

## Reading *All American Boys* (2015) in the Swedish Upper Secondary School English 6 Classroom

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## **Abstract**

Young adult literature is enjoyed by both adolescents and adults. This genre of literature is often contemporary and tends to deal with real life issues, for example cultural and social aspects of young people's lives. Such social issues can be, for example discrimination and racism, topics highly relevant to discuss in the Swedish upper secondary English classroom. This essay performs a didactic literary analysis of *All American Boys*, a young adult novel dealing with racism and police brutality in the USA. The primary focus in this essay is arguing for how literature, specifically, *All American Boys*, can be used to promote students' critical thinking and intercultural awareness in the Swedish upper secondary school English classroom. The literary analysis of *All American Boys* found that the novel's dual narrative offers a powerful and complex insight to social issues, making it suitable material to use in the Swedish upper secondary English classroom. The dual narrative in the novel can help students develop, not only reading comprehension in English, but also intercultural competence, as well as an opportunity to practice their critical thinking skills, specifically through working with comprehension constructors.

Key words: comprehension constructors, critical thinking, interculturality, EFL, racism, YA literature, Jason Reynolds, Brendan Kiely

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## Introduction

Wallace (2003) argues that it is a teacher's job to invite students to pay attention to societal issues. She further argues that the key principle in this task is that the chosen text for discussion in the classroom matter, especially how to introduce societal issues. Wallace writes within an American context, but her arguments apply to and are relevant also in Swedish schools. The education offered in Swedish schools should include and supply the students with information about civil and human rights and the fundamental democratic values that underlie Swedish society (Skolverket, 2011a). The English curriculum for the upper secondary school states that knowledge of the English language can also provide new perspectives on the world, more opportunities to connect with others, as well as greater understanding of various living conditions (Skolverket, 2011b).

Literature is a great tool in addressing and introducing new perspectives on and understanding of complex topics to readers. This is partly because literature is fictional, which can provide a safe and comfortable distance to process complex topics, and partly because literature offers insights into how characters think and reason in situations that may not be easily accessible to all readers in real life. *All American Boys* is a YA novel written by two authors, Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, and was published in 2015. The theme of the novel is racism, specifically racial profiling, and racial targeting by the police. The novel is written in the first person, but from a double perspective, written by each author. The story alternates between the two main characters Rashad and Quinn, who both go to the same high school, yet they do not know of each other because they do not associate within the same group of friends. Rashad's perspective is that of a black ROTC (reserve officers training corps) kid who falls victim to police brutality when he is wrongly accused of stealing from a local store. Quinn's perspective, on the other hand, is that of a white high school student who happens to witness the arrest in person. The reader then gets to follow along with the boys and gains insight into their thoughts and feelings about racism, white privilege, injustices, loyalties and what is morally right or wrong.

This essay focuses on English as it is taught in English 6. The syllabus for English 6 states that the teaching of English should touch upon both concrete and abstract topics with a connection to societal and work life, as well as to the students' education. Issues concerning society, culture, politics, and historical circumstances, as well as values in different frameworks and areas where English is used, should also be explored by the students (Skolverket, 2011b). This part of the syllabus supports the purpose of having students in English 6 read about racism in the USA. Working with the novel *All American Boys* in the English classroom is thereby suitable for several reasons: human rights and issues relating to racism are always relevant topics. Moreover, because of recent events in the USA, where the oppression and targeting of black people are debated, the study of *All American Boys* is a good way to introduce these topics to students. This is partly because of the multiple perspectives within the story, which makes this novel stand out from other social justice novels. Furthermore, the students should be given the opportunity to compare these topics with their own experiences, values, and knowledge of the world (Skolverket, 2011b).

The novel's social and political concerns can be linked to a Swedish context. Sweden is generally considered to be an open-minded and inclusive country, but this image is changing. Hübinette and Lundström (2014) identify three time periods of hegemonic whiteness in Sweden. The first period is between 1905-1968, when Sweden was multicultural and multiracial because of several colonies overseas, as well as trade stations in Asia, America, and Africa. The second phase is what Hübinette and Lundström call the era of white solidarity. During this period Sweden had become a leading voice for antiracism in the West and a supporter of anticolonial movements. Consequently, Sweden started taking in refugees and migrants from the non-Western world. The third phase is from around 2001 to present day, when, Hübinette and Lundström argue, a general crisis mentality and feelings of anxiety towards everything or everyone foreign, non-white, and non-Christian, have come to dominate political discussions. The anxiety and negative attitudes towards anything foreign have led to the extreme right in Sweden gaining ground in society and influencing both Swedish society and politics (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2014). Therefore, addressing the topics of racism, and human and civil rights, is important in the English classroom in upper secondary school.

Critical thinking and harboring a critical approach are needed when studying a societal phenomenon or topic. There are several different definitions of critical thinking. Most of them, however, involve the need to think rationally and having the ability to find evidence that supports one's judgments or arguments. In the curriculum for the upper secondary school, it is stated that teaching should make use of the surrounding world as a resource for information and learning, which will help the students develop an understanding of how to search for, evaluate, choose, and assimilate content from different sources of knowledge and experiences (Skolverket, 2011a). Students should therefore practice their critical thinking skills in various contexts. According to Jaffar (2004) critical thinking can be developed through critical reading, which involves training the students what to look for and how to think about what they find in each text they read, whether fiction or non-fiction.

Jaffar's statements about developing critical thinking through reading statement supports the argument for implementing a kind of reading and understanding of literature that addresses racism and societal issues from more than one perspective, as *All American Boys* does. Working with *All American Boys* in the upper secondary school English classroom, with a focus on the two narrative perspectives, can thereby fulfill at least two aims from the steering documents. Used well, the novel can promote critical thinking and it can help students develop intercultural knowledge.

## Thesis, Aim and Research Questions

Literature can be a tool for developing knowledge of the world, the self and of the other. It can also help students to develop critical thinking skills. The novel *All American Boys* addresses the assault and shooting of young black men by the police in the USA by approaching the topic from two narrative perspectives. This essay argues that *All American Boys* addresses a wide range of subtopics related to racism and the fight against it, such as injustices, privileges, morality, and loyalty. This, I argue, makes the novel a useful tool in the upper secondary school English classroom. Since racism is also a problem in Sweden, the novel can therefore be used to discuss the nature of racism in the Swedish multicultural society.

The aim of this study is to establish how a focus on the novel's two perspectives can be used in the classroom to promote the fight against racism by encouraging discussions on topics addressed in the novel and the Black Lives Matter-movement. The following research questions are the starting points for this essay:

1. How can the study of literature in the English subject help Swedish upper secondary school students develop intercultural awareness and critical thinking skills?
2. What insights into contemporary American society can a study of the dual narrative perspective in the novel *All American Boys* give students, and how can this study promote intercultural awareness and the development of critical thinking?

## Background

This part of the text will begin with a brief history of racism in the USA and the Black Lives Matter-movement, which will be followed by how the steering documents for English 6 support these topics as relevant to study. The background sections will also include a summary of the history of racism in Sweden, what kind of racism exists in the Swedish society and how it might manifest. Thereafter, the use of literature in language education, with a focus on the English curriculum and the syllabus for English 6 will be addressed. The final sections will deal with intercultural understanding and awareness in literature and critical reading of literature. Young adult literature and previous research on *All American Boys* will conclude the theoretical background of this essay.

## Black Lives Matter

A study of the novel *All American Boys* in Swedish high school allows for comparisons between culture in the USA and in Sweden. Therefore, this section will give a brief history of racism in both the USA and in Sweden and how it manifests itself in both societies.

Racial discrimination in the USA has its roots in centuries of oppression, discrimination, and slavery. Racism has been part of the history of the USA from the earliest European settlers to the present day (Miller & Garran, 2017). First, the slavery was exclusively taken from the African continent. Eventually the racial discrimination escalated, and Chinese people were excluded from immigrating to the United States, Japanese immigrants were also banned from entering. However, at the same time as these ethnic groups were forbidden to enter the country, immigration from Ireland, Germany, Sweden, Poland, Italy, and other European countries was encouraged (Miller & Garran, 2017). According to Miller and Garran, some ethnic groups were even seen as non-human and therefore not treated as humans even if they were already part of the United States:

Although some White ethnic immigrant groups were not considered civilized...they were never denied the recognition of their humanity. The same cannot be said for Native Americans and African Americans. (p. 47)

Miller and Garran state that if the non-accepted, that is non-white, ethnic groups by any chance did enter the country they were “attacked and or shackled once they arrived” (p. 39). The history of racism in the USA could therefore be described as a question of human versus non-human based on their race and color of the person’s skin. Even though laws have changed since then, racism is still a major problem in the nation (Miller & Garran, 2017).

