

Black feminist theory and literature in the critical language classroom

*An interdisciplinary study of Octavia E. Butler's Kindred and how it can be used
to engage in critical pedagogy in the Swedish Upper Secondary ESL classroom*



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Abstract

The aim of this interdisciplinary study is to consider how teachers of English as a second language (ESL) might engage with critical pedagogy through the use of literature. This is illustrated by, on the one hand, applying a Black feminist lens to Octavia E. Butler's 1979 science fiction novel *Kindred*, which is argued to constitute an appropriate novel for upper secondary students to read. On the other hand, the analysis is discussed in the light of the Swedish National Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School and the ESL subject syllabus. The literary analysis is concerned with analyzing the ways in which race intersects with gender in creating women's experience within the novel, how the female characters are portrayed and what the novel tells the reader about African heritage and African American history and experience. The analysis is then systematically organized using coding method. Using this method, the emerging themes were: *The importance of heritage, Racism and sexism intersected* and *Equality in relationships*. The major interpretations include showing how such a systematic analysis can elicit themes that can constitute the basis for a critical pedagogy approach to the teaching of ESL, as well as showing how engaging with critical theory creates a way for teachers to cover a number of the aims expressed in the Swedish National Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School.

Keywords: The Swedish National Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School, critical pedagogy, critical theory, literature, Black feminist criticism, Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred*

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Background to the study.....	7
A critical language classroom.....	7
Critical theory – reading the word and the world.....	9
Black feminist criticism.....	10
Origins.....	10
Intersectionality.....	11
Recovering black women’s history.....	11
Octavia E. Butler and <i>Kindred</i>	13
Procedures for analysis.....	14
Octavia E. Butler’s <i>Kindred</i> through a Black feminist critical lens.....	17
The importance of heritage.....	17
Racism and sexism intersected.....	19
Rape.....	19
Shame.....	20
Equality in relationships.....	21
Intimate partner violence.....	22
Interracial relationships.....	23
Conclusion.....	25
References.....	27

Introduction

According to the Swedish National Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School, democratic values *and* working methods are supposed to permeate all education in Sweden. The fundamental values that are to be encouraged and imparted in students by all who work within the Swedish school system include the respect for human rights and the environment, equality between women and men and solidarity between people (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4).

In addition to the fact that teachers' practice must be based on scientific grounds and proven experience (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4), the curriculum stresses that "students should develop their ability to think critically, examine facts and relationships, and appreciate the consequences of different alternatives. By these means students will come closer to scientific ways of thinking and working" (Skolverket, 2013, p. 5). In the light of these exigencies, educators need to stay well informed of current research practices and results.

Sweden, just as many other countries, is affected by the ongoing conflicts in the world and is now facing the challenge of integrating masses of war refugees all the while a political far-right is spreading its ideas of discontent. The school plays an imperative role in regards to this; how will the future citizens of Sweden meet these changes? How can students develop empathy and understanding for others? How can they develop critical thinking skills that will be crucial to their future role as citizens and in facing ignorance and hatred in an ever-growing multicultural society?

Within the field of second language education there has in recent years been a growing interest among educators and researchers to explore the principles of *critical pedagogy* (Santana-Williamson, 2000). Coined by Paulo Freire, who opposed the traditional banking model of teaching where teachers transmit knowledge onto students, critical pedagogy aims at changing the world for the better, by engaging learners in dialogue about the world (Freire, 2002). Janks (2013) summarizes a few of the main issues that critical pedagogues consider in

their exercise:

As educators and researchers, not philanthropists, the questions for us to consider are: How can education contribute to a world in which our students at all levels of education become agents for change? How can we produce students who can contribute to greater equity, who can respect difference and live in harmony with others, and who can play a part in protecting the environment? (p. 227).

Critical pedagogy thus seems to constitute an approach that could cover a great deal of the aforementioned curricular exigencies.

As Appleman (2015) furthermore points out, in an era that is becoming more and more ideological, teachers' job is about more than just teaching students how to read and write, but to help them make use of those skills in order to understand and navigate in the world in which they live (p. 1). As literature is infused by ideology, one important tenet within critical pedagogy is *critical theory*, which is the application of critical lenses to texts and other cultural artifacts, in order to reveal the ideological workings within them (Beach et al., 2011; Tyson, 2006). In this project, one such critical lens is considered, namely, *Black feminist criticism*. It is a theory that is concerned with examining oppression based on both race and gender, and it is argued here that it can provide an effective tool in aiding students understand how these two socially constructed notions intersect in devaluing women; in literature as well as in life.

