

Consider the Alternatives

Teaching liberal feminism through Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

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Summary: This essay focuses on the implementation of fundamental values mentioned in the Swedish curricula in the English language classroom with the help of literature. More specifically, the essay focuses on the ideas of everyone's equal value and right to the same opportunities, considered here to be a liberal feminist value, and how this may be discussed with the help of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, an arguably liberal feminist novel. The novel's focus on oppression in many forms – based on gender, economic class and profession, for instance – makes it a suitable tool in helping students understand and expose oppressing structures both within the novel and in society. The aim of this essay is to provide concrete examples of these structures within *The Handmaid's Tale*, and to argue the case for such themes to be discussed in the Swedish school system.

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Introduction

In the Swedish curriculum for the non-compulsory school system, *Lpf 94*, democracy is said to “form the basis of [the] school system” (3). The school has, according to the curriculum, the “task of imparting, instilling and forming in pupils those values on which [the Swedish] society is based” (ibid). Among these values mentioned are the inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, and equality between men and women. It can be assumed, then, that the task of each teacher working within the Swedish school system is to promote and teach these values, and to integrate them in every school subject offered in Sweden.

As a future teacher of English at upper secondary level in Sweden, I have found the task of teaching these democratic values and integrating them in all classroom activities challenging. The purpose of this essay is therefore to take one of these aforementioned values, and present ideas for teaching it within the frame of the subject of English as a foreign language. More specifically, this essay will focus on equality between men and women, and the political implications of this in the classroom. I have chosen to describe this idea of gender equality as feminism, and the essay will describe and suggest ideas for how to teach feminism – specifically liberal feminism – with the help of a literary text. The text chosen for study is Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which focuses on the positions of men and women in a dystopian society. My claim is that by presenting the ideas of liberal feminism against the backdrop of the novel, both the text itself and the ideas of gender equality will be viewed in a new light by pupils. In addition, it is my belief that presenting the novel and these fundamental values of the Swedish school will lead to a greater reading experience for the pupils.

The first chapter of this essay gives a brief summary of liberal feminism and argues the case for teaching it at upper secondary level in Sweden, as well as considering arguments for teaching literature at this level. It also discusses school as a political arena. In chapter two, practical ideas for presenting liberal feminism in the classroom are discussed. The themes presented in *The Handmaid's Tale* are also described, as well as the problems that may arise with the classification of the novel as a liberal feminist work. Chapter three presents the practical implications of teaching this text and exercises for the classroom are presented. Finally, chapter four contains the analysis and conclusion of the project.

1. Teaching literature and liberal feminism in a political classroom

In this chapter, I will discuss the concepts of teaching literature in the language classroom, and teaching through liberal feminist discourse. I will do this by first explaining the theoretical background of liberal feminism and its definition(s), then the arguments for teaching literature. Finally, I will discuss the appropriateness and suitability of teaching feminism in Swedish classrooms, where I will touch upon the ideas of school as a political or apolitical arena.

1.1 Liberal feminism

Feminism, like all political theories and movements, can be defined in a number of ways, and has, throughout history, allowed for the development of a large quantity of schools of thought. These schools of thought share one fundamental idea or value, according to *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism*, which defines feminists as people who believe “that women are less valued than men in societies that categorise men and women into differing cultural or economic spheres”. *Liberal feminists*, according to the same dictionary – though it should be noted that this expression too does not have one “true” definition and that those who define themselves as such may give the phrase a different meaning than I do in this essay – are people who, “broadly speaking [...] work towards an egalitarian society, which would uphold the right of each individual to fulfil their potential”. Furthermore, feminism as a political ideology does not exist independently of other ideologies or movements, and must therefore be understood as part of a larger struggle for independence and liberation. Henry A. Giroux quotes bell hooks [sic] in describing this larger effort: “We must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group oppression, that there is no hope that this can be eradicated while these systems remain intact”

(26). Feminism – and liberal feminism in particular – as an ideology therefore plays a part in the movement towards a society where the equal value of everyone is a reality, and where each and every individual has the ability to govern their own life, independent of their gender, class, ethnicity or age.

It is my belief that introducing liberal feminism in the classroom is only a natural part of the effort to create a school environment where every pupil learns the equal value of all people and the value of individual freedom and integrity, as mentioned in the curricula for the non-compulsory school system. Equality between men and women, and discussing the position of men and women, is therefore a part of teaching these values. Liberal feminism is simply the tool which seems to me to be the most suitable to use in the classroom in the effort to instil these fundamental values in each and every pupil. It does not imply the exclusion of men from classroom discussions, but rather the *inclusion* of women, and within that framework also allows for the discussion of positions of power and submission, which are not limited to one constellation. I would argue that discussions based on a liberal feminist agenda do not necessarily exclude the possibilities of men being oppressed, but rather widens the focus of oppression to men *and* women.

1.2 Literature in the language classroom

Four focus areas of language teaching are often described in handbooks: speaking, listening, reading and writing. Ideally, a pupil should, within their abilities, develop all four of these skills. Literature, I believe, can help the development of all four areas. A work of fiction can provide the basis for oral discussion and for written assignments, in addition to the more obvious skills of reading and listening, in this case for instance to a text being read. In *Literature in the Language Classroom*, Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater claim that “literature offers a bountiful and extremely varied body of written material which is ‘important’ in the

sense that it says something about fundamental human issues, and which is enduring rather than ephemeral” (3). It can therefore be argued that a work of fiction can offer interesting insights to the human condition and that novels, short stories and poems do not as quickly become outdated as other text sources. A Victorian novel may provide Swedish pupils of today not only with new views on a time past in Britain, but may also present different perspectives on their own lives and situations. Much like Collie and Slater, I would argue that there is a reason that Shakespeare, for instance, is still read and taught, apart from the historical value of his body of work: by reading *King Lear* or *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, we may re-examine ourselves through the development of the fictional characters. Much like reading in general may provide new viewpoints, experiences and insights to new worlds, reading in the language classroom specifically may function as a gateway to the same.