Historically, resistance against racism has taken many forms. The civil rights movement in the USA denotes the beginning of a new time for African Americans making it “a new landmark in the history of African American liberation” (Zhang, 2002, p. 101). According to Zhang, black workers were generally denied employment opportunities. The civil rights movement was created by Black Americans to end racial discrimination and gain equality under the law. The movement began around the late 1940s and ended around the late 1960s. The movement was

characterized by mostly being non-violent with boycotting, sit-ins, and marches. The March on Washington was a protest which happened in 1963, where 250,000 people gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. This march took place to draw attention to the challenges and inequalities that black people continued to face. During this march is also when Martin Luther King Jr. held his famous “I Have A Dream”-speech (HISTORY.com Editors, 2022).

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a civil rights movement that started in USA in the 2000s. It was founded in 2013 by Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi and Alicia Garza as a response to the release of the police officer who murdered Trayvon Martin, a black American citizen (Black Lives Matter, 2013). The organization has expanded rapidly since then because of later events surrounding police brutality and racism against black people. George Floyd is another name deeply connected with the movement. Floyd was a black American man who was murdered in 2020 by Derek Chauvin, a white police officer (Sima, 2021). A store manager accused Floyd of counterfeiting and then called the police on him, and there were many witnesses to the event (Sima, 2021). This incident led to BLM-demonstrations all over the world, a few of them even in Sweden (Sima, 2021). Critics argue that BLM is not necessary in Sweden in comparison to the USA as Sweden does not have the same types of problems with police brutality or other forms of racism (Sima, 2021).

## **Racism in Sweden**

A study of the novel *All American Boys* in Swedish high school allows for comparisons between culture in the USA and in Sweden. Therefore, this section will give a brief history of racism in Sweden and how it may manifest itself in contemporary Swedish society.

Racism can be defined as inherent in different cultures and social order. It can also be said to be a routine which has been created and reinforced through everyday practices for generations. It links ideological dimensions of racism with daily attitudes and interprets the reproduction of racism in terms of the experiences of it in everyday life (Essed, 1991). Racism exists on various societal levels and in different contexts, meaning that racism takes different forms in different societies (Wigerfelt & Wigerfelt, 2001). Institutional racism includes policies and practices that are embedded in how organizations work, resulting in and supporting an unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race (Cambridge University, 2021a). Structural racism is often used as a synonym for institutional racism. However, sometimes structural racism is defined as laws and official policies in a society, which result in and support an unfair advantage of to one group of people and an unfair and harmful treatment of another group based on race (Cambridge University, 2021b). In other words, this kind of racism is where the dominating group in society is either consciously or unconsciously excluding minority groups based on societal norms.

In Sweden people are trained to embody a notion of a normal ‘we’ and an abnormal ‘them’, terms which sometimes exist both outside and within the nation’s borders (SOU, 2006:40). This is the main problem for the modern education system world-wide. Discrimination and identifying this ‘otherness’ of students with foreign and minority backgrounds is then part of



the education system's way of working (SOU, 2006:40). There are institutional practices done by teachers, other school staff as well as the school's pedagogical work and the content in the schoolbooks that identify students with foreign and minority backgrounds as others (SOU, 2006:40). Therefore, these practices are core issues in an educational context which needs to be taken seriously to prevent exclusion of said students. Moreover, the government, the curriculum and syllabuses all talk about encouragement of democracy and a social unity.

According to Edling and Liljeros (2016) everyone is equal in the eyes of the law. However, in reality there is a huge difference in prerequisites in opportunities for ethnic Swedish and immigrants. Additionally, they argue that the concept of the immigrant has developed into a notion that partly states something about one's roots and other ethnic belonging, partly indicates a social position (Edling & Liljeros, 2016).

The assumption that an 'immigrant' has a desire to become 'Swedish' affirms a sort of value of Swedishness in a privileged system where opportunities, rights, belonging and access to society's resources and power structures are regulated because of imagined ethnic divisions (SOU, 2005:51). "Discrimination is embedded in a system of privileges that give certain individuals or groups benefits and advantages at the expense of others" (SOU, 2005:51). Swedishness can therefore be presented as desirable given that it represents an ideal norm with an exclusive position, which is available to some but not all.

Concluding these two sections on racism, everyday racism is defined by injustices that occur so often that people almost do not recognize them as racism at all. This kind of racism is not limited to one specific country and is not characterized with extreme cases of racism, but rather its most distinctive feature is ordinary and trivial cases. This, however, does not make everyday racism a more humane kind of racism. Contrary, it affects the individuals with a more psychological stress that can have a chronically harmful effect on both mental and physical health. The concept of everyday racism contains two parts, one that states that it is in relation to racism and one that states that it concerns everyday life. The concept defies the notion that racism must be either a problem on an individual level or an institutional level (SOU, 2005:51).

### **Literature in Language Education**

The steering documents support the use of literature in the Swedish upper secondary English classrooms. In the syllabus for English 6 in the upper secondary school it states that students should be provided with the chance to develop all-round communicative skills using language in meaningful contexts (Skolverket, 2011b). This means that these skills should cover both reception, production and interaction in understanding spoken as well as written texts. Additionally stated in the syllabus across all levels of English in the upper secondary school, is that students, through language acquisition, should learn to understand not just spoken and written English, but also develop the ability to interpret content (Skolverket, 2011b). Under reception in the English 6 syllabus, it further says that teaching in the course should cover contemporary and older literature and texts of different kinds and for different purposes. Finally, the teaching should give students strategies to understand perspectives and implied meaning in larger amounts of texts (Skolverket, 2011b).

Reading novels in school has since long been a part of the Swedish upper secondary school in both the Swedish and English subject. Lundahl (2009) gives several reasons for why reading fiction in the English subject is important. Firstly, it promotes intercultural learning, as the literature enables the students to interact with other cultures and understand historical conditions from different parts of the world. Secondly, literature is a source for how the language and texts are used and behave in multiple ways. In other words, literature works as a possibility to envision all the different potentials language holds. Thirdly, literature can promote language development. The relationship between students and various texts always involves meaning making, which in turn contributes to language development. Lastly, literature is important in encouraging further reading comprehension and development (Lundahl, 2009).

According to Persson (2007) students should engage in literature reading regardless of language because it:

- Provides experiences
- Provides knowledge
- It develops language
- Develops and strengthens personal identity
- Strengthens cultural identity
- Provides familiarity with cultural heritage
- Provides knowledge of and thus understanding and sympathy for cultural diversity
- Promotes good reading habits
- Discourages undemocratic values
- Creates empathic, tolerant, and democratic students
- Provides knowledge of literature, literary history, and literary terminology – and such knowledge makes the student a better reader (Persson, 2007, pp. 123-37)

Persson further argues that students should engage in reading for two reasons: on the one hand, students should engage in experiential reading, and, on the other hand, they should read for information to acquire knowledge. The former type of reading is exclusively connected to fiction, while the latter to non-fictional texts. According to Nussbaum (1997) literature holds a vital and important role when educating citizens of the world. Moreover, she states that a child who is deprived of stories, is also in certain ways at a disadvantage when it comes to viewing and understanding other people. More arguments and viewpoints on this topic will be presented in the next section, about culture in literature.

Collie and Slater (1987) argue that the main reason for using literature in the language classroom is that it offers an abundant and varied list of written material. They further argue that its relevance changes with the times and scarcely ever disappears completely: “In this way, though its meaning does not remain static, a literary work can transcend both time and culture to speak directly to a reader in another country or a different time period of history” (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 3). They acknowledge that the world in a novel is a fictional one, yet they continue, it still offers a full and vivid context in which characters from many social

backgrounds can be depicted. A reader can discover their thoughts, feelings, customs, what they believe in, what they fear, how they speak and behave. This vivid imagined world can quickly give the foreign reader a feel for the codes and preoccupations that structure a real society.