According to a 2005 report by the Swedish Government Official Reports (SOU), ethnical division, segregation and alienation is augmenting in Sweden and the structural discrimination of immigrants in Sweden constitutes a complex societal problem (De los Reyes & Kamali, 2005, own translation). Behind the processes that create a segregated society in

Sweden lie ideas about the notion of *swedishness*; about who is Swedish and who is not (Mattsson, 2005, p. 139, own translation).

Furthermore, the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) reports that women between 16 and 24 years of age represent the group that is most exposed to sexual offense in Sweden. 5% reported to have been exposed to sexual offense during 2014. This includes a wide specter of crimes, from minor offenses such as flashing, to more serious crimes such as rape (Brå, 2015). In addition, women are, according to a 2014 report, exposed to reoccurring intimate partner violence in Sweden, to a greater extent than men (Brå, 2014, pp. 7-8). Sexual offense against women thus constitutes another societal problem in Sweden.

The aim of this interdisciplinary study is to consider how teachers of English as a second language (ESL) at Upper Secondary School in Sweden might engage with critical pedagogy through the use of literature. More specifically, it will examine how an appropriate and systematic read of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* might provide a basis for critical student discussion in the ESL classroom. This will be illustrated by applying a Black feminist critical lens to the novel, and the analysis will then be discussed in the light of the Swedish National Curriculum and the ESL subject syllabus for English. On the one hand, this interdisciplinary study thus examines a work of fiction by applying a critical lens within critical theory, and on the other hand, it examines a way to cover the exigencies of the Swedish National Curriculum and the ESL subject syllabus, through reading instruction.

Background to the study

In this background chapter, critical pedagogy will be described further, followed by its sub-category, critical theory as well as the merits of using literature in the ESL classroom. With backdrop to these two concepts, the Swedish National Curriculum and subject syllabus for English 7¹ will be discussed. This first chapter will furthermore present the theoretical frame for the study, Black feminist criticism and black women's literary tradition. The material used in this project – Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* – will then be presented as well as the reasons for considering it appropriate for the Swedish Upper Secondary ESL classroom. Lastly, the procedures for the analysis will be described.

A critical language classroom

Considered by many as the father of critical pedagogy, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (2002) critiques the banking model of education and promotes instead democratic working methods that enable men and women to develop the ability to critically discern the world in which they live and act against oppressing structures (p. 12). The ultimate goal of critical pedagogy is social change. This is to be achieved by addressing societal injustices and for students to develop critical thinking so that they can *act* on injustices at work in the world around them (Beach et al., 2011; Benesch, 1999; Janks, 2013; Santana-Williamson, 2000). The idea is that gender, ethnicity, class and other societal constraints must be addressed and discussed in learning settings in order to be surmounted (Chen, 2005, p. 11). Finally, critical pedagogy is in accordance with the Swedish National Curriculum, which states:

The school should promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathise. No one in school should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnic affiliation, religion or other belief system, transgender identity or

¹ the highest level of ESL studies in the Swedish Upper Secondary School (see Skolverket, 2011).

its expression, sexual orientation, age or functional impairment, or to other forms of degrading treatment. All tendencies to discrimination or degrading treatment should be *actively* combated. Xenophobia and intolerance must be confronted with knowledge, *open discussion* and *active measures*. (Skolverket, 2011, p. 4, emphasis added)

Numerous studies have established that critical approaches to reading instruction and language teaching can have positive effects on learners' critical consciousness (see e.g.: Abednia & Izadinia, 2013; Benesch, 1999; Janks, 2013; Ko, 2013). What does a critical approach to one's teaching entail? Abednia and Izadinia (2013) explored the learning processes and outcomes of a university reading course with a critical pedagogy approach in Iran. This entailed letting students participate in establishing the course syllabus, reflective journal writing and, encouraging students to critically analyze ideas expressed in the texts that they read. One of the major results of the study was how positive the students were toward this way of working afterwards and that they experienced that they benefited from the knowledge and critical methods they had learnt, even a long time after the study was conducted.

Another important aspect of critical pedagogy is dialogue (Freire, 2002). Benesch (1999) argues that teachers must function as conversation facilitators in the critical language classroom since critical thinking is a skill best developed through dialogue, that "teaching critical thinking is neither an unguided free-for-all nor a didactic lecture but a balance between extended student contributions and gentle challenges by the teacher" (p. 578). In her study of a classroom dialogue between students of ESL on the topic of homophobia, she could establish that by engaging in dialogue and exchanging viewpoints and assumptions with each other, students expanded their initial understanding. She states: "Teaching critical thinking dialogically allows students to articulate their unstated

assumptions and consider a variety of views” (p. 576).

