

# Tracy Chevalier's *Falling Angels* in the EFL classroom

*A study on the use of historical fiction in the language learning context*



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## Abstract

This investigation will analyze how the genre historical fiction, more specifically the novel *Falling Angels* (2001) written by Tracy Chevalier, can be used in the EFL (English as Foreign Language) classroom in upper secondary school in Sweden. It will argue that the different themes approached by the novel are interesting points of departure to be used in the classroom for both language learning and personal development, according to the requirements of the Swedish National Agency for Education. The investigation consists of an analysis of the novel using New Historicism as a theoretical framework and using as reference the Swedish national curriculum for upper secondary school, as well as the English and history syllabi. The genre historical fiction was chosen due to its popularity and possibility of discussing historical, social and cultural aspects of the countries where English is used. This particular novel was chosen for some reasons: the first is the narrative technique with first-person narration where almost all the characters have voice; the second reason is the variety of themes that could possibly emerge in classroom discussions. In addition, it is a contemporary representation of a historical moment, which may lead to different interpretations than those obtained from a novel written at the time it represents. The study suggests that the use of historical fiction and this particular novel in the EFL classroom in Sweden gives the teachers a large range of themes to work with, where the students can develop their language skills as well as historical, cultural and social awareness of themselves and the surrounding world. In addition, by using this novel or any historical novel in the EFL classroom, it is also possible to start a collaborative work between English and history, where both teachers and students can benefit from.

**Keywords:** historical novel, *Falling Angels*, EFL, new historicism, historical and cultural awareness

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## Introduction

Second language teaching and learning have been evolving along the years and teachers use several tools and ways for teaching and supporting the students. Literature has been one of these ways of teaching and dealing with a second or foreign language. The purpose of this study is to investigate how English teachers can use a specific genre of literature, historical fiction, in the EFL (English as Foreign Language) classroom to work with historical, cultural and social aspects of the countries where English is used. The focus of the investigation will be on the novel *Falling Angels* (2001), written by Tracy Chevalier.

*Falling Angels* is a novel that takes place in England during the transition from Queen Victoria to King Edward, and the main characters are the members of two families – Coleman and Waterhouse. They are surrounded by additional, but not less important, characters that enrich the narrative with social and cultural variety. The author uses first-person narration to tell the story and gives voice to almost all the characters mentioned, which allows the reader to see different perspectives of the same event. Later in the analysis, it will be possible to see how this narrative technique is related to the concept of ‘little narratives’, which will also be presented and discussed further. The novel works as a contemporary fictional representation of this important historical moment – the transition from the Victorian to the Edwardian era – and different themes related to the changes in society. *Falling Angels* is the third of Tracy Chevalier’s eight historical novels. Her novels are usually inspired by historical moments or historical personalities and are supported by her extensive research (Chevalier, 2016).

The analysis of the novel will be informed by a New Historicist perspective and will take into consideration the educational context in which the novel will be taught. Thus, besides the theoretical framework, three documents will be used to inform the analysis: the

curriculum for upper secondary school in Sweden, as well as the English and history syllabi. Due to the fact that the object of analysis is a historical novel, it is important to understand how history as a school subject is treated, and if there is any overlap between English and history that could be used to benefit the learning process. A collaborative work between the subjects could also benefit teachers and students by saving time and providing multiple exposures to the same discussion themes. The focus of the investigation is not the teaching of historical facts, but the awareness of historical, cultural and social aspects of the different societies where English is used, while learning and improving the language. The investigation will argue that by developing and working with historical, cultural and social awareness, the students also learn and improve the target language, in this case English.

Before starting this investigation, several studies on the use of historical fiction in the history, social studies and EFL classrooms were found and some of them will be used here. However, there are no previous studies on this specific novel in the EFL classroom. By focusing on how *Falling Angels*, as part of the historical fiction genre, can be used in the EFL classroom, I am hoping that my investigation will contribute to providing new material and new aspects of the teaching of English as a foreign language. These aspects should take into consideration not only the language itself, but also the world surrounding the language, which means, historical background, cultural features and social conditions of the countries where the language is used, as well as awareness of the students' own context.

# Background

## The Swedish educational context

Some of the fundamental values of the Swedish national school system are respect for human rights, respect for the intrinsic value of each person and the environment we all share (Skolverket, 2013, p. 3). The upper secondary school is also responsible for promoting “understanding of other people and the ability to empathise” (p. 4) and creating the “preconditions for students to acquire and develop their knowledge” (p. 5). Developing social and communicative competence and covering ethical, environmental, international and historical perspectives are also some of the tasks expected from the upper secondary school (p. 6). In summary, the school should prepare the individual for personal and working life.