Teaching literature means teaching fiction, poems, plays, or critical essays ranging from various authors from different time periods. According to Showalter (2003) some kinds of fictions are literature, and some are not, some literature is fictional, and some is not. She argues that realistically speaking, literature is the text that gets taught. What she means by that ranges from the classics, the canons, the traditional English and American works, the postcolonial literatures from all over the world to popular literatures including best-sellers. Regardless of the choice of fiction, it is fundamental for teachers to systematically incorporate discussions about what is read in the classroom and act as a reading role model for the students, for example by talking about what they themselves read (SOU, 2018:57). A fictional text can be read in several different ways depending on the interpretation instruments that are provided for the reader as well as the contexts (SOU, 2018:57).

### **Teaching Culture and Intercultural Awareness through Literature**

Culture can be defined in different descriptive categories, according to Gagnestam (2005). The first category is what she calls cultural culture. This category includes what can be referred to as aesthetic culture or fine culture, for example operas, concerts, films, literature, and arts. This is probably the most common form of culture that comes to mind when people come across the word culture. The second category deals with how culture can be perceived as a way of life and contain attitudes between people (Gagnestam, 2005). This category includes traditions, customs, cultures in working life, climate, food, and clothing. In other words, this category treats culture as a form of lifestyles. In the third category, Gagnestam (2005) sees culture as a way of thinking, dealing with values within a certain culture, how society is structured with political systems and social rights etcetera. Additionally, this category also includes religious beliefs and ideologies that underline the specific culture in focus. In the fourth and last category she presents a summary of perceptions of culture, that culture is something all-encompassing. According to this way of perceiving culture, it can be anything from how we open doors to literature, art, and music. This includes traditions, ways of thinking, lifestyles, behaviors, attitudes, politics, and religion (Gagnestam, 2005).

For the Swedish upper secondary school teacher, the English subject can be seen as a cultural subject, as well as a literary subject. According to Gagnestam (2005) English has developed into becoming a global language of communication and thus into a mediator for many cultures. In addition, being able to partake in foreign cultures is an important incentive and enhancing motivation when it comes to language learning (Gagnestam, 2005).

One of the goals in language teaching is intercultural understanding. According to the English syllabus (Skolverket, 2011b) students should develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues as well as cultural features in different context and parts of the world where English is being used. Every individual in the classroom brings their own various cultural identities with them, which vary depending on the context. Culture could be seen as something that

differentiates individuals from each other, but it can also be seen as something that unites a group of people. A culture emerges when people get together (Lundahl, 2009). Tornberg (2015) argues that when talking about culture in language pedagogy and language teaching, the concept of culture is generally associated with nationality. By this she means that studying a foreign language means studying the foreign country's culture or cultures.

While our thinking and our language use are culturally conditioned, they are also highly individual (Tornberg, 2015). The multicultural classroom can be seen as a place for diversity, where individuals meet who all have their own life history characterized by their gender identity, social affiliation, their religion, and ethnicity and their sexual orientation and especially the region where they grew up (Tornberg, 2015). Additionally, in the cultural encounters that take place based on this diversity, people also change and evolve by learning from each other's experiences. Culture is dependent on communication and communication, in turn, can be seen as culture-creation (Tornberg, 2015).

In the syllabus for English 6 there is a section explaining that students should be given the opportunity to develop an understanding of living conditions, societal issues and cultural conditions in different contexts and areas where English is used (Skolverket, 2011b). Moreover, the teaching should stimulate the students' curiosity of language and culture. Furthermore, the teaching should take advantage of the outside world as a resource for information and learning. It could be argued then, that the three types of diversity teaching seen in British schools, could inspire Swedish teachers of English and thus, helping the teachers and students to follow the goals and values in the steering documents.

According to Nussbaum (1997), education should be multicultural. What she means by this is an education that "acquaints students with some fundamentals about the histories and cultures of many different groups" (68). This kind of education will enable the students to learn and deal with each other with respect and understanding. She further suggests that the world citizen must develop a sympathetic understanding of other cultures and ethnic, racial minorities than one's own or the one's closest to oneself. Nussbaum (1997) further argues that in a curriculum for world citizenship, literature makes especially rich contributions to the teaching of cultures, mainly because literature holds the ability to represent specific conditions and problems of people of all kinds. Culture in literature is of importance, or as Nussbaum puts it:

For if one cannot in fact change one's race, one can imagine what it is like to inhabit a race different from one's own, and by becoming close to a person of different race or sexual orientation, one can imagine what it would be like for someone one loves to have such a life (p. 92).

In this case, the fictional characters provide the reader with the ability to show compassion and understanding. For example, a male reader reading a story about a female character can remain some sense of his own identity (94). He cannot, however, know exactly how it is to be a female, the same way that a white reader cannot know what it is like to be a black person. These readers are thus forced to think about this in a deeper sense. Nussbaum (1997) argues for the readers'

ability to learn both from sameness and differences. Such readers assess the differences of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and how they all shape a person's possibilities in life.

According to Nussbaum (1997), working with literature and culture, the students start to see how deeply for example racism is embedded within many people's minds and emotions. Ideally, this work will also lead to critical thinking: "To produce students who are truly Socratic we must encourage them to read critically; not only to empathize and experience, but also to ask critical questions about that experience" (p.100). What she means is that these reading strategies go hand in hand with each other. Often when we read a novel closely, we start sympathizing with characters of different kinds. The text will also cultivate the sympathy unevenly among these characters in the story. This in turn, as described by Nussbaum, directs our attention to some types of human beings and not to others. Reading or teaching a novel with democratic ideals of equality and respect, we might be left feeling that there is something missing or perhaps even defective in the novel. It is because of this that Nussbaum argues that sympathetic reading and critical reading should go hand in hand. It encourages readers to ask how their sympathy is distributed among the characters and on what the sympathy is focused.

### **Reading Literature Critically**

Reading is a fundamental skill required to navigate everyday life and the world. Reading is also a core value for knowledge development and an opportunity to be a part of and affect the future and the society that readers live in (SOU, 2018:57).

Reading is a skill we use every day in many different situations. When reading fiction is compared to reading news articles there is no need to read thoroughly and get stuck on the details in the former, it is more a general reading that is required, even though readers sometimes need to go back and view the details when analyzing the fiction. When one comes across words like 'critical thinking' and 'critical reading' it is usually in connection to non-fiction. However, any given text can be read with a critical eye. In school there are several different aims for the purpose of reading. A few notable examples are learning to search, to understand something, language acquisition, communication, instruction, and analyzing literary experiences (Lundahl, 2009). Education material is always discussed in terms of motivation and relevance to the students' interest. Lundahl (2009) explains that when students perceive both literary and non-fictional texts only as a source for expanding their vocabulary or learning grammar, the content becomes uninteresting to them.

Lundahl (2009) further argues that critical reading means that ideologies and statements in the specific text being read are identified and questioned. In other words, using a critical reading approach embraces critical awareness of what reading a text entail and can help readers gain insights into both the ideological and the cultural aspect of the literary work. Teaching in English 6 should deal with strategies for contributing to actively participating in argumentation, debates and discussions related to cohabitation and working life, for example by asking follow-up questions, explaining, contributing with new perspectives, and linking to other people's ideas (Skolverket, 2011b). The steering documents highlight that students should practice critical thinking. In the curriculum for the upper secondary school, it states that students should

develop the ability to critically examine and assess what he or she sees, hears, and reads in order to be able to discuss and take a stand on various life and value issues (Skolverket, 2011a).

Reading a fictional text compared to a non-fictional text differs in experience for the reader and requires different tools. When a reader is reading a fictional text, they first must emerge into the world the author is presenting in the story. Additionally, they must get to know the different characters, as well as the setting, and especially get familiar with the author's language use. Even more experienced readers may need help with getting started with a longer literary text (Lundahl, 2009). If teachers provide the students with the right scaffolding tools when teaching reading, it not only boosts the students' confidence but aids them in grasping aspects of the text that they would not have comprehended on their own (Lundahl, 2009). Some questions which are useful for reading critically could be asking who is included and excluded in the story, how a particular situation is structured and if there could possibly be multiple ways to interpret and understand the context of the text. Nussbaum argues that "this commitment to the making of a social world, and of deliberative community to think critically about it, is what makes the adventure of reading so fascinating, and so urgent" (104). In other words, reading literature and working with the text in a critical manner have many benefits for the students, not only in their school life, but also in their life after school.