Literature can furthermore provide excellent opportunity to have students talk to each other (Beach et al., 2011, p. 69). This brings us to *critical theory*; a critical pedagogy approach that is concerned with critically analyzing literature and other cultural artifacts through different perspectives (Beach et al., 2011, p. 15).

Critical theory – reading the word and the world

The notion of *reading the world* was first expressed by Paulo Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1987, as cited in Beach et al., 2011, p. 13). In *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents* (2015), Deborah Appleman explains that by introducing students to critical theory in connection to literature, teachers can help them interpret the world of the text, as well as the world around them, whether it is texts, videos, commercials, peer pressure or other factors that shape the culture in which they live (p. 3), help them “to read both texts and worlds with a nuanced and critical eye” (Appleman, 2015, p. 11)

Critical theory, or *literary theory*, explains the assumptions and values behind different types of literary criticisms. “[W]hen we interpret a literary text, we are doing literary criticism; when we examine the criteria upon which our interpretation rests, we are doing critical theory (Tyson, 2006, p. 6). Literary criticism, in turn, is the application of different critical lenses to texts, which seek to bring specific elements into focus (Beach et al., 2011; Tyson, 2006). A literary analysis informed by *Feminist critical theory* for example, is concerned with examining the ways in which women are oppressed by patriarchy – “the politics of male domination” (Hull & Smith, 1982, p. xxiii) – in texts and other cultural productions (Khaghaninejad, 2015; Tyson, 2006). Some other critical theories include Critical race theory, Marxist criticism, Psychoanalytic criticism, Postcolonial criticism and Lesbian, gay, and queer criticism (Tyson, 2006).

It is important to note that all interpretations we make out of literature are based on our personal beliefs (about literature, education, language, selfhood etc.) that permeate the culture we live in and that we therefore take for granted, (Khaghaninejad, 2015; Tyson, 2006). This is why critical theory is so important; it provides a tool for us to learn how to consider alternative views (Appleman, 2015; Khaghaninejad, 2015; Tyson, 2006). Since all literature is influenced by ideology (Khaghaninejad, 2015, p. 94), teaching literature involves more than transmitting a literary cultural heritage to students; it involves aiding students to *see* the ideological issues at work in texts (Beach et al., 2011, p. 15).

Appleman (2015) furthermore underscores that teachers should not offer only one critical theory to their students, since that would be propagandistic teaching. Teachers should not try to transmit their personal ideology or political point of view onto students, but the purpose of introducing them to critical theory is on the other hand to help students understand literature from multiple perspectives in order to develop their critical thinking skills (p. 9). Considering *various* critical theories is also in accordance with the Swedish subject syllabus for English 7, which stipulates that the content of reception in the teaching should include: “strategies for drawing conclusions about the spoken language and texts in terms of *attitudes, perspectives, purposes* and *values*, and to understand *implied meaning*” (Skolverket, 2011, para 5, emphasis added).

Moving on to one of the most recent critical theories and the theory that pertains to the present project; *Black feminist criticism*.

Black feminist criticism

In this section, the theoretical frame for the literary analysis in this study – Black feminist critical theory – will be described. Firstly, the origins of this theory will be presented and secondly, two of its main tenets will be accounted for: intersectionality and recovering black women’s history.

Origins. Black feminist theory sprung from the failure of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's as well as the feminist movement of the 1970's to include the concerns of black women (Childers & Hentzi, 1995, p. 32). The feminist movement meant that the centuries-old struggle for women's equality finally started to show in literary studies – as opposed to the all but exclusive representation of (white) male authors of texts describing (white) male experiences (Tyson, 2006, p. 84). However, it was mainly the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women that were depicted in the debate (Hull & Smith, 1982, p. xx). In a similar way, the Civil Rights Movement mainly dealt with the concerns of black men. The name of one of the very first anthologies describing Black feminist thought captures the general idea; *All the men are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave* (1982). This anthology accounts for some of the earliest Black feminist research and texts that contributed to the emergence of the Black women's literary tradition, and it is thus of great relevance to the present study.