Although all school subjects should follow the fundamental values mentioned above, each of them has different learning objectives. In the case of English, the syllabus for upper secondary school is very clear about the importance of English as language and as subject. It states that the language is used in diverse areas, it increases the individual’s opportunities to interact in different contexts, and it provides new perspectives on the surrounding world (Skolverket, 2011a, “English”).

English as a school subject aims to help students “to develop knowledge of language and the surrounding world so that they have the ability, desire and confidence to use English in different situations and for different purposes” (Skolverket, 2011a, “Aim of the subject”, para. 1). In addition, they should be given opportunities to develop communication skills, adapt language to different contexts and purposes, and the most relevant for this investigation – “[t]he ability to discuss and reflect on living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket, 2011a,

“Teaching in the subject of English...”). These course objectives, in addition to a new historicist perspective, will serve as the base for the analysis of the novel, which means analyzing how the novel covers or not the course objectives. The focus of this investigation is, therefore, on how historical fiction, particularly *Falling Angels*, can contribute to the historical, cultural and social discussions and reflections in the EFL classroom, since the novel illustrates some of the changes in society during the specific historical moment when it takes place.

Due to the fact that historical fiction has a relationship with history, the school subject history will be taken into consideration in this investigation as well. The purpose of the investigation is on how the historical novel *Falling Angels* can be used to promote historical, cultural and social awareness in the EFL classroom, so the historical events cannot be totally ignored. They are important because they are part of the history course and ignoring or teaching them in a wrong way in the EFL classroom could cause conflicts with the history subject. For this reason, the focus of this study is not on the teaching of such historical events in a linear way, but on an effort to promote interdisciplinary activities, which can only be accomplished by understanding how other subjects are taught. The Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket) describes history as “a humanistic and social science subject that deals with the individual’s conditions and changes in society over time. People’s opportunities and choices in the future are dependent not only on actions and events in the past, but also on making contemporary interpretations of these” (Skolverket, 2011b, “History”). Among the several goals of the history subject, the most relevant for this investigation is the “knowledge of time periods, processes of change, events and persons on the basis of different interpretations and perspectives” (Skolverket, 2011b, “Teaching in the subject of history...”). This agrees with one of English’s aims of discussing and reflecting on living conditions, social issues and cultural features of parts of the world where the language is used. The

combination of the above mentioned goals for the history course with those of the English course will allow the students to understand the different historical events, situate them in time and place, discuss and understand their consequences, how they affected society when they took place and how they affect society nowadays, how language evolved and was affected by them, and how the countries where English is used interacted and interact with the surrounding world.

### **Previous research on the use of literature and historical fiction in the EFL classroom**

Theories surrounding second language acquisition have been evolving for decades. The use of literature in the EFL classroom has also been discussed and questioned by many scholars (Yimwilai, 2015, p. 14). There are numerous studies about the use of historical fiction in the classroom, most of them related to its use in the social studies and history classrooms, but also in the L2 classroom (Hinton, Yonghee, Cólón-Brown & O’Hearn, 2014; Howell, 2014; Rycik & Rosler, 2009; Tegmark, 2012; Turk, Klein & Dickstein, 2009). Since this project takes an interdisciplinary approach, different studies will be used, regardless of whether their focus is on the L2 classroom or not. For instance, there is a study combining historical fiction in English with social studies, a study on the use of historical fiction with children and its benefits, and a study on how to use historical fiction with pre-service teachers and teach them to use it with their future students.

The most relevant for this investigation is very specific though, as it treats exactly the use of historical fiction in the EFL classroom in Sweden (Tegmark, 2012). The study argues for “an inclusive definition of culture in language teaching and learning, one which takes into account social practices in which the target language is used” and makes ‘culture’ become

both an object of study and a social practice among the students (p. 22). The author also argues that to fully understand the culture of a L2, the texts studied have to be analyzed through a historical perspective and with the development of a historical self-awareness among the L2 students (p. 22). In addition, the study analyzes *what*, *why* and *how* the aspects of culture and history can and should be part of all foreign and second language teaching and learning. Different literary works are analyzed through the theoretical framework of Jean-François Lyotard and his concept of ‘little narratives’ and Hayden White’s ‘narrative discourse’, besides the author’s personal experience at teaching English as a second and foreign language in Sweden.