## **YA Literature**

This section will focus on young adult (YA) literature, the genre which the novel *All American Boys* belongs to. In the English classroom in the Swedish upper secondary school there will be students with various reading skills and experiences of dealing with different kinds of texts. Students can react negatively when a teacher has assigned a literary book for them to study (Santoli & Wagner, 2004). Gallo (2001) refers to his own, negative experience of reading in school:

Like many teens today, because I did not read much, I had a weak vocabulary, and I did not write very effectively. That was doubly bad, because not only was I not interested in reading books like *Great Expectations*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Hamlet*, and *Silas Marner*, I had to struggle to understand them when they were assigned. (Gallo, 2001, p. 33)

The titles Gallo (2001) refers to are all considered classics. He also mentions that he, as well as many of his classmates, could never figure out exactly what they were supposed to learn from the teacher-assigned stories. Consequently, they had to rely on the teacher to tell them what the stories meant. Santoli and Wagner (2004) point out that teachers tend to pick classics over contemporary literature in a belief in literature's timelessness. Yet YA literature can be a tool that enables the teachers to teach the same literary element found in texts from the canon, while simultaneously engaging the students in classroom discussions and assignments (Santoli & Wagner, 2004; Groenke & Scherff, 2010).

A misconception about YA literature is that it is only intended for struggling readers and unwilling readers, as opposed to advanced and already motivated readers (Groenke & Scherff,

2010, p. 1). Arguments for the use of YA literature in the English classroom in upper secondary school are quite strong, however. Adolescents enjoy YA novels because these books are written about adolescents, with adolescent readers in mind. Consequently, the students might not have to rely on the teacher to understand the basics of the plot and characters' motivations. YA fiction contains a broad range of books representing several genres and literary styles (Kaplan, 2005). Although YA fiction is widespread across different genres, Kaplan states that the main thing all YA literature has in common is the search for some type of identity. Due to this genre of literature being so broad, much of the YA literature that gets published is high-quality literature which fits both struggling as well as advanced readers (Groenke & Scherff, 2010).

### ***All American Boys* – Previous Research**

Previous research on *All American Boys* is quite limited. All the articles presented in this section have their core in student teacher education in the USA. However, such approaches are still relevant for this essay as these student teachers discuss and highlight how they would introduce this novel in their future classroom and what benefits and limitations each introductory approach holds.

In her study, Neville (2020) examines student teachers' responses to *All American Boys* while also viewing the documentary *13th* from 2016, a film that asks why black men are still imprisoned for minor offenses in larger numbers than white men (Neville, 2020). She argues that the novel can help youths practice critical literary skills when connecting the main characters' experiences to present day real cases surrounding racism. However, she finds it limiting to include only *All American Boys* to help her students connect with the wider historical aspects of race and racism to the present day. Hence, she also includes Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's argument to refuse "secondly" in their readings (Neville, 2020, p. 197). In Adichie's powerful TED talk, she discusses how one can avoid the single-story perspective in literature. Neville states that:

Adichie's discussion of the danger of a single story is helpful to consider how English teachers might use literature to forward anti-racist ELA pedagogy, as it centers on the need to offer representation for students from diverse backgrounds across race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, language, and citizenship status. 'Refusing secondly' requires that readers approach texts with a wide-angle view of the historical legacies of power and oppression that have led to our present racialized moment. (Neville, 2020, pp. 197-198)

Neville argues that certain texts enable the teachers and students to what Adichie calls "refuse secondly." She argues that *All American Boys* is an example of such a text, because it chooses to tell Rashad's story from his perspective already at the start of the novel compared to having the white person's perspective before the black person.

A study conducted by Falter and Kerkhoff (2018) investigate student teachers in two university YA literature courses in the USA, where the students read and discussed *All American Boys*. Their aim for their study was to explore how student teachers in a YA literature course used the

novel in the classroom as a tool for critical literary discussion on race and police/community relations. In their findings, Falter and Kerkhoff found that the teachers thought that the issues of race and police relations are of importance and the YA book was indeed powerful in its message, however, some of the teachers in the study deemed the novel too political. Despite this, three sub-themes of neutrality among the teachers were predominant in their findings. These sub-themes were: a need for both sides of the story, the perspective that all beliefs are valid and the belief that we are all human thus all lives matter equally. One possible interpretation of the critical shift among some of the teachers is the idea that teaching *All American Boys* in a high school classroom in the USA could lead to sensitive and uncomfortable political discussions due to the political climate in the nation. However, because Sweden's and the USA's political climates differ, the discussions would also differ between an American classroom and a Swedish classroom. Sweden does not have the same issue with police brutality as the USA.

Lillge and Dominguez (2017) produced an article on how one of their colleagues used *All American Boys* in her classroom. The colleague chose this novel because she knew that her students needed help understanding issues surrounding racial profiling and discrimination due to the emergence of national headlines which focused their attention on police brutality. The colleague used clips from *The Daily Show's* 2016 presidential election coverage as well as additional images from news coverages to invite consideration of questions she knew the novel would introduce, for example, "Whose perspective are presented and valued here? How do different voices affect how we interpret the world around us?" (p. 39).

Zwillenberg and Gioia (2017) state in their study that their interest was focused on the novel's two perspectives, how the narratives open up for teachers and students to talk about race together in the classroom. In their article, they first present two frameworks which has guided their literary analysis: the concept of counter-storytelling, counter-narrative, and the framing of literature as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. Through these frameworks, Zwillenberg and Gioia argue that it is easier to see the opportunities that the novel provides young readers, for example by

- a) holding up mirrors to see their own racial identities, pain, and agency affirmed;
- b) opening up windows into how other may be wrestling with their racial identities and privileges (or lack thereof); and c) sliding open doors to real, tough questions about how youth just like them might experience, understand, take action against, and find their power against racism in their day-to-day lives. (p. 58)

They conclude their article stating that some teaching strategies for this novel would be to pair it with supplementary texts or images that connect the novel's themes to real-world examples. They also suggest pairing the novel with writing activities that will contribute to the students' critical analysis of the novel and "foster analytical connections to the world around them" (p. 68). Kerkhoff (2017) agrees with Zwillenberg and Gioia, stating that "given its two narrators, *All American Boys* may be viewed as a mirror and a window and may be used as a tool for positive social change" (p. 28).



The previous research on *All American Boys* focuses on how to use the novel in an L1 English classroom and how the novel promotes L1 students to use their critical thinking skills. The research states that the novel could be paired with supplementary media, such as other texts, images or videos that deal with the same topics. The research also states that the novel could be paired with writing or oral activities which will contribute to the students' critical analysis of the novel. Based on the previous research on *All American Boys* and the steering documents for the English subject in Swedish upper secondary school, this essay argues that even Swedish L2 learners of English would benefit by working with the novel in their classrooms. Firstly, students get to practice their English reading comprehension. Secondly, it offers the opportunity to compare the culture in the USA with Swedish culture, especially when it comes to questions of racism. Lastly, *All American Boys* can help readers develop their critical thinking skills because of its dual perspective on the topics presented in the story.

## Method of Reading

This essay approaches *All American Boys* by focusing on the dual narrative perspective in the novel. This section will provide a general definition of narration in fiction, which style of narration is presented in the novel, as well as how to interpret and understand a dual narrative perspective.