Intersectionality. One of the main tenets of Black feminist criticism is the consciousness of how racism and sexism intersect in oppressing women of color (Bethel, 1982; Childers & Hentzi, 1995; Hull & Smith, 1982; The Combahee River Collective, 1982; Tyson, 2006). In other words, whereas all women are oppressed by patriarchy, every woman's subjectivity, her sense of self and her experiences, are also affected by her race, socioeconomic situation, sexual orientation, religion etc. “In the United states, for example, the experience of patriarchy for women of colour is inseparable from their experience of racism” (Tyson, 2006, p. 105).

Recovering black women's history. Since black women were absent from official black histories and literary criticisms until the Black feminist movement, another of its major concerns was to recover African American women's history and literary heritage (Childers & Hentzi, 1995; Gates, 1990; Washington, 1990). It was in particular slave

testimonials and narratives that provided this historical foundation (Yasek, 2003, p. 1054). “Black women’s history has been neglected in every epoch, but especially under slavery” (Stetson, 1982, p. 61). In contrast to male slave narratives, which deemed it “too ‘disgusting’ or ‘shocking’ to expose to view”, female narratives that now emerged would describe the sexual abuse of black women during slavery (Myles, 2009, p. 243).

The Black feminist movement was thus greatly concerned with recovering the history of black women and this was mainly done through establishing a literary tradition that would depict the experiences of black women. Mary Helen Washington (1990) writes:

If there is a single distinguishing feature of the literature of black women – and this accounts for their lack of recognition – it is this: their literature is about black women; it takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings and deeds of black women, experiences that make the realities of being black in America look very different from what men have written. (p. 35)

Authors such as Toni Morrison with her *The Bluest Eye*, Maya Angelou with her *I know Why the Caged bird Sings*, and Toni Cade Bambara with her anthology *The Black Woman*, are all authors that helped pave the way for this literary tradition (Gates, 1990, p. 2).

Octavia E. Butler’s science fiction novel *Kindred* also contributes to the black women’s literary tradition. As Beach et al. (2011) note, “[teachers] never just teach [a] book; we teach the idea that the book happens to be about” (p. 69) and that if teachers want to teach a unit on a particular topic, they should find texts that portray the topic in question (p. 54). The following section will present the novel further, as well as the reasons for using it in the Swedish ESL classroom.

Octavia E. Butler and *Kindred*

The material chosen for this project is the novel *Kindred* (2003) by Octavia E. Butler. It tells the story of Dana, a modern 1976 black woman living with her white husband Kevin in Low Angeles, who finds herself inexplicably transported back through time and space to an antebellum Maryland plantation, in order to secure her own ancestral line, which will begin with Rufus Weylin, a white plantation owner, and the slave girl Alice. Dana is uncontrollably snatched back in time to the nineteenth century whenever Rufus's life is in danger, and then snatched back to the twentieth century whenever her own life is in danger. These time travels start when Rufus is just a boy, and he and Dana develop a particular bond between one another.

Some of the major motifs in the novel are race, oppression and violence. Time travel of course also constitutes one of the motifs in the novel, which is why it is considered a work of science fiction. As a fictional slave testimonial – even though it is based on authentic slave narratives (Crossley, 2003; Myles, 2009) – it is also considered a historical work (Crossley, 2003, p. 271). Thanks to the provocative motifs of the novel, it has sparked a great deal of critical interest since its publication (Crossley, 2003, p. 273).

The subject syllabus for English 7 states that the content of communication should include “[s]ocietal issues, cultural, historical, political and social conditions, and also ethical and existential issues in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used”, as well as “[t]hemes, ideas, form and content in film and literature; authors and literary periods” (Skolverket, 2011, para 5). The antebellum period represents one of the most important eras of American history and it still influences African American experience today; “racial injustice in the United States is still a major and pressing problem; it’s simply become less visible than it used to be “ (Tyson, 2006, p. 367).

In their study on addressing race issues in education, Cruz and Duplass (2009)

stress the importance for teachers to engage middle and high school students in frank discussions about race-issues, including how the notion of *race* has shaped history (pp. 425-426). For this endeavor, they propose using historically based literature to teach history, since it allows students to “imagine and visualize what life might have truly been like for the people in a given society or era” (p. 429). Beverly A. Bunch-Lyons (2000) for example, used *Kindred* in her Black women’s history course at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University when she taught a unit on the situation of Black women in the antebellum south. She chose *Kindred* because she found it sophisticated yet accessible to undergraduates. The unit provoked lively and stimulating class discussions and the learning outcomes turned out very positive.

To sum up, the reasons for promoting *Kindred* as appropriate for the upper secondary ESL classroom in Sweden are because it represents a work within the Black women’s literary tradition, because it depicts an important era of African American history and finally, because the motifs in the novel can provide a basis for critical classroom discussions. The following section will describe the procedures for the literary analysis.