The ‘little narratives’ consist of the alternative narratives, that is, to avoid the grand narratives that “still have a strong hold on how culture and history is understood – and taught – in educational settings around the world” (Tegmark, 2012, p. 24). Perceiving history as a collection of little narratives means to avoid focusing only on the history told by those who have power to decide how the facts will be told in the future, according to their own interests, and giving voice to those who usually are never heard. Later in the analysis, it will be possible to understand how the concept of ‘little narratives’ can be applied to some of the characters in *Falling Angels*, due to the novel’s first-person narrative structure. In addition, according to Tegmark (2012), in the EFL classroom, the study of cultural and historical aspects should focus on the human experience instead of just covering chronological historical events, that is, how people perceived the facts and changes (p. 26). The findings of the study show that by using historical fiction in the EFL classroom, teachers have an opportunity to provide students alternatives to the mainstream historical narratives, as well as to motivate them to engage critically in the literary studies. Also, this in-depth cultural understanding helps students develop self-awareness because in order to understand the others – different cultural and social groups – the students have to understand themselves, the context where they live in,

and how their own daily lives are affected by the public and historical events (Tegmark, 2012, p. 34).

Another relevant study for this investigation reports the results of an interdisciplinary study that aimed to make connections across content areas – English, history and social studies – at different grade levels (Hinton et al., 2014). The authors and participants – teachers of different subjects and grades – came to significant conclusions: firstly, teachers should build students’ historical background knowledge before asking them to engage with historical fiction (p. 22-23); secondly, one of the goals of using historical fiction involves nurturing historical empathy, which means seeing the historical events from the perspective of those whose goals and values are not necessarily the same as the historian’s (p. 23-24), and thirdly, pairing historical fiction with nonfiction promotes historical understanding and thinking in the classroom (p. 24). In addition, historical fiction gives the teachers an opportunity to “nurture children’s sensitivity toward the way the past is used for moral and ideological ends in the present” (p. 25), and the students should learn how to analyze historical fiction critically. Thus, by working with historical fiction, both the English and the social studies or history teachers would have an opportunity to place the historical fiction in the right context in response to the historical texts. In addition, that would give the students an opportunity to practice reading, writing and develop historical and cultural awareness.

According to Howell (2014), in recent years there has been a steady increase in the amount of fiction, TV shows and films inspired by historical events or figures (p. 1). Her study investigates this trend of the popularizing of history and how it can contribute to teaching and learning. It also questions if historical fiction could be used as an introduction to history as a school subject (p. 1). According to the author, history teachers, in particular, are worried about the historical inaccuracy, but many of them also argue that if the readers are aware that the literary work is only a representation of the historical events and do not take it

as their only source of evidence about such events, then it should serve as “entry point into the discipline” (p. 2). Historical fiction is a vehicle for learning about other people from the past, in a more accessible and personal language (p. 4), and as indicated above by Tegmark’s study, in the EFL classroom, historical fiction can serve to focus on the “human experience” of the historical events (2012, p. 26).

Focusing rather on the reader instead of on the historical events presented in historical novels, Nord’s study from 1988 discusses the importance of not just the historical context of the literary work, but also the importance of the historical context of the reader. The author claims that students should see themselves and the texts they read as part of an evolving analysis and concludes that “[i]t is not enough to teach that literary texts are rooted in a historical moment and exist in the context of a material and social history: we must also suggest that readers exist in history and that, for that reason, literary texts are forever changing” (p. 83). That means that the readers’ way of seeing a text changes according to the time they live in, which indicates the importance of being critical when reading an analysis or any literary work. In the next section, this idea will be further discussed when referring to New Historicism.

Different aspects of the use of literature and historical fiction in the classroom were presented here, and there are many points in their conclusions that might be helpful in this investigation. Most of what was concluded in these studies – ‘little narratives’ and the focus on the human experience, historical empathy, understanding of different perspectives and the importance of the context where the reader is inserted – reflects some of the school aims presented by the Swedish National Agency for Education and some of the course objectives for English and history that this investigation will be focusing on. As can be seen, this seems to be an indication that historical fiction is indeed a good classroom material. Despite this initial indication, the investigation will proceed to provide additional elements on that,

focusing more specifically on *Falling Angels*. Next, the methodology and theory will be presented, before reaching the analysis of our object of study.