### Narrative Perspectives

Every story is written with a type of viewpoint, which is "the perspective from which the reader experiences the action of story" (Rasley, 2008, p. 9). Griffith presents four basic points of view: third-person omniscient point of view, third-person limited point of view, third-person objective point of view and first-person point of view (Griffith, 2014, pp. 45-46). On the other hand, Rasley presents eight different basic points of view, such as:

- Objective or camera-eye
- Classical omniscient
- Contemporary omniscient
- Second person
- First person
- Third-person multiple (also called multiple third)
- Third-person single (also called single third)
- Deep third person

(p. 16)

Additionally, Rasley provides deeper insights into the elements of point of view, namely, narration, perception, introspection, and voice. Narration, according to her, is the manner of which the action of the story is told. The narration can be from either above, from within a single person, or from within more than one person. Whether the reader gets a deep, individual, yet narrow, understanding of what happens in the story, or a contradictory, multiple and

comprehensive omniscient understanding, is determined through the narration. Perception is how the narrator perceives an event and its effect on the storytelling. Introspection covers the thoughts and feeling of the narrator. Through introspection, the reader gains an understanding of the consequences of the plot. Voice is the style and attitude of the narration. According to Rasley, occasionally only the author's voice is revealed in the narrative, however usually the narrating character's own voice comes out. Thus, it can be concluded that the viewpoint, or perspective, is the medium through which the reader experiences the story.

The narrative holds the power to enable us to see the lives of others with more than "a casual tourist's interest" (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 88). Nussbaum further states that the narrative provides a deeper involvement in the story and a sympathetic understanding. According to Nussbaum, the understanding of the effects of a history of racial stereotyping has on an individual, is highly pertinent in our decision-making skills as citizens.

### **First-Person Narrative**

*All American Boys* is written from a first-person point of view. When a text is written in the first-person narrative, one of the characters, usually a main character, tells the story and uses the first-person pronoun, I (Griffith, 2014; Rasley, 2008). In this narrative style the narration is tied to how one specific character experiences the events in the story, either in action or by observing. This means that the reader gets to see, hear, and feel the events in the story from the perspective of one person. Rasley discusses the advantages as well as the disadvantages of a first-person narrative. This kind of narrative provides an intimate viewpoint and enhances the readers' understanding of the character (narrator). An additional benefit of the first-person narrative is that the narrator's voice is more dynamic and unique than the less intimate narrator. However, some disadvantages she presents are exactly this dependence on one character's experience which can be restrictive. This narrow focus could also lead to a dislike towards the narrator so much so that some readers could refuse first-person narratives.

The choice of which perspective an author uses affects the narrative because each character fosters his or her own perspective on what the story's events mean and because all characters might not experience the same events in the story (Rasley, 2008, p. 42). So far, this essay has focused on one single narration of a story. The following section will discuss multiple narration of a story.

### **Sequential Narrative**

Rasley argues that multiple-first narrative perspectives result in "the Rashomon effect, after the Japanese film that displays an assault four times, from four characters' perspective" (p. 85). Sequential narrative means that several narrators tell the story chronologically, each taking a chapter or so. Each chapter reflects the perspective and personality of the narrator, and each perspective has to be distinctive but cohesive. Rasley mentions William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) as an example of sequential first-person narration. In *The Sound and the Fury* three brothers narrate the story; each brother has a different perspective. They are linked not only by the family relationship, but they are also thematically connected. Each is describing

the loss of their sister, and each section (brother) has its own plotline with a beginning, middle and end. This means that each brother's section progresses the overall plot of the story while also containing an individual story. As previously mentioned, *All American Boys* uses the first-person narrative, and similarly to *The Sound and the Fury*, it uses multiple-first person narrative alternating between the character Rashad's point of view and the character Quinn's point of view. The dual narrative provides each character an individual journey by focusing on the narrators as characters in the overall plotline (Rasley, 2008).

To conclude this section, literature can contribute to a "wider human meaning-making activity" and the narrative is important for educators as it assists their students in "developing and reflecting on their own and other's competence in this central area of human activity" (p. 16). What this means is that the narrative can act as a tool for students to develop, not just reading comprehension, but also intercultural competence, and for practicing their critical thinking skills. Before proceeding to this essay's analysis of *All American Boys* it is important to briefly mention that the themes in the book, which are illustrated by the narrative perspectives, are racism, injustices, privileges, morality, and loyalty.

## Literary Analysis of *All American Boys*

Having defined the importance of YA literature in the EFL classroom, this essay will now present an analysis of the dual narrative in *All American Boys* with the help of Rasley's four elements of point of view: narration, perception, introspection, and voice. The analysis will focus on four central aspects or events in the story from both Rashad's and Quinn's viewpoint. These central aspects and events are: the beating outside of Jerry's Corner Mart, the protest against racism and police brutality, the graffiti "Rashad Is Absent Again Today" and finally the media coverage of the beating.

The overall theme of the novel is racism as well as the many subthemes that are connected to the notion of racism. This paper will identify and analyze the most prominent themes, namely racism, racism, injustices, privileges, morality, and loyalty.

### Narration

As previously mentioned, this element shows the way the action of the story is told either from above, or by a single person or more than one person. *All American Boys* in its entirety is told from two first-person points of view, Rashad's, and Quinn's. By having two different characters alternating narrating the story in each chapter allows the reader to get a juxtaposed and extensive understanding of not only the plot, but also of the characters as individuals. Narrating the story from a first-person perspective is a narrow style of storytelling, as previously stated in this essay. However, *All American Boys* broadens the narration by including two significantly different characters narrating the overall plot in their own personal way.

The readers are first introduced to Rashad and then to Quinn. As a result of having Rashad's narration first, the authors Reynolds and Kiely make clear that the theme of the plot involves racial issues. Rashad gets to express to the reader what happened inside the store, before Paul Galluzzo, the police, drags him outside and beats him up. When Rashad enters the store, the readers are first introduced to the setting of the store as well as some history behind the store. The reader gets to know why the store keeps a police officer close by, due to its history of being targeted of petty thefts. Moreover, it is clarified how many people there are in the store before the rising action of the plot starts. Since this is Rashad's chapter, it is his narrative, which is also emphasized through expressions, such as: "Now, here's what happened. Pay attention" (p. 24). Expressions such as this make it evident that an important narration is about to be presented to the reader. Moreover, in a first-person narrative told from a main characters' point of view, other bicharacters' thoughts, feelings, and actions are filtered through the lens of the narrator. In this case, the reader only gets a complex and deep understanding of the two narrators, Rashad and Quinn, while getting only a subjective, filtered, and narrow understanding of the other characters. The alternation of the two narratives provides a more in-depth view of the characters and how they experience events. Consequently, the narration also encourages the reader to really reflect on the topics that the story addresses.

## **Perception**

### Rashad

As explained earlier, perception tells the reader how the narrator observes and apprehends an event in the story. This is unique and different depending on which character is narrating the story. Only Rashad can tell what he experienced and how he felt and what really went on inside the store. Through the narration of Rashad's inner thoughts and feelings, the reader experiences the event at Jerry's Corner Mart very intimately:

I tried to explain, but the policeman shut me down quick...He roared, now rushing me, grabbing me by the arm. "You deaf or something?" He led me toward the door while walkie-talkie-ing that he needed backup. Backup? For what? For who? I pleaded, unsure of what was happening...my arms twisted behind me, pain searing up to my shoulder. He shoved me through the door and slammed me to the ground. Face first. Hurt so bad the pain was a color – white, a crunching sound in my ear as bones in my nose cracked...the metal cutting into my wrist, he yanked at my shirt and pants, searching me (20).

Here, Rashad describes the event as well as the feelings that are evoked by the event, namely that he is "unsure of what was happening". Additionally, he describes the physical pain he experiences as the officer pushes him to the ground face first. The quotation above demonstrates Rashad's individual perception of the arrest. This perception is only available to the reader because Rashad is one of the narrators of the story.

### Quinn

Conversely, the reader gets an outside perception on Rashad because Quinn witnesses the events and tells the reader about it too:

I just stood there, sorta frozen, just watching transfixed. With one knee and a forearm pinning the guy beneath him, Paul bent low and said something into the guy's ear. I couldn't look away; I didn't even want to. I didn't know what the hell was going on and my own pulse jackhammered through me. (34)

Then later on in the story, Quinn reflects on what he saw that day of the beating:

I just keep thinking about how extreme it all was. I mean, I don't know what Rashad did, but whatever it was, I can't imagine he needed to get beaten like that. I mean, as far as I know, he's a guy looking to stay out of trouble (104-105)

This is just one example of many scenes in the story that is approached from a dual perception enabling the reader to get as wide an understanding as possible. Because of the double narrative, one could argue that the narrative is reliable, especially as both boys describe the event quite similarly. Had Quinn thought that the way Paul acted to Rashad was right, the argument could

have been that one of the boys is more reliable than the other, although it would not have been clear which of the boys to believe. Apart from the beating at the start of the novel, the protest towards the end of the story is another scene which is described by both boys in their individual way. This will be discussed next under the section Introspection.