Procedures for analysis

It is against the backdrop of the principles of critical pedagogy and Black feminist criticism as described above, that *Kindred* will be analyzed in order to illustrate how literary analysis can be applied to a work of fiction.

In her book *Critical theory today – a user-friendly guide* (2006), Lois Tyson explains that there are two ways of applying a critical lens to a text: *reading “with the grain” or “against the grain”* of a literary text. Reading with the grain implies interpreting the text the way it seems to invite you to interpret it, i.e. the way in which the author intends you to interpret it, whereas reading against the grain implies analyzing elements in a text of which the text itself seems unaware (p. 7). For example, she notes, it is “important to be able to

recognize when a literary work depicts patriarchal ideology in order to criticize it or invite us to criticize it” (Tyson, 2006, p. 117). In this sense, some works of fiction lend themselves more readily to certain types of analyses (p. 5). As *Kindred* belongs to the Black women’s literary tradition, it can be argued to constitute an appropriate novel for a literary critical analysis from the perspective of Black feminist criticism. The present study will thus be one where a reading “with the grain” is applied.

Inspired by Tyson (2006, p. 119 & 394), the analysis will be informed by the following questions:

- What does the novel suggest about the consequences of patriarchal ideology? How are the female characters portrayed? How do these portrayals relate to the gender issues of the period in which the novel was written and the period in which the novel is set?
- Does the work reinforce or undermine patriarchal ideology? In other words, does the author seem to have a feminist agenda with the novel and, if so, in what way does that agenda manifest itself?
- How does the work reveal the ways in which race intersects with gender in creating women’s experience?
- What does *Kindred* tell the reader about African heritage and African American history and experience?

Drawing on Johnny Saldaña’s *Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (2013) the analysis of the novel will furthermore be organized using coding method, which is a method for systematically interpreting and dividing a text into themes (pp. 9-10, 14). It is based on identifying *codes* – words or short phrases – in the text, that label particular episodes in the text as salient or evocative (p. 3), the outcome of the coding then, is a theme (p. 14). Using this method, the following three themes have emerged: *The importance of heritage*,

Racism and sexism intersected and Equality in relationships.

In the next chapter, the aforementioned themes will be further presented and exemplified by extracts from the novel. In addition, they will be discussed in the light of their relevance to the Swedish upper secondary ESL classroom.

Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* through a Black feminist critical lens

In this chapter, the analysis of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* through the lens of Black feminist criticism will be presented. Against this backdrop as well as their relevance to educational settings, the following themes will be discussed more explicitly: *The importance of heritage*, *Racism and sexism intersected* and *Equality in relationships*.

The importance of heritage

As explained above, voicing the history of black women and how it relates to their present, is central to Black feminist thought. In a number of ways, Butler can be said to highlight this idea.

Firstly, the way that Dana travels through time allows her to truly appreciate the past of her ancestors. It allows for Dana to live it as a reality, as opposed to just learning about it from books or popular media. She learns a completely new meaning of the word *slave market* as she experiences antebellum Maryland. Before her time travel experiences, she carelessly compares her 1976 job with a slave market: "I was working out of a casual labor agency – we regulars called it a slave market" (Butler, 2003, p. 52). On her return to 1976 California, Dana has a stronger understanding of African-American history than earlier. She has experienced it first hand, and she can now appreciate how shockingly horribly the Blacks were treated in the nineteenth century. She compares it to and condemns the version that is depicted in movies such as the classic *Gone with the wind*: "its version of happy darkies in tender loving bondage was more than I could stand" (p. 116). Butler thus criticizes the way that such a movie, one that gives a distorted image of how whites treated blacks before the Civil War, is considered *a classic*. Similarly, when reading to Rufus at one point, she criticizes the classic novel *Robinson Crusoe*: "I had read it when I was little, and I could remember not really liking it, but not quite being able to put it down. Crusoe had, after all, been on a slave-trading voyage when he was shipwrecked" (p. 87).

Second, Butler criticizes the way that American history is often depicted from a white, western perspective in the following passage. Kevin, who experiences neither racism nor sexism as a white man in the antebellum south, has problem relating to the situation of the Black women, as opposed to Dana who experiences it first hand. “‘This could be a great time to live in,’ Kevin said once. ‘I keep thinking what an experience it would be to stay in it – go West and watch the building of the country, see how much of the Old West mythology is true.’” To which Dana announces: “‘West,’ I said bitterly. ‘That’s where they’re doing it to the Indians instead of the blacks!’” (p. 97). Here, it seems that Butler criticizes the way that American history is often depicted from a white, western perspective, as adventurous stories of cowboys and Indians, while the perspective of minorities such as the black population and the native Americans, is left ignored.

