assignment for a cultural canon, the project nonetheless breathes of welfare state ideology, engineering, and Social Democratic steering and management. Perhaps there is also an echo of, as professor of literature Anders Cullhed (2017, p. 18) described it, "the great patriotic literary histories, where concepts like national characters or folk temperaments could play a role."⁸ A question that arises is: will this be able to seep downward, outward, so to speak? Formation of a cultural preference is both controversial and conflict-filled and moves over mined ground. Strong feelings and reactions can be awakened.

There are examples in neighboring countries to reflect on, which have in common that they incorporate the contemporary in a completely different, more open way, unlike the canon in Sweden, which had as its outer limit the year 1975 (which meant, for example, that Sweden's largest music export ABBA was not included). Closest at hand is the work on a canon in Denmark (discussed by for example Ebbeson, 2018).⁹ Culture Minister Brian Mikkelsen initiated a canon project across seven fields: architecture, design, visual arts, theater, literature, film, and music. In 2006, 108 works were presented. Almost immediately, an additional 12 works, including the LEGO plastic building block, was added in a children's culture list. The reading lists came to be criticized and supplemented, among other things through a public vote on Danish Radio. Danish teachers wanted a say. Plans were made, which has been highlighted by Ebbeson (2018) to put the canon project on ice altogether, but instead complements were made, trying to compensate for the complications relating to over-national treaties and cooperation between other countries, especially the Nordic ones. But the canon as it was authorized remained fixed. The questions concerned were for example: Where does the border between Swedish and Danish culture run, or between Norwegian and Danish, considering the joint historical and cultural heritage? The Danish canon list dared to go closer to the contemporary, compared to the Swedish one, but was also much more criticized.¹⁰

Cultural Canon for Sweden

⁷ My translation. In Swedish: "I fråga om arbetarlagstiftningen, församlings-, tanke- och trosfriheten, liksom i fråga om rättsväsendets utveckling äro vi svenska sålunda mycket efterblivna." The international connection is vital, according to Key for inspiration and as a base for experience, as concluded in chapter 8 in *Barnets århundrade* (1900).

⁸ My translation. Cullhed's instructive reasoning that problematizes and clarifies provides a good overview; the canon concept's winding path and manifold use is described, but he also establishes "A canon is by its very nature unequal, because otherwise it would not be a canon in the sense of a yardstick, prescription, or guideline," *ibid* p. 20.

⁹ Counterparts exist in Norway. Particularly noteworthy is the daily newspaper *Morgenbladet* with *A Canon After Munch*. It concerns 12 works of art that had contemporary impact during the period 1945-2005. An expert group was responsible for the selection. Several other canons existed for different cultural expressions.

¹⁰ Filmmaker Lars von Trier was one of those who protested. He had been ranked into the canon compilation through his film work *The Idiots* (1998). His protest was expressed in a film where he cut up the Danish flag, removed the white cross, sewed together the four remaining red fields into a solid red, totalitarian signal.

The background to the cultural canon in Sweden was an initiative taken in 2006 by parliamentarian and minister in the Church of Sweden, Cecilia Wikström (b. 1965), from the Liberals. Reference was made to the Danish work and at the same time consideration was given to what roles the Swedish Academy (Svenska Akademien) and the National Agency for Education (Skolverket) might take on for this work. Both these institutions could be considered to have normative functions where recommended reading lists are not uncommon. In 2022 the question was raised again and both the right-wing parties, the Swedish Democrats and the Christian Democrats, were positive while the Conservatives (Moderaterna) were hesitant. In the Tidö Agreement (presented Oct 14, 2022, and which clarifies how the right wing minority government with support from the Swedish Democrats and their 9 officials in the government office should be able to develop government work and drive it forward) expert groups and reading lists in different school grade levels are mentioned.¹¹ Art historian Karin Sidén (b. 1961), director of Waldemarsudde, and professor of economic history Daniel Waldenström (b. 1974) were engaged as coordinators for the expert groups for art forms and society respectively. Music professor Mattias Lundberg (b. 1983), well-known for his struggle for popular education, has been involved as an expert. He stepped forward in the debate (*Expressen* September 20, 2025) and argued that the project aimed to pan out "reference points in tradition and culture."

Unusual Presentation and Missteps

A peculiar press conference was held (SVT, September 2, 2025). Culture Minister Parisa Liljestrand, the commissioner, and the two expert groups' coordinators, Karin Sidén and Daniel Waldenström, a total of four people were in charge. This was followed by a moment for questions. Everything was broadcast on national TV directly from Gustavianum in Uppsala, a location mentioned in the canon. But the presentation contained a series of errors and mistakes, which gave an impression of carelessness and nonchalance.¹² Some of the motivations, including the Ellen Key reference, left the impression that they came about in haste, in some cases almost without thought (see above the derogatory word "prophetess.") Other demands of corrections of several incorrect statements in the canon were made, for example from the Swedish Academy; the answer given was that this would not happen now. All the errors could of course be seen as accidental work failures, but at the same time the more comprehensive question of accuracy, quality, and relevance was raised.¹³

¹¹ Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson repeatedly says that "we are a government that gets things done." The agreement took place at Tidö Castle (hence the name) and was presented on October 14, 2022. One of the points in the agreement is that a cultural canon should be developed. A checkpoint became the party leader debate that was broadcast on national TV on January 14 from 6-9:10 PM, where we could note that the cultural canon was not mentioned with a single word.