## **Introspection**

### Rashad

Introspection provides a deeper insight to how the narrator experiences an event. This is where the narrator includes their thoughts and feelings as the event is happening or their impression after an event. The raw emotion of being exposed to racism is evident in Rashad's thoughts and feelings throughout the whole story. The reader follows how Rashad's initial confusion transforms into fear, to anger, to woefulness and lastly into pride. The first chapter closes out with Rashad's thoughts right before he passes out from the beating: "My brain exploded into a million thoughts and only one thought at the same time – please don't kill me" (22). On the morning of the protest, he decides to take off the bandage on his nose off before going to the protest because he wants everyone to really see him, see that "I would never be the same person. I looked different and I would be different, forever" (243). Later, at the protest, during the die-in when they are listing all the innocent black people who came before him, Rashad reflects on the whole event and its emotional impact it has had on him:

And I laid there on the hard concrete, for the second time in a week, tears flowing down my cheeks, thinking about each of those names. ... I was sad. I was angry. But I was also proud. Proud that I was there. For all the people who came before us, fighting this fight, I was here, screaming at the top of my lungs (247-49).

Here, the novel ends with a dramatic and powerful message which can help students talk about the emotional side effects of racism and police brutality. Even though this is just one example of how racial profiling and police brutality could look like, the list of all the other black victims of police brutality who will be absent forever, shows that it is a societal problem worth discussing. Rashad is proud to be present at the protest, fighting the fight against systematic racism. It is, however, important to note that white people should reflect on and notice their privilege in order to gain deeper knowledge of systematic racism. A closer look on white privilege is portrayed in the book from Quinn's perspective.

### Quinn

A significant aspect of racism and specifically systematic racism is white privilege. White privilege is embodied through Quinn in this story. This is especially revealed as soon as the video of the arrest goes viral and the whole town divides into sides either supporting Rashad or Officer Galluzzo. Quinn cannot understand why he feels so bad and why all the commotion makes him feel so heavy:

Now I was thinking about how, if I wanted to, I could walk away and not think about Rashad, in a way English or Shannon or Tooms or any of the other guys at school who

were not white could not. They were probably afraid, too. Afraid of cops in general...afraid of people like me. I'd be afraid too,...But I didn't have to because my shield was that I was white...I realized something worse: It wasn't only that I could walk away – I already *had* walked away. Well, I was sick of it (147).

In this part of the text, the narrative is a personal self-reflection by Quinn on his white privilege. He realizes that the reason why he has felt so bad about the incident is rooted in his white “shield”. And because of this shield, he has unconsciously walked away and distanced himself from the racist turmoil that has affected so many others in the novel. If white students read this novel and see how Quinn critically examines his attitude towards systematic racism and see that it can exist both on a conscious and an unconscious level, it can provide them with beneficial tools to understand their role in a multicultural society. There is a powerful conversation between Quinn and his friend Jill where they discuss what is happening at school after Rashad's beating and after someone has spray-painted “Rashad Is Absent Again Today.” They talk about how the students have formed sides and how, when the school searched lockers for spray paint, they skipped Jill, who is white and only searched the POC (person of color) students. Their conversation is avoidant of using the term racism and any terms connected to it. Or as Quinn reflects: “Why is it taking me five minutes to say the word racism?” (150). Here, Quinn indirectly highlights that conversations about racism between adolescents lack confidence and terminology. Young people are afraid to talk about racism and similarly complex topics because of the fear of saying something wrong. Having said that, the dual narrative in *All American Boys* approaches topics such as racism, injustices, privileges, morality, and loyalty which can aid teachers to initiate conversations about it with their students.

## **Voice**

The last part of the analysis focuses on the element, voice. As previously mentioned, this is referring to the narrator's attitude when telling the story. Sometimes only an author's voice is evident in a narrative, yet the narrating character's own voice comes out quite often (Rasley, 2008).

Overall, the attitude of the narrative in *All American Boys* is comic, lighthearted with the occasional note of defensiveness or woefulness which makes the novel feel authentic and realistic, mirroring the way two young boys might actually think and speak, almost making the text appear non-fictional. The two protagonists, Rashad and Quinn show their contrasting perspectives. However, their attitudes towards some events in the story are quite similar. For example, they harbor the same negative feelings toward the media response from Rashad's beating but for very different reasons. Rashad is uncomfortable with the turmoil and expresses how he rather would have gone unnoticed. This is evident when his family comes to visit him in the hospital for the first time. His brother Spoony, being quite the activist, has been searching on the internet to see if someone has posted something about the arrest, “some live footage or something” (50). He assures Rashad that he will not let this incident go unnoticed and pretend like everything is alright. Rashad, however, does not share his brother's enthusiasm:

I gotta admit, there was a part of me that, even though I felt abused, wanted to tell him to let it go. To just let me heal, let me leave the hospital, ... and let me go back to normal ... I didn't want all that. Didn't need it (50-51).

Here, Rashad's voice has changed from reflecting the spontaneous optimistic self that he is, to feeling woeful and depressed over what he has experienced. All he wants is for life to get back to normal and to heal himself without the whole world watching him and his family. Usually, in these circumstances, the blame is put on the victim which does not help the uproar in the society, and especially does not help Rashad's healing process. Rashad is probably scared that this will become a huge thing and that he himself or someone he cares about could get hurt. Additionally, Rashad is probably even more petrified of the police and how they will handle the media and the effect the media has over how society will react.

Someone who does share Rashad's feelings surrounding the whole backlash of the arrest is Quinn. He feels uncomfortable with all the "nonstop Rashad buzz all day" (102) and how everyone "was talking about the video" (101). All Quinn wants is for the image of Paul, his father-figure, beating a boy to disappear from his memory. He wants to believe that Paul is a good man, because he has always been there for Quinn and his family when his father passed. He goes through an inner battle of deciding what is right or wrong. As previously discussed, Quinn just wants to ignore and walk away from all of this at first. However, Quinn's character development shows how his attitude towards what has happened gradually changes. At first, he is ignorant of his white privilege but towards the end he realizes that what happened in the store is not important, what is important is that a boy is injured and, in the hospital, and there is no excuse for using unnecessary force. Right from the start, Quinn's voice is rebellious as he talks about being perceived as a good kid. "That stuff pissed me off. The world was shitty, and I didn't care if that sounded melodramatic. It was. Yeah, yeah, I was a good kid. A model kid" (30). He is referring to how his military dad, was seen as a hero, "a model man when he lived, model man after he died. The model man and the model family he left behind" (30). This image of him and his family is probably why he and his friends seek out alcohol from Jerry's even though they are underage. Thus, before Quinn witnesses the incident between Rashad and Paul his voice is rebellious and tough. However, after he witnesses the beating his voice changes and becomes queried as to why Paul had become so adamant at beating Rashad. Quinn has a hard time understanding his own feelings and how he is supposed to be feeling. Later, when he first sides with Paul his voice changes towards the defensive: "What the hell, Nam? I said. He was just doing his job" (111). A few chapters later his defensiveness gets quieter:

I kept my voice low as I continued. "Guzzo's pissed. He thinks someone did it [spray paint] to make a statement." English cocked half a grin as he lay down beneath the bar and began his set. "Of course. That's the point." "No, but like, it's saying that Rashad is innocent, so that makes his brother guilty." ... "Man, Rashad didn't do shit." "Yeah, but what if Paul was just doing his job? Then no one's guilty." But even as I said it, I felt like I was Guzzo suddenly, or someone in the family, his family, and I wished I wasn't (153).



In this quotation, Quinn still wants Paul to be innocent while he still recognizes that Rashad has not done anything wrong and probably Paul was in the wrong here. Yet he still does not want to realize this because he is in a moral dilemma. It is not until Quinn watches the video that his attitude changes and he realizes that what Paul did to Rashad is unacceptable and a bigger issue than he originally wanted to admit. "I feel so gross, I said. I keep telling myself it isn't my problem. But it is. It is my problem. I just don't know what to do" (161). "And If I don't do something, I finally mustered, if I just stay silent, it's just like saying it's not my problem" (163). By this point Quinn's voice has changed again and his attitude towards the whole situation has changed. Throughout the novel Quinn's voice is the most complex and has the most range. He starts off as rebellious, switching into query which slowly merges into defensiveness until he makes this final switch to advocacy. The choices Quinn makes, for example going to the protest against his family and friends' wishes shows how his attitude has shifted and shows a major character development through self-examination.