The last and strongest imagery of the connection between past and present, comes in the end of the novel, when Dana loses her arm as Rufus holds on to it when she time travels for the last time (pp. 260-261). This final horror that Dana has to endure, strongly symbolizes that she will be forever marked by and joined to the past of her ancestors. It seems that Butler uses the fact that Dana loses a part of herself in the nineteenth century, as a symbol for stressing the importance of history and heritage, that it is a part of us and that it should not be ignored.

The fact that Dana is a modern woman finding herself in the midst of 19th century Maryland society, seeing it, experiencing it and judging it with her educated mind, it can be argued, makes *Kindred* an interesting novel for upper secondary students to read. As argue Cruz and Duplass (2009), historically based literature can allow students to “‘imagine and visualize what life might have truly been like for the people in a given society or era” (p. 429). In *Kindred*, the protagonist goes through this herself. Judging the operations at work in that time from a modern perspective, is what the students would have done had it been them

that were snatched away to the past.

Moreover, considering one's cultural and ethnical heritage can be of great interest to many students as well. Especially considering the many ethnical backgrounds represented in ESL classrooms in Sweden. The Swedish National Curriculum states: "The school should promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathise" (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4). Discussion about heritage might widen students' understanding and solidarity for others in the class, the school and/or in society.

Racism and sexism intersected

As mentioned earlier, one of the main tenets of Black feminist theory concerns acknowledging the way in which women of color are oppressed both based on their race and their gender (Bethel, 1982; Hull & Smith, 1982; The Combahee River Collective, 1982; Tyson, 2006). Butler shows a Black feminist agenda in making the reader aware of the way that Black women were repressed in this intersected way, as Dana thinks about her relationship to Rufus: "I was the worst possible guardian for him – a *black* to watch over him in a society that considered blacks subhuman, a *woman* to watch over him in a society that considered women perennial children" (Butler, 2003, p. 68, emphasis added).

Rape. Butler moreover brings to the surface the way in which female slaves were degraded through rape on a daily basis. Rufus is in love with Alice. However, the world in which he lives has taught him that as a black woman, she is his for the taking. He is outraged when Alice rejects him and marries one of the slaves on his plantation, and even though they have grown up together and been friends their whole life, Rufus rapes her, losing her love and trust, forever: "I begged her not to go with him [...] Do you hear me, *I begged her!*". To which Dana reflects: "There was no shame in raping a black woman, but there could be shame in loving one" (p. 124). After Rufus rapes her, Alice runs away. She is caught by some patrollers and badly tortured. Rufus buys her in a public auction, and brings her back to

the Weylin plantation. She is now a slave. He has her sleeping in his room, recovering from her injuries, and Dana is worried that he will start raping Alice again, but Rufus assures her: “I wouldn’t bother [Alice]. It would be like hurting a baby.” To which Dana thinks: “Later it would be like hurting a woman. I suspected that wouldn’t bother him at all” (p. 153).

Many of the female slaves at the Weylin plantation are, or have been, subjected to forced sexual relationships with white men. When bored with her, Rufus’s father Tom Weylin passes the slave girl Tess, to the overseer at the plantation. Because the poor girl is young and pretty, she will, in addition to the physical and verbal abuse that all slaves (male and female) endure daily, be forced to endure sexual abuse every night: “‘You do everything they tell you,’ she wept, ‘and they still treat you like a old dog. Go here, open your legs; go there, bust your back. What they care! I ain’t s’pose to have feelin’s!’” (pp. 181-182). Butler thus points out the fact that slaves were not considered more than property, cattle.

In addition to being used for sexual pleasure, Butler raises the issues of the female slaves being valuable to their white owners, in that they functioned as *breeders*. As women, they could bring valuable merchandise to the plantation owners in the form of babies that would be turned into slaves, and slaves could either provide work force to the running of the plantation or, be sold. Both Sarah, the housemaid, and Alice, experience being separated from their children as they are sold off to other slaveholders (p. 249).