In addition to the strictly cultural experience or enrichment a pupil may receive through literature, an important point to make is that most works of fiction are not specifically written to be used in the classroom. Rather, they are often examples of *authentic material*, material which is unedited, forcing pupils to come face-to-face with texts using language intended for native speakers, whereby they may develop skills to work with language and rhetorical figures which would otherwise be unfamiliar to them. Using authentic materials in general and literature specifically in the language classroom may also give pupils insights to English-speaking cultures. It is important to note that not all pupils have had or will have the opportunity to visit the English-speaking world, and so providing them with literature from different parts of this diverse area, which is spread around the Earth, may give pupils a sense of meaning in studying English. In addition, it is mentioned in the syllabus for English B that pupils should, after finishing the course, “have a basic orientation to English literature from different periods” (skolverket.se), and “have a knowledge of current conditions, history and cultures of the countries where English is spoken” (ibid); both of these goals to be attained

may be reached with the help of literature in the classroom. The syllabus for English A says that pupils should, upon completion of the course, “be able to read and understand simple literature and through literature acquire a knowledge of cultural traditions in English-speaking countries” (skolverket.se). Finally, in the goals to be attained for English C, it is stated that pupils should “be able to read literature from different periods and different genres, as well as being able in their reading to reflect on textual contents and form from different perspectives” (skolverket.se) and “be familiar with developments in one or more areas such as politics, social life, religion, literature, film, art or music in an English-speaking country” (ibid). In each of these syllabi, reading literature is mentioned as a criterion, that is, something a teacher must introduce in the classroom. In addition, literature may assist both pupils and teacher in the areas of cultural knowledge; in reading, a pupil may become familiar with the politics or societal life of an English-speaking country, or the history of one, for instance. Literature is something that may not only be *of* use in the classroom, but something that *has to* be used.

1.3 School as a political or apolitical arena

The argument that education should be an area of society free from politics may seem rational. It is obvious and clear to me that no teacher working within the Swedish school system should force or promote their political beliefs or ideals onto their pupils. Regarding education as a part of society where the political majority or ruling parties have no influence, however, is not only naïve, but a failure to understand the structure of the social order in which we live. Every new syllabus and every new curriculum which teachers in Sweden have to work in accordance with is the product of the educational policy of the government in rule at the time of its production. School reforms – certainly not uncommon in Sweden, as new curricula were introduced in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and that new ones will come into force in July 2011– are always by-products of political decision-making. As such, it is not

implausible to regard certain wording in the current curricula and syllabi as the direct consequence of feminist political and lobbyist work. Assuming that the goal of feminism is to eradicate the possible inequalities between men and women which exist in society today, no matter the form which these inequalities take, it is possible to read certain passages in the Education Act of 1985 as very feminist indeed:

School activities shall be structured in accordance with fundamental democratic values.

Each and every person active in the school system shall promote respect for the intrinsic value of every human being and for our common environment. Persons active in the school system shall in particular [...] promote equality between the genders (1)

The mentioning of “fundamental values” that are to be taught or instilled in every pupil in the Swedish curriculum for the non-compulsory school system (*Lpf 94*) also implies that school is not an area of society which is free from politics. Rather, it implicitly states that public education is very much a political arena, where certain values are to be promoted by school staff. Part of a teacher’s profession is, quite simply, to be political and to teach certain ideas that are considered to be fundamental to the society in which the teacher and their pupils exist. Although it could be argued that the majority of feminism’s goals have now been achieved – legislation makes it illegal to discriminate a person based on their gender; women formally have the same possibilities to succeed professionally as men etcetera – the inclusion of passages like these in the curricula and syllabi implies that school and everyone working within the school system must play an active role in implementing the idea of gender equality in every pupil. It seems to suggest that there is yet work to be done, particularly in the classroom, and that these so-called “fundamental values” may not be as fundamental as one would like them to be.

1.4 “Feminist” literature in the political language classroom

What kind of literature, then, can be used in the political language classroom, assuming that teachers have to work within the framework of the Swedish curricula and syllabi? As the focus of this essay is liberal feminism, I will present a few points to take into account when choosing works of fiction to teach in the feminist language classroom specifically.

Collie and Slater mention that “[i]nterest, appeal and relevance are all more important [than straightforward and simple language]” (6) when choosing literature for the classroom, meaning that a novel’s theme must appear to be relevant and interesting to the pupils. Can themes of the story be anchored in current events or life experiences of the pupils? Will it provoke a reaction from the pupils? A novel which takes as its themes the equality or inequality between genders may appear overly political and complicated to a classroom full of teenagers; it is the task of the teacher to present a work of fiction and its themes in ways which will appeal to their pupils. A teacher must provide background information to a novel, as to entice and interest pupils. This is perhaps even more important when using literature which can be interpreted as being political in the classroom than otherwise, as, like previously mentioned, politics in the classroom may appear to be a sensitive issue.

It is also important to make the case for so-called feminist literature in the classroom against the backdrop of the Swedish syllabi and curricula, as to avoid controversy or misunderstandings within and outside of the classroom, by which I mean that it is important to stress the support for feminist themes in the classroom and education as a whole in the control documents of the Swedish school system. Pointing out the wording of the steering documents and the support liberal feminist ideals that can be found in them may serve as a way of toning down any controversy or problems that may arise from explicitly regarding and treating the classroom as a political arena.

In choosing liberal feminist literature, or literature meant to be a part of a greater scheme of creating a liberal feminist classroom, the previously mentioned factors of relevance and interest to the pupils must be taken into consideration. Themes that can be anchored in current events, pupils' life experiences or social challenges may be brought forward and pointed out in the classroom, and serve as starting points for discussions or an introduction. Anchoring themes in the lives of the pupils and the society (or societies) in which they live may assist a teacher in exposing oppressing structures in society as well as in a fictional world. In drawing from the real lives of the pupils when making classroom comparisons between the fictional world of a novel and the society in which they live, these oppressing structures and the importance of a struggle for equality may be made more obvious to a group of pupils. This would then be a first step in constructing a liberal feminist classroom.