## **Method & Theory**

The starting point of this investigation is a close reading of the novel *Falling Angels* (2001) with focus on the elements from the English and history syllabi for upper secondary school in Sweden that were mentioned in the background section. That means reading the novel with the purpose of understanding, reflecting and discussing the living conditions, social and cultural aspects presented in it. In addition, reflecting on how what is presented in the novel differ among the countries where English is used and the world in general. Another important point to consider in this close reading is the understanding of historical periods and events, how they changed the surrounding world and how they might still reflect on our current lives. Although the focus of the investigation is not the teaching of history, it is important to be aware of how the subject is taught, the course goals, as well as what is required from the history teachers in the classroom. Nowadays, teachers are encouraged to cooperate with each other and, in order to plan future interdisciplinary collaboration, they have to be aware of how other subjects are taught. Working simultaneously on the same themes, but focusing on different aspects, could save some time for the teachers as well as for the students.

The analysis will take into consideration which themes presented in the novel are relevant to work with in the classroom according to the English and history syllabi's goals previously mentioned. In addition, the themes will be discussed considering how teachers and students can work with them, the benefits of focusing on such themes in the classroom, and

how the English language can benefit from that. Besides the objectives of the English and history syllabi, the analysis will be informed by a new historicist perspective, since the focus of the investigation is on a historical novel. The importance of this genre will also be taken into consideration to both justify the choice and how it can add value to the work in the classroom.

Nunan (2013) states that in qualitative research “all knowledge is relative, that there is a subjective element to all knowledge and research, and that holistic, ungeneralisable studies are justifiable [...] the insights and outcomes generated by the research cannot be applied to contexts or situations beyond those in which the data were collected” (p. 3). With that in mind, this investigation can be qualified as a content qualitative analysis since it is a subjective interpretation of the novel considering specific objectives of the school documents and having New Historicism as theoretical framework. Although much of the discussion surrounding the historical novel genre can be applied to different works, the focus here will still be on *Falling Angels* and how it can be used in the EFL classroom in Sweden.

## **New Historicism**

This investigation has as its object of study a historical novel. A traditional historian would probably focus on history or on the historical events when reading a historical novel. However, as mentioned before, the focus here is not on the teaching of history or historical events, but on the awareness of the social, cultural and historical aspects of the societies where the English language is used.

According to Tyson (2015) history is a “series of events that have a *linear, causal* relationship” (p. 268). The author also argues that historians are human beings, who live in a particular time and place, and for this reason, their views of the facts are also influenced by

their own experience and culture, which makes their interpretation subjective, even though they might believe they are being objective (p. 269). On the other hand, a new historicist does not believe that we have access to more than the basic facts of history and our understanding of what such facts mean is a matter of interpretation (p. 268-269).

*Falling Angels* is a fictional representation and a contemporary revisiting of some historical events, for instance how some groups mourned the death of Queen Victoria, the first years of the Edwardian era, and the women's suffrage movement. Such events were, in turn, also interpreted by the multiple historians. As mentioned before, according to New Historicism, historians are not completely objective in their interpretations since they are influenced by their own experience, culture and the surrounding circumstances (Tyson, 2015, p. 271). In addition, when presented to the readers, in this case the upper secondary students, the novel will also go through multiple interpretations. The students come from different backgrounds and their interpretations may vary according to their life experiences.

Another important aspect that New Historicism stands for is the focus on the historical narratives of marginalized peoples and on the plurality of voices, in order to ensure that a “*master narrative* – a narrative told from a single cultural point of view [...] will no longer control our historical understanding” (Tyson, 2015, p. 273). It is possible to connect this idea with Lyotard's concept of “little narratives” mentioned by Tegmark (2012, p. 24) and described above in the background section. The little narratives are told by the marginalized peoples who usually do not have power to influence others. Narratives of private life are also usually ignored by traditional historicism and considered subjective and irrelevant. New historicism, however, makes issues related to private life a part of historical inquiry (Tyson, 2015, p.274). Later in the analysis, it will become clear how *Falling Angels* gives voice to marginalized peoples and focus on private life issues at the same time that illustrates a historical period. For all these reasons, the analysis of *Falling Angels* will be informed by the

perspective of New Historicism, as the purpose is not to discuss the historical events in a linear and progressive way, but to analyze the consequences and interpretations of these events.