Concluding the analysis of *All American Boys* there are several benefits to reading the novel because of the themes the novel takes up, especially in the particular way that it approaches these themes. The dual narrative offers a strong and complex view of social issues, and it is written in an easy pace which makes it accessible to all readers, not only advanced readers. The analytical tools used in the analysis can also be applied didactically in a Swedish upper secondary English classroom to help students develop intercultural awareness and their critical thinking through a reading of the novel.

## Didactic potential

### **Suggested Example Approach**

As explained in the introduction, this essay will provide a theoretical didactic approach to *All American Boys* and a potential way to work with the novel in the English classroom of a Swedish upper secondary school. This, however, is only a suggestion and could therefore be modified to fit different situations and different classrooms.

With regards to the dual narrative and the wide range of perspectives on racism, injustices, privileges, morality and loyalty, the novel could be a teacher-assigned novel with class/group discussions. Comprehensive constructors will help the students approach the text, as well as aiding the teacher in recognizing the students' reading comprehension skills. In order to achieve this aim, a suggestion would be to have an introductory lesson on narrative with a focus on Rasley's four elements relating to point of view: narration, perception, introspection, and voice. This is so the students know exactly what to focus on when reading the text. An example of each of the four elements would also benefit the students to differentiate between narration, perception, introspection, and voice as they are quite similar so as to avoid any confusion.

Before the students start reading the novel, the teacher should distribute a sheet with comprehension constructors, see appendix 2. Here the students will take notes while reading the novel in order to foster a critical reading of the text rather than only reading for enjoyment without a clear purpose. Because there are four elements of narrative, each element should have its own comprehension constructor with 2-4 scenes to focus on. This is quite an extensive way to work with a novel. Depending on how many scenes the teacher chooses to include, this work could span out over a half term. However, as previously stated, this can be modified into a shorter timespan if the teacher chooses to only focus on one or two elements and one or two scenes in the book. The disadvantage with shortening the timespan is the loss of full knowledge of all the elements of narrative. Moreover, working extensively over a longer period of time, gives the students an in-depth understanding of the novel and the power of narratives.

Depending on the size of the class, the teacher would then divide the students into groups after finishing the reading of the novel. The group will then discuss what themes they have identified in the story with the help of their comprehension constructors. Is either Rashad or Quinn a typical all-American boy, or are both of them equally good examples of an all-American boy? In Sweden there is a similar notion of what a typical Swede looks like and acts like. How close to the novel's all-American is the notion of a typical Svensson? This means that the novel, even though set in the USA, can be discussed from a Swedish context because racial and other stereotypes exist in both countries and systematic racism is not exclusively an American phenomenon. By working with the novel this way, the students will develop critical thinking skills, because they have to take in and reflect upon more than one perspective on the events in the novel. They are also encouraged to develop intercultural awareness by comparing the novel's portrayal of race and racism in an American society with the Swedish multicultural society.

According to Wallace (2003) critical work with foreign language learners of English is necessary because “it is in fact discriminatory not to provide the tools and resources which allow them access to powerful uses of language and literacy” (200). The aim of her Critical Reading courses, she writes, is for the students to feel included in the world and to be able to contribute into changing it. That is what she refers to when talking about “being powerful users of language” (200). Students should then, according to Wallace, actively question the texts, their own reality and more importantly question the wider social and political injustices.

Working with *All American Boys* in this way with comprehension constructors and group discussions, allows the students to pay attention to the text in a much closer way than just reading it on their own. They will thus be able to reflect on the novel critically by for example, comparing events in the story to their own personal experiences. Focusing on reflective questions urges students to consider various options and to challenge assumed truths, hence enabling them to become more critical thinkers (Nieto, 2010). This way of working pushes students to realize that there is not just a single way of viewing an issue.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The suggested approach described in the previous section is rooted in a sociocultural perspective on learning. Here learning is, according to Tornberg (2015), primarily seen as a social and interactive process. According to this perspective, it is above all in conversations between students and between teachers and students that knowledge is developed and acquired. Tornberg also states that research on language learning in recent years, has used the zone of proximal development as a theoretical starting point in clarifying how students in groups collaboratively solve more problems, as well as more difficult problems than they would have on their own. Additionally, this approach sees literature as having a central role where language learners can explore their identity and who they might develop into as they are introduced to and involved in this new language (Hall, 2005). Language learning is seen as the development of new ideas and personality, rather than acquisition of a set of new labels or familiar objects or, at most, of new syntactic rules.

English surrounds us in our everyday life, especially in areas such as culture, politics, and education. Thus, knowledge of English increases opportunities to be part of different social and cultural contexts and to be able to participate in a globalized world. Understanding English and being able to use the English language can provide new perspectives on the outside world, increase opportunities and greater understanding of different living conditions. According to the English syllabus, teaching in the course English 6 should cover the following core content:

- Concrete and abstract subject areas related to societal and working life and students’ education
- Opinions, ideas, and experiences as well as ethical and existential issues
- Themes, form and content in film and fiction
- Societal issues, social, cultural political and historical conditions as well as values in different contexts and areas where English is used, also in comparison with own

experiences and knowledge

(Skolverket, 2011b)

It is also stated in the syllabus that students should learn:

- How structure and context are built up and how attitudes, perspectives and style are expressed in spoken and written language in various genres.
- Oral and written production and interaction in different situations and for different purposes where students argue, report, apply, reason, summarize, comment on, assess and give reason for their views.

(Skolverket, 2011b)

This suggested way of working with *All American Boys* covers the core content of the English 6 course. The novel covers the subject areas related to societal and working life, as well as the themes, form, and content in fiction. The comprehension constructor acts as an aid for the students to reach the zone of proximal development. The class/group discussions also contribute to the zone of proximal development, but they also cover the oral production and interaction goal where the students argue, reason, assess, comment on, and give reason for their views. The novel and the discussions also cover the opinions, ideas, experiences, ethical and existential issues from the core content.

### **Concluding Discussion**

As was pointed out in the introduction, the aim of this essay was to establish how a focus on dual narrative in young adult fiction, can be used in the classroom to promote students' critical thinking skills and encourage students' intercultural awareness. The narrative in a literary work enables the teachers and students to converse about race together in a safe space. The dual first-person narrative in *All American Boys* provides an intimate insight and enhances the readers' understanding of the characters (narrators). As previously identified by Rasley, multiple first-person narratives are also called sequential narrative. This kind of narrative enables each character to individually tell their story, alternating between chapters. Working with *All American Boys* allows the reader to get an extensive understanding of not only the plot but also the characters as individuals. This is only possible because the story is told from two different first-person perspectives side by side.

An initial objective of this essay was to identify how studying literature can build critical thinking. This essay found that literature primarily is a tool for addressing and introducing perspectives on topics to readers. Moreover, because literature involves fictional stories of real-life events it provides a comfortable distance to process the topics such as those discussed in *All American Boys*. Literature also offers insights to the characters' thoughts and feelings. As previously mentioned by Jaffar (2004), critical thinking can be developed through critical reading as it involves thinking about what the story says. Additionally, critical thinking is needed when studying or reading about social phenomena and topics.

More significantly, this essay set out with the aim for assessing the importance of critical

thinking in literary education in the Swedish upper secondary school English classroom. The steering documents state that the education offered in Sweden should provide the students with information about civil and human rights and the fundamental democratic values that underlie Swedish society. One way to achieve this is by reading literature that deals with civil and human rights. The steering documents also state that in the Swedish upper secondary school there are several different aims for the purpose of including reading in the education. The importance of reading literature in the upper secondary education of English is for students to learn how to search, to understand something, for language acquisition, for communication, instruction and for being able to analyze a literary work. When students read and then analyze a novel by questioning for example the characters, theme, or narrative, they reflect on the novel critically by drawing on their personal experiences or assumptions of similar events. By focusing on analyzing a literary work, students are motivated to consider different perspectives on one event and to challenge assumed truths, thus enabling them to become more critical thinkers. *All American Boys* has the advantage of providing two perspectives on its central events from the start. Having the ability to think critically is important for educating students into being good citizens with the fundamental democratic values that underlie Swedish society.