It may be argued that not all pupils at upper secondary level are yet ready for a liberal feminist classroom. Teenagers may shy away from that which is perceived to be overtly political or elaborate; however, it is my belief that adolescents in particular exist in a world where gender equality or inequality and gender in general are widely debated topics. In addition, I believe that pupils at upper secondary level are old or mature enough to understand and expose oppressing societal structures.

Does a novel have to have an expressed liberal feminist agenda in order to be of use in a liberal feminist classroom? Some may claim that this is not the case. There are certainly works with a complete opposite or somewhat different political stance that can be of use to illustrate power structures and structures of oppression – in fact, using books with opposing views may occasionally be beneficial to a teacher. It may be argued, however, that works that take a somewhat clear liberal feminist viewpoint often have a more thought-out presentation of the aforementioned power structures, that is, a description or analysis of these that is so clear that pupils will have little difficulty exposing the oppressing structures in the novel, and

therefore also in society itself. It is with this in mind that I have considered the uses of *The Handmaid's Tale* in the upper secondary level classroom. In the next chapter, I will therefore discuss the classification of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a liberal feminist novel and Margaret Atwood as a liberal feminist writer, as well as the possible criticisms of different feminisms that the novel contains.

2. *The Handmaid's Tale* as a liberal feminist work in the classroom

This chapter discusses themes in *The Handmaid's Tale* that may be used in the classroom within the framework of teaching liberal feminism. Each theme will first be analysed with references to the novel and liberal feminist ideals and concepts, after which the ideas for integrating these themes in the classroom and their relevance for classroom discussions will be presented. No actual exercises for the classroom will be discussed in this chapter, however, but in chapter three. The first part of the chapter discusses ideas for presenting the very concept of liberal feminism in the classroom, as it is against this backdrop that the novel's themes will be looked at. The chapter also briefly discusses the classification of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a liberal feminist work, and the possible problems that this classification may bring in the classroom.

2.1 Presenting liberal feminism in the classroom

In order to establish a productive discussion about liberal feminist ideas in the classroom, pupils must have been presented with structured and clear examples of the concepts. Pupils have to be aware of what the words themselves entail, and how they are relevant for themselves and their realities. Before discussing the themes of *The Handmaid's Tale* which can be analysed against the backdrop of liberal feminism, the very notion of liberal feminism must be explained and concretised.

When presenting liberal feminism in the classroom for the first time, a teacher may anchor the concept in the everyday lives of their pupils; doing this can help pupils understand just how many liberal feminist issues they encounter on a daily basis. In *All in Our Places*, Carla Washburne Rensenbrink mentions that “children bring ideas about gender with them into school” (43); these ideas, though they may be unconscious ones, can be brought forth or

called upon by the teacher. In addition, as the steering documents mention the equality between genders as one of the fundamental values to be taught in the Swedish school system, bringing copies of these to class and letting pupils discuss exactly what the wording of these documents entails may aid a teacher in presenting liberal feminism in the classroom. With this in mind, I will discuss a few practical ideas about how to introduce liberal feminism to upper secondary level pupils.

As the reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* will be conducted within the frame of English as a foreign language, and as the syllabi for English at upper secondary level mention the history and society of English-speaking countries as something to be discussed in the classroom, the history of the feminist and civil rights movements in the English-speaking world may be an interesting starting point for discussing liberal feminism. A teacher may begin a lesson by projecting a series of photos – or passing photos around the classroom – of people taking part in marches and protests against oppression based on gender, class and race. Pupils are then asked if they recognise some of the banners or signs of the protesters, and what they associate with the marches. The idea is for a teacher to highlight or bring up words such as *feminism*, *equality*, *oppression* and *equal rights*, and let pupils discuss exactly what they believe that these concepts entail. Upon finishing this discussion, pupils may be given the syllabi for English at upper secondary level, the Education Act of 1985 and *Lpf 94*. The teacher may highlight certain wording in these steering documents pertaining to feminism and equal rights, whereby pupils may also be asked whether they believe that the documents contain any feminist ideals. Within this discussion, the definition of liberal feminism as an ideology focusing on everyone's right to fulfil their own potential may be presented by the teacher. Questions about whether or not this is what the steering documents strive for may be introduced and discussed at this point as well.

It is important for a teacher to emphasise that pupils do not need to define themselves as *liberal feminists*, but that they are meant to understand the concept and its ideals, and to which extent these are relevant in the Swedish school system. As a further way of explaining exactly what kind of issues liberal feminism deals with, pupils may be asked whether or not they believe that everyone in society receives the same treatment, regardless of gender, race or class. To provoke a discussion, a teacher may here begin by asking a male pupil whether he believes that his opportunities are the same as those of a female pupil in the same class. A female pupil may then be asked the same.

As this essay not only discusses liberal feminism, but also mentions radical feminism and criticism thereof that may be found in *The Handmaid's Tale*, discussing radical feminism and allowing for a clear distinction between liberal and radical feminism in the classroom may be beneficial to pupils. This may be done once pupils have a clear idea of what liberal feminism entails. Once the teacher has defined liberal feminism and ideas about everyone's equal rights, radical feminism may be discussed and contrasted against these ideals. Pupils may be asked if they know of any other feminist schools of thought than liberal feminism, and what ideas they associate with these other disciplines. The teacher may here highlight any associations with separatist ideals – “man-hating feminists”, for instance – and using that as a starting point for giving pupils a few simple outlines and points of radical feminist thought. A deeper discussion of radical feminist ideals may be conducted once pupils have read a majority of *The Handmaid's Tale*, at which point pupils may freely discuss the differing opinions of the female characters in the book, their actions and words in light of both liberal feminist ideals and the wording of the steering documents of the Swedish school system.