Shame. In addition to being forced into sexual relationships with white men, black women were shamed and rejected by their black community because of it. Alice, in a physical relationship with Rufus, and Dana with Kevin, pretending that she is his slave, are rejected by the other slaves who consider them “the master’s women” (Butler, 2003, p. 229). As she and Kevin pretend to be slave and owner, Dana feels “almost as though I really was doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner. I went away feeling uncomfortable, vaguely ashamed” (p. 97). Thus, even though being forced to a sexual

relationship with a white man, the slave women were considered to be sleeping with the enemy. They were in this way rejected by their black community, which they were supposed to be able to trust; a fact that made being female and slave, even harder for black women than for black men.

As pointed out earlier on, rape and other forms of sexual abuse constitute a major societal problem in Sweden and women represent the group most exposed to it (Brå, 2015). Drawing on the principles of critical pedagogy which posits that gender, ethnicity, class and other societal constraints must be addressed and discussed in learning settings in order to be surmounted (Chen, 2005, p. 11), it is important that such subjects that are addressed in literature, are not ignored or considered too brutal or *taboo*, but that they are tackled in the classroom. To foster responsible citizens of their students, who will take active responsibility, be empathic toward others and make use of their critical thinking skills to act on injustices, teachers need to address such topics that exist in a great extent behind the surface in society. Shedding light on the way in which women of colour are devalued based on their race and gender and exposed to systematic sexual abuse within the novel, can thus shed light on those issues in society as well.

Equality in relationships

In addition to portraying the obviously unequal relationship between white men and black women as *propertied* and *property* in the nineteenth century, Butler shows with the time-travel mechanism, how race and gender are also affecting women in the 1970's. As Kevin asks Dana to marry him, he jokes: “‘Yeah, don’t you want to marry me?’ He grinned. ‘I’d let you type all my manuscripts’” (Butler, 2003, p. 109). When she refuses to do this for him, he gets angry with her (p. 109). This can be interpreted as if, as Dana’s (white) husband, he expects her to serve him rather than be his equal partner. This interpretation can be further strengthened based on the exchange between Kevin and Rufus as they meet for the

first time, and Rufus asks Kevin: “Does Dana belong to you now?” and Kevin says: “In a way [...] she’s my wife” (p. 60). Following this exchange, Kevin reacts strongly when Rufus calls Dana a “nigger” (p. 60). He is thus aware of this racist comment, but does not realize that he himself undermines her when he thinks of her as belonging to him, as his wife, as a woman *belonging* to her husband.

Intimate partner violence. Another issue that is brought up in the novel is the issue of accepting and adjusting. People might wonder why oppressed people do not revolt, why women in destructive relationships do not leave, almost looking down on them. Dana even thinks this of Sarah, the kitchen maid: “She had done the safe thing – had accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid [...] She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger [...] I looked down on her myself for a while. Moral superiority” (Butler, 2003, p. 145). Thinking this, Dana cannot yet relate to Sarah, she does not know yet of how Sarah’s husband died and how Tom Weylin sold all her three sons, only to let her keep her daughter Carrie, who is now all that she has left to live for.

Back in 1976, Dana’s wounds are still visible when her cousin comes over to visit her. In order not to elaborate on the entire story – which her cousin would never believe anyway – Dana lets her cousin think that Kevin has hurt her. Her cousin shows *disapproval* (p. 116), but does not call the police: “I never thought you’d be fool enough to let a man beat you,” she said as she left. She was disappointed in me, I think” (p. 116). Why? Does she expect Dana to? Again, Dana’s cousin chooses not to act the next time they meet, she asks Dana: “He hasn’t hit you again, has he?” and again Dana lets her believe that he has in fact done so, that time before, by simply answering “No”, to which her cousin says “Well, that’s something. You’d better take care of yourself. You don’t look so good” (p. 243), just as if *that is that*.

Interracial relationships. Rufus, who grows up in nineteenth century America, finds Dana and Kevin's relationship shocking, exclaiming: "Niggers can't marry white people!" (p. 60). At the plantation, Alice reproaches Dana about Kevin: "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, whining and crying after some poor white trash of a man, black as you are. You always try to act so white. White nigger, turning against your own people!" (p. 165). Being called white was one of the worst things for a black to be called, implying that you were turning your back against your own. Before finally giving in to the kind of relationship Rufus (all grown up and now the owner of the plantation) wants with her, Alice claims: "I could have ten black men without turning against my own" (p. 167), meaning that she would rather let ten black men use her body, than two white men, which would be much worse; it would mean that she would betray her black community. It was thus an impossible situation for these women. There was never really any choice for them.