## **The Historical novel**

Previous researches have presented the benefits of working with historical novel in the classroom, whether it is English, social studies or history. Some mentioned its popularity and some mentioned the risks of not using it right. A definition of what the historical novel is has not been clearly presented though. De Groot (2010) defines the historical novel as a complex genre that mixes sub-genres and types of writers with different characteristics:

Historical writing can take place within numerous fictional locales: romance, detective, thriller, counterfactual, horror, literary, gothic, postmodern, epic, fantasy, mystery, western, children's book. Indeed, the intergeneric hybridity and flexibility of historical fiction have long been one of its defining characteristics (p. 2).

De Groot (2010) also mentions the multiple audiences and the great variety of authors within the historical novel, which makes possible, according to the author, to link the contemporary Tracy Chevalier (1962- ) with the 19<sup>th</sup> century George Eliot (1819-1880), or Ellis Peter (1913-1995) with Pat Baker (1943- ), for instance (p. 2). Still according to de Groot (2010), the genre of historical novel has a special concern with social movement and empathy, usually not present in the "more individualistic novel form [...] born of autobiographical, personal, revelatory narratives" (p. 2). However, the two kinds of novels have in common the realism, development of character and engagement from the reader with a set of ideas that might be familiar or not for him or her (de Groot, 2010, p. 4). Furthermore, according to de Groot (2010), "historical novels have often been used to reinsert communities

into the past” (p. 148), that is, to give voice to those who had been forgotten by the “master narratives” and see different points of view. Here, it is possible to notice a clear connection between historical novels and new historicism, since one of the main ideas behind the new historicist perspective is that the marginalized peoples’ narratives are also important and should also be taken into consideration when talking about history (Tyson, 2015, p. 274). This agrees as well with Lyotard’s concept of “little narratives” mentioned by Tegmark (2012, p. 24) and described here previously.

The interest in narratives that one can relate to is probably one of the reasons why in the last decades there has been an explosion in the sales and popularity of historical novels and other forms of the genre historical fiction (de Groot, 2010, p. 1; Howell, 2014, p. 1). Howell (2014) also pointed out, as mentioned before, that the genre can serve as an entry point to the study of history (p. 2). The combination of popularity, of being an opportunity to get into the subject, reading alternative narratives that had been forgotten or ignored, and discussing their interpretations and representations seem to be very good arguments to believe that the genre can and should be used in the EFL classroom. These and other arguments will be taken into consideration next, when the novel will be analyzed.

## **Analysis**

As mentioned previously, the novel will be analyzed from a new historicist perspective and taking into consideration its utility in the EFL classroom according to the course objectives presented in the background section of this investigation. The analysis will provide first a brief description of the plot to help the reader understand the historical moment in discussion. As the focus is on how the historical novel can be used in the classroom, the

investigation continues with an analysis of the specific historical facts or events mentioned in the novel and how they can or should be approached in the classroom. Then, the mourning etiquette is analyzed, since it is one of the main themes in the novel and during the Victorian era, which is partially represented in the novel. An analysis of the social classes and the little narratives is presented next, followed by an analysis of how the language is presented and how it can be used in the classroom. Considering that the focus of this investigation is on how to work with the novel in the EFL classroom, language is an element that should not be ignored.

A brief description of *Falling Angels*' plot will be helpful to understand the analysis of the historical moment in question. The narrative begins in 1901, after Queen Victoria's death, and has the members of two families as main characters. They live in the same neighborhood, but there are some differences between them. The Colemans are wealthy, have a higher social position, and are more open to the changes in society, while the Waterhouses belong to a slightly lower social class and live quite attached to the Victorian traditions and social conventions. Their daughters, Maude and Lavinia, become best friends and spend a lot of time together. A cemetery is their favorite place and where they meet Simon, the gravedigger's son, who becomes their friend and shows them a way of seeing life different from their middle-class outlook.

Besides the members of the two families and their personal narratives, there are also other important characters that contribute to the representation of many spheres of the English society of the time in question. This analysis will argue that the variety of characters – females, males and children of higher and lower social classes – represent both the master but mostly the little and alternative narratives, as described previously. In addition, the narrative shows us the first years of the transition from the Victorian era and its several decades of influence to the new days of the Edwardian era. Some aspects presented during this transition

are, for instance, extramarital affair, the women's suffragette movement, the mourning etiquette and even, abortion. Almost all the characters in the novel have voice and tell the story in first person, giving the reader different perspectives of the facts. As shown above, social, historical and linguistic aspects of the novel will be analyzed in this study and informed by the perspective of New Historicism, as well as their applicability in the EFL classroom.