2.2 The Handmaid's Tale as a liberal feminist work

Classifying *The Handmaid's Tale* as a work of feminist fiction is not unproblematic; the novel contains passages that may very well be interpreted as criticisms of certain kinds of feminism, and though the novel focuses mainly on the positions of women in the Gileadean society, the hierarchy of men is not entirely simple.

Gileadean society may be interpreted as having realised some of the goals of feminism; Fiona Tolan notes in *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* that “[a]lthough politicised women like Offred’s mother are now officially designed ‘Unwomen’, Aunt Lydia grudgingly admits: ‘We would have to condone some of their ideas, even today’ (128)” (152). Women in Gilead are, in many ways, it can be claimed, freed from the dangers or discriminations and humiliations of the 1970s and 1980s; they do not run the risk of being attacked in the streets of Gilead, pornography and sex outside the frames of marriage are by and large forbidden. Whether or not pornography by definition has to be discriminatory or humiliating to women may be discussed, of course, but the novel describes the struggle against the sex industry as one which conjoined radical feminists and the religious fundamentalists that eventually became the leaders of Gilead. In the novel’s fictional universe, a relationship between pornography and sexual abuse seems to be implied by the supporters of the government. Atwood uses the ideas of some anti-pornography activists in creating the ideals of Gilead’s rulers; under the definition of “pornography” in *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism* it is argued that “[a]nti-pornography campaigners [...] trace a correlation between the consumption of pornography and the sexual abuse of actual women”. This idea of pornography as inherently bad and its consequences being violence against women is described in chapter 20, where Offred recalls Aunt Lydia’s words at the Red Centre, implying what the future Handmaids have been “freed” from:

Sometimes the movies [Aunt Lydia] showed would be an old porno film, from the seventies or eighties. Women kneeling, sucking penises or guns [...] women being raped, beaten up, killed. Once we had to watch a woman being slowly cut into pieces, her fingers and breasts snipped off with garden shears, her stomach slit open and her intestines pulled out.

Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then. (Atwood, 118)

Offred and her likes live in what may be interpreted as a *women's culture*, a place to which men have only very restricted access. This is made particular clear during the Birthing ceremony, where Offred's mother is mentioned: "Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists." (Atwood, 127) This idea of a women's culture, of an almost separatist society, is for some radical feminist schools of thought an important part of the struggle for equality; only when women exist independently of men, it is thought, can they be truly free. In Gilead, this kind of separatist thinking has been realised; there is no social independency for women in the Republic, but there is a definitive separation of the male and the female.

These radical feminist ideas that have been adopted – in however an altered version – by Gilead as a state allow for a reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a criticism of radical feminism and some of its affiliations with the conservative right. Margaret Atwood herself does, indeed, reject the labelling of her as a feminist writer: according to Kim A. Loudermilk in *Fictional Feminism*, she questions whether a writer being directly involved in political movements is good for the writer, as opposed to merely being good for the movement (125). Atwood's relationship with feminism is a complicated one; Loudermilk claims that "[s]he participates in feminist political activities and is sometimes willing to call herself a feminist 'if by feminist we mean someone who's interested in seeing women included in the human

race” (124) and mentions that Atwood generally opposes the most radical branches of feminism, claiming that their goals have not been achieved (ibid). Taking these reservations of the writer into account, *The Handmaid's Tale* allows for liberal feminist interpretations and uses in the classroom. In fact, pointing out these criticisms of certain feminisms to pupils may contribute to a more nuanced discussion about the struggle for equality than simply claiming that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a liberal feminist novel. This may be particularly interesting to discuss in the classroom once pupils have read a good portion of the novel and feel reasonably comfortable with the concept of liberal feminism, at which point they may be ready to explore other feminist schools of thought in the light of the steering documents and *The Handmaid's Tale*.

2.3 Themes in The Handmaid's Tale for the classroom

Despite Atwood's reluctance to label herself as any kind of feminist writer, her work certainly has the possibility to promote a political agenda. In *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse* Magali Cornier Michael points out, however, that “fiction can be politically effective only in so far as it affects or transforms the consciousness of readers and therefore depends on some sort of convergence between reader and text” (10). This means, effectively, that a novel can only be of use as a political tool provided that certain groundwork has been laid. Using a work of fiction as a way of promoting certain ideas relies on the reader being receptive to the message intended. In an effort to create a liberal feminist classroom with the help of *The Handmaid's Tale*, this in effect means that pupils have to be prepared for this kind of thinking. A teacher must therefore give pupils the opportunity to prepare with pre-reading activities, as well as picking out themes of the novel that may aid pupils in understanding the message.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood uses a number of themes and rhetorical figures to describe the reality of life in Gilead. When describing the uses of the novel in a liberal feminist classroom, I have focused on a few which I believe will contribute to classroom discussion and aid pupils in seeing and exposing the oppressing structures and hierarchies of the novel. The themes and their possible classroom use are described below, whereas a more practical guide to them and exercises will be presented in chapter three.

2.3.1 Language

The Handmaid's Tale contains a number of descriptions of how language is used as a tool in the government's oppression of some of its citizens. Language use is restricted, and many words have been forbidden by the government, effectively impacting the thoughts of Gilead's inhabitants. In class, presenting and discussing the use of language in the Republic, as well as the numerous names characters have been given by the government because of their position, can be a useful tool in describing the power of language as an oppressive tool to pupils.

The written word belongs to the domain of men in Gilead. In the part of society where Offred exists, in the culture of women, language use is restricted to oral communication. Women are neither allowed to write nor read, not even the most trivial of things: "they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us" (Atwood, 25). It is not only the written word that has been taken from Offred, however; she longs for language which is different from the sanctioned, rigid speech of the government, for gossip and small talk, which she has been denied: "[h]ow I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts" (11).