However, Dana's union with Kevin is subject to strong reactions in her time, 1976, as well. Butler describes the reactions by people to Dana and Kevin's marriage – she a black woman, he a white man. For example Dana's colleague who teases her about Kevin, calling their relationship "chocolate and vanilla porn" (p. 56). Even their families react to their union, simply based on their difference in skin-color, without even getting to know them (p. 109). Rufus's sister turns out to have very racist opinions stating that Dana won't be welcome in her house, and Kevin neither, should he marry her (p. 110). Whereas to Dana's uncle, also opposing her and Kevin's union, it is, as Dana says, *personal*: "He's sort of taken this personally [...] it's as though I've rejected him [...] He was more hurt than mad [...] He wants me to marry someone like him – someone who looks like him. A black man" (p. 111). The atrocious history of slavery is still very present in Dana's uncle's mind, and he will not let it be forgotten. Butler shows here that the issue of how whites during the nineteenth century treated blacks is something that many hold against the whites of today.

Violence against women and especially intimate partner violence is, as noted in the introduction chapter, a major societal issue in Sweden (Brå, 2015). Just as the subject of rape, this is an issue that is of relevance to address in the classroom. The reader of *Kindred* learns how utterly impossible it was for black women to do anything about their situation back in the antebellum South; there was no justice system for them to talk about. What about today? And what about in Sweden? Why do so many women choose not to report on sexual and other physical abuse in their home? Making students aware of workings such as these in the text could enable them to discuss the matter of equality between men and women; what it should mean to be in a marriage and what two people in a relationship should expect from one another.

The issue of conflicts between blacks and whites in the United States and how it relates to American history is also of great relevance for ESL students to discuss in order to understand American culture. According to the Swedish syllabus, the content of communication in the subject of English 7 should include: “societal issues, cultural, historical, political and social conditions, and also ethical and existential issues in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket, 2011, para 5). This is a topic that is also very relevant to upper secondary students in Sweden as well, since they take part of a society that is becoming increasingly multicultural. Also, drawing on the theory of critical pedagogy, questions regarding inequities in society should be addressed in classrooms so that students can express and share their thoughts with each other in order to expand their perspectives.

Conclusion

This project has illustrated how critical theory can be applied to a fictional text and provide a good foundation for the critical ESL classroom, in that it helps eliciting specific themes in literature that are relevant to the Swedish Upper Secondary ESL classroom. More specifically, it has shown how principles of Black feminist critical theory can enhance the understanding of Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* and help students make sense of underlying ideology that permeates the text and how they might relate it to their own lives. This is based on the idea that critically analyzing literature that depicts real world issues, means that students practice critically analyzing the world in which they themselves live. This project shows how Octavia Butler's *Kindred* can be used for this endeavor. The literary analysis of the novel shows how themes such as *The importance of heritage, Racism and sexism intersected* and *Equality in relationships*, relate to the teaching of ESL in Sweden.

It can also be concluded that by engaging in critical pedagogy and critical theory, ESL teachers can cover many of the exigencies expressed in the Swedish National Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School, such as implementing democratic working methods in the classroom, providing opportunity for students to develop their critical thinking skills and addressing inequality issues based on race and gender in the classroom. Introducing a novel such as *Kindred* in combination with critical theory could provide opportunity to cover all of these aspects.

In addition to the fact that teachers' practice must be based on scientific grounds and proven experience (Skolverket a, 2011, p. 4), the curriculum stresses that "students should develop their ability to think critically, examine facts and relationships, and appreciate the consequences of different alternatives. By these means students will come closer to scientific ways of thinking and working" (Skolverket, 2011, p. 5). Introducing students at upper secondary level to critical theory, can be a way in the right direction, since, as it has been

shown in this essay, it can be used to inform systematic research.

In this essay, it has been examined how a Black feminist lens can be applied to a text in order to enhance specific elements. However, as Appleman (2015) notes, it is important to not teach only one critical lens to students, since that would imply a propagandistic teaching; trying to transmit one's own ways of thinking onto students (p. 9), it is thus suggested that further research be conducted in the lines of analyzing *Kindred* from other critical lenses as well, before introducing students to the novel and the antebellum United States history. Alternatively, since it has been argued here that a Black feminist lens is appropriate for this particular novel, that teachers consider this essay an *example* on how critical analysis can be conducted and make sure to consider other lenses for other texts to include in their teaching of ESL.

Finally, future studies related to this project could include systematically examine and keeping notes of the learning outcomes of a teaching unit on the novel presented here, as with other novels, in connection to teaching critical theory. In this way, teachers can share their experiences with other ESL educators and contribute to “proven experience” as expressed in the Swedish National Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4), on which teachers are supposed to base their practices.

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