### **History in *Falling Angels***

In terms of the historical moment it represents, the novel provides some references to guide the readers – the narrative starts on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1901 and it ends somewhere in May 1910, which means the first years of the Edwardian Era. *Falling Angels* starts with a strong argument for those who claim that historical novels are not accurate – the death of Queen Victoria. In the novel, she is already dead at the turn of the century, but Queen Victoria died actually on January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1901 (Royal Family History, 2016), which makes one question the reliability of what is being read or even if the readers would learn the wrong facts. This could cause some confusion in an educational environment. However, it is the teacher's responsibility to clarify that the novel is fiction and counts as a representation of life, as mentioned previously by Howell (2014), and it serves as an entry point into the discipline of history (p. 2). In addition, the focus here does not seem to be the death of the Queen, but its consequences to society and, as it will be shown more closely later in the analysis, the narratives of regular people that would probably not be taken into consideration by the master narratives that describe historical facts, which is one of the aspects that New Historicism stands for (Tyson, 2015, p. 273). Another argument to the fact that Queen Victoria's death is being used more as a representation of a historical moment than with the purpose to teach

historical dates, is the fact that Kitty Coleman mentions that she “secretly hoped that the change in the century would bring a change in us all; that England would miraculously slough off her shabby black coat to reveal something glittering and new” (Chevalier, 2006, p. 5). The shabby black coat here is a reference to Queen Victoria, as it is well known that she mourned the death of her husband until her own death. The feeling of hope for a new time is represented by Queen Victoria’s death being put together with the turn of the century in a symbolic way. In this sense, according to Allison L. Baer in Hinton et al. (2014), when pairing fiction and nonfiction, the differences should be highlighted when it is important, but “fictional texts read better than informational texts” (p. 25). In this case, it means that the students might forget the exact date of Queen Victoria’s death, but they will probably never forget that she died around the turn of the century because they will remember the novel.

Later, there is another mention to a historical figure. In a very short reference that does not detract the readers from understanding the story, Guy Fawkes is mentioned – “[w]e stood around an enormous bonfire on Parliament Hill, clutching our sausages and baked potatoes, and marvelling that we where gathered on the very hill where Guy Fawkes waited to see the Parliament burn” (Chevalier, 2006, p. 67). Guy Fawkes was and still is a very important personality in the country (BBC History, 2016). This is a short reference about a historical figure that lived in a time different from the time represented in the novel. Many readers might not notice it or understand it, especially in the Swedish context, but in the English class, it could serve as an opportunity to give the students more information about England’s history and cultural features, as mentioned by Skolverket’s English syllabus (2011a, “Aim of the subject”, para. 2) and Tegmark (2012, p. 21). Hinton et al. (2014) also agree that the English teacher has, through the use of historical fiction, an opportunity to discuss historical facts and provide the students with some context, which helps them make sense of texts set in the past (p. 23).

## **The mourning etiquette and the cemetery representing society**

As the novel represents the first years of the Edwardian era after several decades under the influence of Queen Victoria, it is clear that many traces of her reign are still present in how the characters are portrayed. Evidence to this is how much some of the characters discuss the mourning rituals, which, as just mentioned above, was very important to Queen Victoria. The Waterhouses are very attached to the Victorian traditions and both the mother Gertrude and the daughter Lavinia follow carefully the rules defined by the Queen. It is so important for them that Lavinia even writes her own manual to help other girls in her position with “the correct etiquette for mourning” (Chevalier, 2006, p. 125). Considering how important the mourning rituals were for Queen Victoria and the long period she reigned, this aspect cannot be ignored in the literature or history classes related to this period of England’s history.

The mourning rituals affected not only how people dressed and mourned, but also how people from different religions and cultural backgrounds were buried. There is a passage where Maude Coleman learns that there is a Dissenters’ section in the cemetery, which means all those who are not part of Church of England, such as Catholics, Baptists, Methodists and others. The suicides are also buried in the same section (Chevalier, 2006, p. 59). This places the members of Church of England in a higher position and limits all those who are from different cultural backgrounds to a specific section of the cemetery, even after their death. Rycik and Rosler (2009) argue that “good historical fiction creates an emotional connection between children of today and their historical counterparts” (p. 163), which is related to Howell’s idea that one of historical fiction’s strengths is the fact that it requires seeing the historical event, era or figure from “within”, with a personal and participatory perspective (2014, p. 4). That means that any reader, not only children, connects and compares the reading with their own lives. In this specific case, religious habits and conflicts are presented. Religion is a sensitive subject and there are many religious conflicts all over the world. The

English teacher can choose to discuss only the religious aspects of the countries where English is used, with the example above, or expand it and transport the discussion to how it is nowadays. And even if the discussion does not focus on the conflicts and habits, it could provide the students with a specific vocabulary of the different religions that they may not have opportunity to learn and use otherwise.