This need to speak freely, to read and write – something one might even define as a *right* – that is denied Offred is an incredible effective way of controlling the inhabitants of Gilead. By restricting the use of language to that which is truly rudimentary, the rulers of the Republic

have in some ways restricted free thought. Handmaids do not even have access to their real names anymore, but are defined – in the most literal sense of the word – by their Commanders. They do not have the possibility to choose the words used to describe them, they have, as it were, lost the power over their own epithet. This idea of control through language, oppression through deliberate word choice, is a tool used by totalitarian regimes throughout the world. In the classroom, making a point of the official use of language in Gilead can serve as an introduction to the idea of control through words, and how language can serve as an oppressing mechanism. The words we use when discussing men and women, gender, sexual orientation and equality or inequality define the way we think about these concepts, which may be an important point to make when trying to create a liberal feminist classroom. In “Homophobia and Sexism as Popular Values”, David Bleich mentions, for instance, that language can be used to express ideological superiority (151), and Sue V. Rosser describes how she, in a pronoun exercise in the classroom, “emphasises the point that male pronouns, even when used generically, evoke a mental image that is male, thereby excluding women” (33). These uses of language as a tool of power, and the loss of authority even over your own name that the Handmaids are faced with, is the focus of the classroom discussions, and may serve as an effective tool in helping pupils understand the power of language. By introducing pupils to the ideas that descriptions of individuals effectively evoke preconceptions about them, and therefore affect someone’s world view, they may gain a greater understanding of why word choice plays a significant role both in the novel and in society at large. Using the word *feminist* as an entry point to these themes in the classroom may be particularly effective, as *feminist* is often considered to be a controversial word, with several definitions. This may also prepare pupils to discuss the power structures behind language, and to question how their world view changes with changes in language, as well as how concepts in Gilead affect the characters’ world views and conceptions of reality.

2.3.2 Class

In Gilead, there is no such thing as a classless society. The government, one may argue, effectively oppresses citizens by placing them into differing classes, where not everyone has the same opportunities. Looking at how class is presented in the novel in this way, the novel's use of class can easily be translated into a liberal feminist issue. In the classroom, this may help pupils understand how closely linked the concepts of class and gender are, and the many forms that oppression can take.

Both men and women in Gilead are defined by their function; every citizen is assigned a particular role in the society. These functions are clear for everyone to see, as each class of people is allotted a colour-coded uniform of sorts. These colour codes – Commanders wear black; Commanders' Wives blue; and Handmaids red – means that someone's identity is obvious to everyone. A person can be defined by the clothes they wear, and whether this person is worthy of respect or disdain according to the societal rules of Gilead is implied as soon as the colour of their dress is revealed. There exists, in effect, no opportunity for anonymity in the Republic.

The classes of women in Gilead are closely connected to economic and social status. An Econowife will never be the Wife of a Commander, a Handmaid will never serve in an Econowife's household, nor will a Martha. Their subordinate economic status is also reflected in the places they are allowed to take at official gatherings, such as Prayvaganzas:

Ranks of wooden chairs have been placed along the right side, for the Wives and daughters of high-ranking officials or officers, there's not that much difference. The galleries above, with their concrete railings, are for the lower-ranking women, the Marthas, the Econowives in their multicoloured stripes (Atwood, 213).

There is a clear class structure in force in Gilead, even within the groups of men and women. People in different classes very clearly have different opportunities and freedoms in

the society; a Commander's Wife has a certain amount of freedom to move at her leisure, whereas Handmaids only leave the house when performing duties. Handmaids are restricted in a way which Wives are not, as are Marthas.

Class and classism, it may be argued, exists in the same framework of oppression as gender. According to Giroux, bell hooks [sic] criticises those who "reduce domination to a single cause, focus exclusively on sexual difference, and ignore women's differences as they intersect across other vectors of power, particularly with regard to race and class" (28). Cohee et al., who in the 1980s "strove to make connections between theory and practice in the classroom and to provide a forum for teachers committed to fighting sexism, racism, classism, homophobia and other forms of social injustice" (1) mention, much like bell hooks [sic], that classism and sexism are two sides of the same coin of oppression and inequality, but also say that "although the commitment to examine the interlocking dynamics of gender, race, class and power may be lauded in some academic circles, the labelling of this endeavour as *feminist* has never generated as many conflicting responses as now" (ibid). However, in accordance with the definition of liberal feminism as an ideology with an egalitarian society as its goal, this examination of interlocking dynamics between gender and, for instance, class and race, is very much a liberal feminist issue. Introducing the novel's theme and description of class in the classroom is therefore yet another step towards a liberal feminist classroom and education. In describing and discussing class issues in the novel, it may be helpful to instruct pupils to reflect on class and opportunities for each character when reading. Using tools such as charts describing the class structures in Gilead, or letting pupils themselves construct such charts, may also be helpful to pupils when exposing these themes. In addition, anchoring the novel's concepts and descriptions of class in the economic classes that exist in our society may further discussion in the classroom. By letting pupils discuss the extent to which class governs their

lives and the lives of their peers, they may also gain a better understanding of why class is a liberal feminist issue.

2.3.3 Pre-Gileadean society

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, pre-Gileadean society is described through a number of flashbacks. Offred's choice of partner is in particular described and criticised by other characters. There is a sense that Offred herself, by embarking on a relationship with a married man, is offering her self-governance and independence. This, as well as other aspects of her life pre-Gilead, may be interesting to discuss in the classroom, as it may help pupils in understanding that even societies which seem equal may in fact uphold oppressing structures. Throughout the novel, Offred clearly longs for the life she had before the revolution resulting in the establishment of Gilead. What she wants is pre-Gileadean society, though her feelings towards it are not entirely positive. The so-called dangers to women that existed have in Gilead been eradicated, and in some ways Offred leads a safer life in the Republic than she did before. She longs, however, for some kind of control over her own body and her own space; the kind that has been taken away from her: "I think about laundromats. What I wore to them: shorts, jeans, jogging pants. What I put into them: my own clothes, my own soap, my own money, money I had earned myself. I think about having such control" (Atwood, 24). It is this longing for some means of control over her own situation that partly makes Offred look back on her existence pre-Gilead with certain wistfulness.