¹² For example, the image covering the inquiry's front page turned out to be manipulated (mirrored), the company logo SKF (Svenska kullagerfabriken) was missing (retouched), and it was also claimed that the man who was photographed was the inventor of the "kullager", Sven Wingquist. In reality, the depicted man was the worker Konrad Österström.

¹³ Disrespectful and old-fashioned dated treatment was unfortunately also part of the picture. When a press conference becomes so extensive, with several people involved and drawn out, and is broadcast live on TV, there is of course a risk that one or another slip occurs, perhaps as a sign of fatigue. One exchange should be preserved as a memento to ponder. Lars Trägårdh was asked whether he had been influenced on a more personal level by the work. He ponders a bit, fixes his gaze on the woman (journalist in a work situation, TV broadcast ongoing) who asked the question and says: "That's something you and I could talk further about over a glass of wine."

The canon project in Sweden under the leadership of professor Lars Trägårdh was debated when the assignment was given, during the work process, at the presentation and afterwards, and continues to be commented on. The comment period was open until January 7, 2026, and 96 answers have been received (out of 140 asked) and published on the website. One point that has been discussed particularly is the chronological delimitation. Works and phenomena should, according to those who worked on the canon, lie at least 50 years back in time. Several critics have emphasized that the present therefor is lacking, that the work has acquired a more historical character, and that what constitutes knowledge about Sweden today (since the canon is to be used among other things as an introduction to Sweden for newly arrived immigrants) is simply not included. In this way, the work appears outdated and says little about either Sweden or Swedes today.

Questions that recur in the debate concern usability and costs. Not least costs can be reflected upon. The inquiry has proposed several new projects that partly appear to lie outside the assignment, or at least have stretched it. A printed publication, establishment and maintenance of a website, a permanent exhibition at the Nordiska museet are mentioned as possible continuations, as well as the establishment of a special foundation with funds from the General Heritage Fund. Ongoing revisions of the canon every ten years is proposed. Will ABBA perhaps be included in 2035?

Some of the Comment Letters and Responses to the Cultural Canon

The critical voices have been manifolded. Above all against the canon embellishing the supposedly "Swedish" into a kind of nostalgic idyllic state that has little to do with the present (or with reality), that both Swedishness and culture are in constant change and thus cannot be fixed within a canon, and of course that a multitude of relevant expressions of culture which influence us do not come from Sweden at all. Folkbildningsrådets [The Swedish National Council of Adult Education's] comment response was published December 16, 2025 (www.kulturkanon.se), and presents a fundamental choice, echoing the thoughts of Ellen Key: "The idea of a state-mediated and instructive view of what is to be seen as Swedish culture is difficult to reconcile with popular education's pedagogy, where reflection and shared learning, rather than instruction, are central." This comment letters and responses describes with desirable clarity the critical choice: reflections versus top-down instruction.

Karlstad University submitted the following highly critical comment response on December 22: "Karlstad University believes that the proposals constitute an attempt at political control of culture and education contrary to adopted cultural policy and at the expense of professional autonomy. The proposals further risk a disqualification of already existing culture and cultural heritage sectors and memory and education institutions in the form of museums and universities, among others." The cultural policy already adopted is abandoned with the proposal and what is proposed comes into conflict with the professions' independence and autonomy. The university also points to challenges with historiography: "The canon proposals with connection to society

and history also have a markedly edifying character; in the long run, this can mean a sanitized embellishment of society's history."

Uppsala University, December 16, goes both further and deeper in its criticism with its statement, a total of 7 pages: "It is remarkable that the investigators' argumentation for introducing a cultural canon in modern times is based on directly incorrect assumptions about the school's history."

Finally, the Church of Sweden, in its reply from December 8, points out, in the context of the school system and civic orientation for new arrivals of immigrants: "that there is critical reasoning about how well the cultural canon can be considered to represent Sweden's history and culture, as for example not all of Sweden's national minorities have been included" and the church also proposes an additional assignment to consider "how the cultural canon could be used in processing painful parts of Sweden's history, as in relation to Sweden's national minorities." This concerns especially the exploitation of the first nation of Samic people and culture in Sweden, of which the former state Church has worked for pardoning and reconciliation.¹⁴

Challenges, Today and Tomorrow, and Ellen Key's Intellectual Legacy

Who can prophesy about the future? Can tomorrow's questions find answers in the older intellectual legacy? Probably, it is still mostly so. Human beings remain human and "spiritually growing" (Trägårdh, 2006, p. 163), and Key reminds us of the necessity of the spiritual growth in the chapter "Religious Education" in the English translation of *Barnets århundrade* (1909, p. 306): "The inclination of the child to deep religious feeling, sound faith, and ardent zeal for holiness will be strengthened by an ability to draw the standards of life as freely from the Bible as from the world's literature."

I thereby want to point out that our time's challenges; freedom and peace with justice and cooperation, as well as spirituality, education, and culture hunger for nourishment and strength. In that perspective, the choice of *Barnets århundrade* for a cultural canon is commendable, not least with respect for individuals and openness to children's and young people's curiosity. We can draw inspiration from Ellen Key and her intellectual legacy. And perhaps in contrast to a narrow cultural canon's top-down approach, be inspired to a more exciting broad, changeable grassroots movement with transformative vitality, i.e. 'something greater'.

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The presentation of a Swedish Cultural Canon at Gustavianum, Uppsala, broadcasted in state television, SVT on Sept 2, 2025. From the left: Daniel Waldenström, Karin Sidén, Lars Trädgårdh, Parisa Liljestrand.
Photo: Lisa Mattison.