Although religion and cultural background are strongly related to the mourning rituals, these are not the only aspects represented in the cemetery. The mourning rituals also seem to differ according to the social class to which one belongs. Edith Coleman, the grandmother, shows clearly how the cemetery and the grave can be a symbol of status:

When my husband and I were married he brought me to the cemetery to show me the Coleman family grave, and I was all the more certain that I had chosen well in a husband. It looked to be a solid, safe and orderly place [...] but I recognised them as features that have established the reputation of the cemetery as the preferred burial place of our class (Chevalier, 2006, p. 95).

As a result, the cemetery serves as a representation of a small scale of the society with its social, cultural and historical differences, where status and religion follow one to the grave. In terms of New Historicism, Tyson (2015) states that the detailed examination of cultural production, for example ritual ceremonies, works of art and others, is an opportunity to discover the meanings that such events had for the participants and the community they lived in. This is called *thick description*, a term borrowed from anthropology, and it focuses on the personal side of history instead of the traditional historical facts and topics (p. 274).

## **The representation of the social classes**

Leaving the cemetery but still discussing the different social classes, the novel portrays the Colemans as members of a higher class, followed by the Waterhouses, the funeral director John Jackson and, at the very bottom, Simon Field, the gravedigger's son. Gertrude Waterhouse shows on several occasions how uncomfortable she feels in the presence of Kitty Coleman and even when having her "At Homes", she prefers to use the front parlor since "it is out of view of the Coleman's house" (Chevalier, 2006, p. 111-112). John Jackson belongs to a lower class: "[h]e is not a prosperous man, though he is not poor either. He is not from a good family. He does not attend supper parties or the theatre or openings to exhibitions. He is not an educated man, though he is learned" (Chevalier, 2006, p. 120). Simon Field represents the lower class as it is known that being a gravedigger is part of his family's history. His grandfather was, his father is and he will probably become one. In one occasion, he comes to the Colemans to eat something, invited by the maid Jenny Whitby, and takes the chance to go around the house without being noticed. While his family lives in a back-to-back house with two rooms for five people, the Colemans' house has several rooms, with doors made of oak, shiny brass handles and a modern bathroom – a room that he has only heard about. The differences are very clear and he gets really impressed: "I think of the privy and bucket me and our Pa use, and it's so different from this they don't even seem like they're for the same thing" (Chevalier, 2006, p. 165).

What these and other passages represent is not exclusively the division of social classes in England at that time, but how these divisions and the conventions created by such divisions affected people. That has also a direct connection with the *thick description* mentioned in the previous topic, where there is a focus on the private life, usually ignored by traditional history

(Tyson, 2015, p. 274). The way Gertrude Waterhouse behaves is related to her feeling inferior to Kitty Coleman and forced her to make decisions based on this feeling. As Tegmark (2012) pointed out, “factual” textbooks probably do not describe such feelings, but literature can illustrate them and help the students see history with focus on the human experience of the events (p. 26). Tegmark (2012) also argues that this personal involvement with historical events through literature motivates students “to find out more about the historical (political, economic, social, etc.) ‘background’ of the story” and understand the little narratives better (p. 26). The little narratives will be discussed further in the following.

### **The little narratives in the novel**

Although Simon is just the gravedigger’s son and not a member of one of the two main families in the story, he is definitely a very important character. He is not as well educated as Maude and Lavinia, but at times, he seems to know more about life than the girls. He demonstrates knowledge in working with the soil at the cemetery and is capable of describing how a grave is dug, but he also seems to understand what the adults are doing around him. He knows, for instance, that Jenny Whitby is having an affair with the cemetery’s gardener and uses inappropriate language to explain this to the girls. Later, when Jenny is pregnant but Maude is told that she is ill, it is Simon again who tries to explain the situation (Chevalier, 2006, p. 159). And he even suggests that Jenny should have visited his mother, who “delivers babies”, for an abortion (Chevalier, 2006, p. 163). It is not revealed in the narrative how old he is, but he is probably not much older than the girls, considering that he plays with them, and in the beginning of the novel they are five years old. His knowledge of life, in comparison with the girls’, demonstrates the differences between how children lived in higher and lower classes. The former living a more protected life, isolated from the problems, while the latter

totally exposed to the circumstances and language that they repeat with no filter. Waterhouse (2003) mentions in his book review that Maude and Lavinia “learn [from Simon] things about their families which their middle-class innocence has prevented them from seeing” (p. 229).