Apart from this longing for control and power over her own body and space, Offred's memories of and consequent longing for her life in pre-Gileadean society focus on the family she had then. She remembers her daughter and husband, Luke, with fondness, despite Luke's ability to treat her quite condescendingly and their relationship certainly not presenting a

picture of a wholly equal marriage. At the time of the revolution Offred loses her job and her economic freedom and her relationship with Luke is becomes somewhat strained:

I guess you get all my money, I said. And I'm not even dead. I was trying for a joke, but it came out sounding macabre.

Hush, he said. He was still kneeling on the floor. You know I'll always take care of you.

I thought, Already he's starting to patronise me. Then I thought, Already you're starting to get paranoid (Atwood, 179).

Offred was certainly not a feminist; rather, her apathy towards feminism is described as being relatively typical for pre-Gileadean society. This apathy, it is suggested, may have contributed to the revolution and move towards the founding of the Republic of Gilead being relatively quick: "they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn't even any rioting in the streets. People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction" (Atwood, 174). The life Offred lived before the establishment of the Republic of Gilead, and the way she was treated by society then is an interesting point for discussion in the classroom. Though her previous life may appear better than the one she lives in Gilead, she, as a woman, was not entirely free, especially not in the days leading up to the revolution. In discussing this in class, pupils may be exposed to some of the more subtle ways in which oppression exists in society. Drawing parallels between pre-Gileadean society and our own may be particularly effective when showing pupils the possible subtlety of injustice and oppression. Anchoring these ideas in the world in which the pupils live and discussing the opportunities Offred had before the establishment of Gilead in relation to the opportunities they have today may make it clear that the Swedish society at large may not always be as fair and equal in its treatment of its citizens as it appears to be.

2.3.4 Offred's mother and Moira

Moira and Offred's mother represent a more radical school of feminism than most feminist characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*. As such, they may unwillingly have contributed to the establishment of Gilead; certain radical feminist goals were fulfilled at the beginning of the revolution, such as the eradication of pornographic material from the public space: “[t]he Pornomarts were shut, though, and there were no longer any Feels on Wheels vans and Bundle Buggies circling the square. [...] We all knew what a nuisance they'd been” (Atwood, 174). Loudermilk defines Offred's mother as a part of an ideology which, in the United States, certainly strived for the abolishment of pornography: “[they] organised antipornography campaigns not only because they found such literature demeaning to women, but also because they thought women were uninterested in pornography since they were considered less sexually driven” (Loudermilk, 137). In addition, Loudermilk claims, they “sought to create alternative female institutions, such as credit unions, health centres, bookstores etc., as a first step toward creating a women's culture” (ibid). Moira, too, could be described as part of the movement:

[s]he said it was different, because the balance of power was equal between women so sex was an even-steven transaction. [...] I said [...] that if Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave she was sadly mistaken (Atwood, 172).

Assuming, then, that both Offred's mother and Moira are the kind of radical feminists that in some aspects share ideals with the rulers of Gilead, the way they are treated once the Republic is established becomes quite troubling. Offred mentions seeing her mother in a film at the Red Centre: “[i]magine, said Aunt Lydia, wasting their time like that, when they should have been doing something useful. Back then, Unwomen were always wasting time” (Atwood, 118-119). In Gilead, Offred's mother is defined as an Unwoman, not even worthy

of being part of actual society. Her political activities in pre-Gileadean society define her, despite some of these activities actually being useful in establishing Gilead. One can assume or come to the conclusion that Offred's mother has not fared well in the Republic. Moira, too, has met a relatively unfortunate fate in Gilead, as a prostitute, but not by her own choice, at a secret government-run brothel. As prostitution essentially is outlawed in Gilead, Moira's existence is officially unrecognised by the government and she has no chance or possibility of re-entering the wider society.

In discussing the characters of Moira and Offred's mother in class, one is able to contrast their positions on feminism with those of Offred and – more importantly – those of liberal feminism. Moira's ideals about a women-only culture may be contrasted with the ideas of a society where equality and inclusion are the most important concepts. Offred's mother and her comments about the uses and uselessness of men may also spur discussions about whether or not these ideas are truly ideals that deal with equality, or if they may also contribute to inequality, discrimination and oppression *by* women rather than *of* women. It may be interesting to introduce pupils to the idea that not every feminist school of thought works with the ideas of inclusion of everyone, but that certain also work with the concept of exclusion. It is very possible that pupils are aware of this, and, assuming that radical feminism has already been discussed to some extent in the classroom, it may be easy for pupils to identify Offred's mother and Moira as something other than liberal feminists. Discussing their opinions with the steering documents of the Swedish school system as a backdrop may be particularly effective, as the wording of the steering documents clearly indicates ideals of inclusion rather than exclusion.

2.3.5 Men and their positions in Gilead

In light of the liberal feminist ideal of inclusion – women are to be *included* in society at large, but men are not automatically therefore to be *excluded* – the portrayal of men and their positions in *The Handmaid's Tale* may be interesting for pupils to discuss. Although there is no declared or clearly expressed oppression of different groups – or classes – of men in Gilead, the hierarchical structure of society effectively means that some groups have a clearer sense of or more tangible freedom than others. Nick, who is “merely” a Guardian of the Faith, is in a subordinate position to the Commander. His service to the Commander effectively means that his life is dependent on the same; he is a part of the household, but certainly not its head. In fact, most Guardians are considered relatively useless to Gileadean society: Offred mentions that they are “used for routine policing and other menial functions, and they’re either stupid or disabled or very young” (Atwood, 20), suggesting that most of them are of no use as spiritual leaders or soldiers, apart from the very young, who may be promoted to Angels: “[t]hey think [...] of promotion to the Angels, and of being allowed possibility to marry, and then, if they are able to gain enough power and live to be old enough, of being allotted a Handmaid of their own” (Atwood, 22). A Guardian is clearly in a position of subordination in Gilead, and can certainly not yield the same kind of power that a Commander or even an Angel can. As Guardians may, if they are lucky, be promoted, however, classes of men are more fluid than those of women, indicating that even though Guardians, for instance, may not be able to exert much power in the Republic they certainly possess more power than the women of the society.