As previously mentioned in this essay, sympathetic reading and critical reading should go hand in hand. This means to ask how the readers' sympathy is spread among the characters of the text they have read as well as where they have focused their sympathy. Thus, reading *All American Boys*, readers could question why and how they have sympathy with Quinn or Rashad and what this means in reference to racism, injustices, privileges, morality, or loyalty. By pairing the novel with comprehension constructors, the students are encouraged to analyze the novel in a critical matter. As previous research has stated about *All American Boys* in the L1 classroom in the USA, the novel can promote L1 students to practice their critical thinking skills either by being paired with supplementary media or with writing or oral activities. Based on the previous research, the steering documents, as well as this essays analysis of *All American Boys*, I argue that there are several benefits of Swedish upper secondary school students of English to work with *All American Boys*. Not only will it contribute to the students' English reading comprehension, but it will also help them develop their critical reading skills because of the dual narrative explored through comprehension constructors.

A critical reading embraces critical awareness of the cultural aspects within the literary work. In other words, working with *All American Boys* in the Swedish upper secondary English classroom also provides an opportunity to promote intercultural awareness in students. The novel promotes intercultural awareness as it introduces the students to interact with a foreign culture and understand a different living condition from a different part of the world than they likely to be familiar with in their own culture and country. Earlier in this essay, it was briefly mentioned that the English subject could be perceived as a cultural subject for the Swedish upper secondary school teacher. One of the goals in English education is intercultural understanding. It is stated in the English syllabus that students should develop the knowledge of cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used. Thus, this essay argued for the use of *All American Boys* in the English 6 classroom in the Swedish upper secondary school. It is difficult to study a foreign language without also studying that country's

culture or cultures. Language teaching should stimulate the students' curiosity about language and culture. Thus, reading this novel in the English subject classroom as opposed to in the Swedish classroom holds several benefits. As previously stated by Gagnestam, culture is a way of thinking and dealing with values within a certain culture as well as how society is structured with political systems and social rights. Therefore, *All American Boys* could be used as a tool to promote the students to reflect on intercultural awareness and why it is important to read about racism, injustices, privileges, morality, and loyalty. Additionally, as eloquently put by Nussbaum, working with culture in literature, the students develop insight to how deeply racism is within our own minds and emotions.

This didactic literary analysis of *All American Boys* raises intriguing inquiries regarding young adult literature in the Swedish upper secondary English classroom. It is important, however, to bear in mind that this is one of many different approaches to literature and critical thinking in the Swedish upper secondary English classroom. Furthermore, there are several young adult novels that deal with the same topics as *All American Boys*. However, there are several benefits for using particularly *All American Boys* in the classroom, specifically because of the way the novel approaches the themes within the work. The dual narrative offers a powerful and complex insight to social issues, and it is written in an easy style, making it accessible to all kinds of readers. The narrative in the novel helps the students develop not only reading comprehension in English, but also intercultural competence as well as practicing their critical thinking skills. The comprehension constructors in this essay (appendix 2) are meant to be presented and applied didactically in a Swedish upper secondary English classroom scenario to help the students develop both intercultural awareness and their critical thinking skills through a reading of *All American Boys*.

In conclusion, further research within this field might focus on a different aspect of literature rather than narrative. Future studies could possibly use a different approach to literature in the L2 English classroom considering the wide range of literature. Thus, there is abundant room for further knowledge within this field as the world is continuously changing and education and research strive to promote lifelong learning. As a student teacher, this essay has had significant implications for my understanding didactic work regarding literature and critical thinking in the EFL classroom. Despite its exploratory nature, this essay offered insight into potential ways of working with literature in the Swedish upper secondary English classroom, something which I am eager to put into practice in the future.

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## Appendix 1

### **All American Boys, a summary**

*All American Boys* is a YA novel written by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely. Rashad, a black ROTC (reserve officers training corps) kid, falls victim of police brutality. Rashad decides to go into Jerry's Corner Mart to buy some chips and a pack of gum. There are three other people at the store, the store clerk, another customer, and a police officer, who is monitoring the store due to its history of being targeted of increased theft and crime. While he is on the floor looking for his phone in his backpack, a woman trips over him, causing them both to fall over and the chips to slide up the aisle. The clerk looks at Rashad's open bag and the chips on the floor. The police officer looks at the lady and asks her if she is okay. Before the woman could answer the police asked her another question if Rashad had done something to her. And before the lady has finished her sentence when she would have said that Rashad is innocent, the clerk tells the police that he was stealing. Rashad tries to explain that he was not stealing and held up his hands which is a reflex from seeing the police coming towards him. He tries to explain what had happened when the police yells angrily at Rashad to shut up. He drags Rashad by the arm out the door while simultaneously calling for backup. The police officer violently slams Rashad to the ground face-first. The police continue to use unnecessary force even after Rashad is hand-cuffed and pressed to the ground unable to move. There are several witnesses to this incident watching and filming it and soon a video of the arrest is circling the internet and reached local and national news broadcasts.

The reader gets to follow Rashad's recovery in the hospital. Rashad's mother brings a lawyer to meet him in the hospital to talk about suing the police department. Rashad finds it weird and doubtful that the lawyer perceives the case to be an easy win, because he knows that police officers have gotten away with worse. As soon as Rashad is released from the hospital his friends come over and they discuss the protest which will start at the corner store where Rashad was beaten, and the protest would end in front of the police station. His friends suggests that they have a die-in, which is where everyone lies down on the ground in order to demonstrate a peaceful protest. During the die-in they would read a list of names of unarmed Black people who have been killed by police officers. On the day of the protest Rashad is very anxious and he feels sick to his stomach. Before going to the protest, he decides to take off the bandage on his nose, he wants everyone to see how Officer Galluzzo changed his face forever.

Quinn, a white high school student and classmate to Rashad, witnesses the arrest outside the store in person. Only problem is, Quinn is friends with and knows the police who brutally beat Rashad. Quinn refuses to believe that the man that basically is like his big brother and has been his savior could be guilty of such a crime. However, eventually Quinn thinks about how different his life is compared to Rashad's, as well as both of their circumstances surrounding this incident. Quinn then decides to stop running away from his problems anymore. He takes a white shirt and a black marker and writes on both sides 'I'm marching' 'Are you?' and he wears

the shirt to school. The basketball coach does not support Quinn's decision in wearing this statement on the shirt, and the coach is quite adamant that none of the players should participate in the march. Even his mother is against him going to the march, as they are so close to the Galluzzo's. But Quinn has made his decision and he is standing up for what he believes in – which he believes is exactly what his father would want him to do, to take responsibility. When Quinn gets to school the day of the protest, he talks to his friend about whether the protest and march will be worth it. They reason that if Black people fear the police every single day from a very early age and even get a speech from their parents about how to behave when interacting with law enforcement to avoid being brutalized, then they can put themselves in danger for one day if it means bringing awareness of the violence against black people.

Quinn realizes that Rashad is lying close to him at the protest and Rashad notices a white kid he has never seen before (Quinn). Rashad can tell that this situation is important for this white kid, and he realizes that he feels grateful for that. Quinn wants Rashad to know that he will never stay silent anymore in these situations and that he really sees Rashad. Rashad feels a strong connection to all the people who showed up at the protest as well as to all the people on the list who lost their lives to police brutality. Both Quinn and Rashad will keep fighting for them.

## Appendix 2

### Comprehension constructors

Narration	Rashad	Quinn
The event outside Jerry's Corner Mart		
#RashadIsAbsentAgainToday		
The Protest		

Perception	Rashad	Quinn
The event outside Jerry's Corner Mart		
#RashadIsAbsentAgainToday		
The Protest		

Introspection	Rashad	Quinn
The event outside Jerry's Corner Mart		
#RashadIsAbsentAgainToday		
The Protest		

Voice	Rashad	Quinn
The event outside Jerry's Corner Mart		
#RashadIsAbsentAgainToday		
The Protest		