With the liberal feminist ideals of every person being able to fulfil their potential and the equal value of all people described in the curriculum as backdrop, discussing the positions of men in Gilead becomes an interesting topic in the liberal feminist classroom. Oppression can take many forms, some intersecting, and the oppression of men and the hierarchical structures

which exist in *The Handmaid's Tale* are certainly liberal feminist issues. A male-focused society, where men exclusively are put in positions of power can indeed function as an oppressive force towards not only women, but also men. The fact that men are in charge of Gilead does not mean that *all* men have the possibility to exert the same kind or the same amount of power in the Republic. In the classroom, a starting point for the discussions about men in Gilead may be the oppressing structures of dictatorships that exist around the world today, and particularly those who often are defined as theocratic totalitarian regimes. As these states are often described as nations who oppress women in particular, discussing to what extent men too can be oppressed within their borders, and comparing the positions of men in these authoritarian states to those of the men in Gilead may help pupils understand the scope of the liberal feminist ideal of equality.

2.3.6 Post-Gileadean society

The epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale*, referred to as *Historical Notes* in the novel, contains certain passages which indicate the position post-Gileadean society takes on the Republic of Gilead and its oppressing structures. Professor Pieixoto mentions that his task as a scientist is “not to censure but to understand” (Atwood, 302) the society and occasionally mocks certain phrases Offred uses, as well as herself, referring to the Underground Femaleroad as the “Underground Frailroad” (301) and mentions that Offred “appears to have been an educated woman, insofar as a graduate of any North American college of the time may be said to have been educated” (305). In addition, Pieixoto mentions Offred’s unreliability as a narrator, suggesting that “the tapes might be a forgery” (302) and that her story

could not have been recorded during the period of time it recounts, since, if the author is telling the truth, no machine or tapes would have been available to her, nor would she have had a place of concealment for them. Also, there is a certain reflective quality about the

narrative that would to my mind rule out synchronicity. It has a whiff of emotion recollected, if not in tranquillity, at least *post facto*. (303)

There are several examples in the passage which indicate Pieixoto's attitude towards women in general and Offred in particular: he flirts with Professor Crescent Moon, talks about Offred in fairly patronising terms and compares the childbearing policies in Gilead to those of Communist Romania. In order to discover these implied inequalities in the lecture held by Professor Pieixoto, however, one needs to read the text quite closely. It may be difficult for pupils to do this, or they may experience the task of such a close reading as quite daunting, however, it may also serve as an introduction to close and analytical readings of prose. Such close readings may aid pupils in discovering and exposing oppressing structures and language, however subtly presented they may be. As language as an oppressive tool by regimes has been presented and discussed, the classroom focus on Pieixoto's word choice and use of language may be an effective additional illustration of this. Letting pupils read Pieixoto's lecture closely and analytically may prepare them for future close readings of prose and poetry. Questions about what words Pieixoto uses and exactly how they reflect his own opinions – as well as those of his contemporaries – are important to ask and discuss with pupils, not only because it helps in exposing prejudices and oppressing structures in Pieixoto's society, but also because the idea that word choice reflects a writer's opinions and the society in which they live are points pupils will have to consider when reading other prose and poetry.

3. Practical implications and classroom activities

This chapter takes the themes of *The Handmaid's Tale* presented in chapter two and discusses their practical implications in the classroom and provides ideas and examples for classroom activities. As the academic discussion of the themes has been presented in chapter two, this chapter does not focus on the literary aspects of the themes but rather on the possibilities of these themes in a liberal feminist classroom.

3.1 Language

In “Warming Up the Classroom Climate for Women”, Sue V. Rosser discusses the power of pronouns and mentions that using exclusively male pronouns evokes ideas about normality belonging to a male domain or words that are associated with masculinity (33). Language and word choice plays a very important role in how someone interprets a concept and therefore has a hand in shaping society. In the same way, *The Handmaid's Tale* offers the Handmaids no proper names, but signals the control of the Commanders by giving every Handmaid the name of the head of her household. Offred was not called Offred before the revolution, but is now only defined by her position and Commander.

In this exercise, pupils are instructed to read chapter five of *The Handmaid's Tale* and exchange every generic term for a position in the Republic – Guardian, Martha, Econowife etcetera – and the names of the Handmaids mentioned for proper names. They are also told to make notes of any changes they notice in the way they interpret each character and Gileadean society. Thereafter follows a small class discussion, where the following questions are discussed:

1. Did giving the characters “real” names affect your reading experience? How?
2. Why are the Handmaids not allowed to keep their former names, do you think?

3. Imagine living in a society like Gilead, where you are given a name by the government that explains your position in society. Do you think that would affect you? How?

3.2 Class

As class is described and presented in the entire novel, this exercise is meant to be introduced towards the end of the novel, when pupils have read at least four fifths of it. Using a model presented by Rosser, pupils are given index cards on which they must define class as it is described in *The Handmaid's Tale*. They are instructed to focus mainly on economic status and freedom of movement, but that anything they consider to be class or classism is relevant.

Once pupils are done writing, cards are collected and read out loud by the teacher. After each card is read, pupils are allowed to comment and discuss what they have just heard. If some cards say essentially the same thing, they may be read together. Once all cards have been read, pupils are asked in what ways they think classism is relevant to liberal feminism, and to what extent class may serve as an oppressing force in our society as well as in Gilead.

3.3 Pre-Gileadean society

In *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom*, Tricia Hedge mentions that pupils often find it useful to imagine an audience when writing a text: “we can create audiences and build up awareness of the reader” (311), which may aid in the process as they may be more aware of the text they are producing if they have a reader in mind. In this exercise, pupils are instructed to write a 500-700 word essay on pre-Gileadean society, focusing primarily on Offred's feeling towards the world she previously lived in and its treatment of her. They are told to write it for publication in the school newspaper, where it will reach readers who may be unfamiliar with the novel. They are allowed to bring any notes on the novel they may have

made when reading it to class, as well as *The Handmaid's Tale* itself. They are also told to express a clear opinion of pre-Gileadean society of their own, and to argue this opinion with the help of the novel. To further help the class when writing, pupils are given three discussion points to take into consideration during the writing process:

1. Do you see any connection between the pre-Gileadean society and ours? What?
2. What in particular is it that Offred misses about her previous life?
3. Compare pre-Gileadean society with Gileadean society. In what way does Offred live a better life now than then? In what ways has her life changed for the worse?

3.4 *Offred's mother and Moira*

In “Reshaping the Introductory Women’s Studies Course”, Ardeth Deay and Judith Stitzel present an exercise in bias in textbook materials on the basis of Myra and David Sadker’s definition of bias (92). When reading *The Handmaid's Tale*, pupils are given a list of definitions of some of these, specifically *invisibility*, *stereotyping* and *selectivity and unbalance*, which they are then told to keep in mind when reading. When reading chapters 7, 10, 13, 20 and 28, which specifically focus on Offred’s mother and Moira, pupils are given an extra task of defining the bias or biases present in the chapter with the help of the three definitions given. They are instructed to specifically look for biases coming from Offred’s mother and Moira rather than from men and to bring their notes to class.

In the classroom, pupils are told to discuss their notes in groups, and to ask themselves whether or not it is possible for women to exclude men with the help of the aforementioned biases, and to what extent such an exclusion would be considered feminist or not. Deay and Stitzel mention that this exercise has allowed them to “discuss [...] the common misconception that feminists want a role reversal rather than a restructuring of power relationships” (92), which is an interesting and important note to make while discussing these

two characters, who essentially represent a role reversal between men and women rather than a reconstruction of power relationships.

3.5 Men and their positions in Gilead

This exercise allows pupils to clearly take stands in the classroom, and to reflect on the positions of men in Gilead in a liberal feminist context. Pupils are instructed to imagine a straight line running through the classroom, and are then told that they will have to take a stand on a few statements read out loud. They are to do this by placing themselves on the imagined line in accordance with the degree to which they agree with the statement. The line represents the numbers 1-10, with 1 indicating that someone does not at all agree with the statement, and 10 (closest to the whiteboard) meaning that someone agrees completely with the statement. Statements read out loud:

1. Nick has the same opportunities as the Commander in Gilead.
2. Men are subjects to oppressing structures in Gilead.
3. Angels, Guardians and Commanders are described as having the same worth.
4. In comparison to the women of Gilead, all men are allowed much freedom of thought and movement.

After each of these statements, pupils are asked about their placement along the line and the part(s) of the novel which best describes their own position(s).

3.6 Post-Gileadean society

Hedge describes five styles of reading, out of which *reflective reading* is one. It “involves episodes of reading [a] text and then pausing to reflect and backtrack” (195), and can for instance be used when checking the coherence of a text or the consistency of arguments. When reading the *Historical Notes* in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, pupils are instructed to use

reflective reading and specifically focus on the word choice of Professor Pieixoto. They are then given a number of questions or points to consider and discuss in class:

1. What words or phrases does Pieixoto use to describe Offred's tale?
2. Does Pieixoto's description of Gilead tell you anything about his opinions about the Republic?
3. What impression of Pieixoto's attitude towards Offred and her story do you get from the words he chooses to use?
4. Can you see any parallels between the post-Gileadean society and the Republic of Gilead, or between post-Gileadean society and pre-Gileadean society?

Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed the merits of teaching *The Handmaid's Tale* within the frame of liberal feminism. I have argued the case for teaching liberal feminism at upper secondary level with the help of relevant steering documents of the Swedish school system. By presenting the novel along with liberal feminist ideas and theories, pupils are given new insights to not only liberal feminism and what the concept constitutes, but also the novel itself. Using the novel within the framework of liberal feminism means that the text itself becomes the tool with which the pupils are able to see and expose oppressing structures and liberal feminist issues both within the novel and in real life.

Letting pupils discover these oppressing structures in both *The Handmaid's Tale* and in the society in which we live opens up for discussion about what opportunities different members of society have in terms of mobility, education and career as well as how different groups in society are represented in the media, literature and classroom material. At the core of this project and this essay is not a question about whether or not literature should be used in the language classroom, but rather to what means literature can be used. The task of the essay has been to prove that literature can be used in language teaching not only as a useful tool in itself, but that it is also helpful in letting pupils discover societal challenges and questions.

The very nature of this project raises questions about the contents and politics of literature that is read in the classroom. By letting pupils access *The Handmaid's Tale* within a liberal feminist framework, they may become aware of just how politically charged most – if not all – literary texts actually are. The purpose of the project is not to force every pupil to describe themselves as liberal feminists or even feminists at all, but to discuss and emphasise the equality of everyone, as described in the Education Act and curricula. While naming this effort *liberal feminism* may tone down or defuse the, to some, somewhat controversial

concept of feminism, the intention is not to force pupils to conform to a political school of thought. The equality of all human beings, regardless of class, race, age and gender is emphasised in the steering documents and therefore an integral part of the Swedish school system.

In discovering the politics of a novel and the possible uses of literary texts, pupils may also take part in the discussion about what texts to read in the classroom. Without necessarily having to point such discussions out to pupils, classes may themselves notice that literary texts may have more than one use in the classroom, and that the use of a novel as a political tool is only one of many. As such, a novel itself becomes a tool for these kinds of discussions and interpretations, allowing pupils to understand just how great a scope the use of literature in the classroom has, and therefore understand the uses of literary texts in school.

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