That is true; Simon is much more than a gravedigger’s son. He gives the reader material to reflect on social classes, children’s life, perspectives and opportunities. His strong voice in the narrative is also a way to show a perspective other than the mainstream history that is usually told. It could be called a *little narrative* or an alternative narrative, as explored by Tegmark (2012), one that is not told by those who have the socioeconomic power and the knowledge (p. 25). In agreement with the concept of little narratives, Turk, Klein and Dickstein (2007) state that “literature is also a powerful tool for integrating and highlighting voices from the past – especially those of children, minorities, women, and the poor – that may not be those generally heard or read by students in their historical studies” (p. 397). To put it in another way, the historical studies usually focus on the collectives, on the big social, economic and structural changes in society, while literature can zoom in on how such changes affect specific people and how they feel about it.

Simon is not alone in representing the little narratives. Jenny Whitby, for example, illustrates how a young and poor housemaid had to deal with working to survive and help her mother, hiding a pregnancy, and being apart from her son in order to be able to work. She is a woman, she is poor, she is not educated, and she has to deal with this entire situation on her own. Society at this time would not accept an unmarried woman to have a child and still be considered an honored woman. Being a woman was not easy at this time, no matter the social class, and Kitty Coleman illustrates this clearly. After giving birth to Maude, she did not want more children but she did not know what to do to prevent a new pregnancy. When asking the doctor for help, he explains how her fertile period works, but requires that she pays an expensive price by having sex with him (Chevalier, 2006, p. 69). This shows that even though

she is an educated woman, she has no access to essential information on how her body works, and such information was retained by men, in this case her doctor, who takes advantage of her situation.

In another occasion that also shows how being a woman was tough at the time represented in the novel, Edith, Kitty's mother-in-law, believes that Kitty should behave less like a man, expressing that she has a strong attitude towards life and wants to have more power than a woman needs (Chevalier, 2006, p. 96). When discussing what a girl should learn or not, she is very clear that Maude should play the piano, sew, and stop reading so much, since "[t]hat won't get a girl anywhere. It'll just put ideas in her head. [...] She won't be satisfied with her life if she has ideas [...] 'Like you'", referring to Kitty (Chevalier, 2006, p. 77-78). Kitty feels that her life is empty and would like to work or have a daily activity, instead of just being at home. This makes her join the woman's suffrage movement later in the novel, which changes the life of her family completely. Kitty Coleman and her new friend from the women's suffrage movement, Caroline Black, want equality and want to be able to vote. Caroline Black summarizes well when answering Edith Coleman's comment that women do not need to vote since their men do it. Caroline says: "There are plenty of unmarried women – myself included – deserving of representation," [...] 'Besides, a woman doesn't always have the same views as her husband.'" (Chevalier, 2006, p. 215). These passages represent how women in general were seen by those who had power and even by conservative women who were in agreement with the status quo. Again, despite the social class, women had no voice and for this reason, whether the character is a poor housemaid or a rich educated woman, it is possible to affirm that they represent the little or alternative narratives, and add important value to this fictional representation.

These are just some examples of how poor people and women lived back then. The historical novel illustrates socioeconomic aspects and conditions from "within" and focusing

on the “human experience”, bringing the forgotten voices back from the past to discuss their situations (Howell, 2014, p. 4; Tegmark, 2012, p. 26; Turk et al., 2007, p. 397). Sara L. Schwebel in Hinton et al. (2014) states that “historical fiction provides incomparable opportunities for teachers to nurture children’s sensitivity toward the way the past is used for moral and ideological ends in the present” (p. 25). In other words, the teachers can use literature and historical fiction to illustrate how the past was in a less theoretical way, and encourage the students to discuss and understand the problems that should be avoided in the future. From a new historicist perspective, history is a text that can be interpreted the same way as literary texts are interpreted, and literary texts can be used to provide additional aspects of the time it represents (Tyson, 2015, p. 272). For this reason, literary texts, or in this case, historical fiction, can and should be used to provide the students additional elements to traditional historical narrative.

So far, this investigation has focused on historical, social and cultural aspects of the English society represented in *Falling Angels*. Several arguments were provided as to why these aspects should be considered in the classroom when working with the novel. However, none of them can be discussed without the help of language. Considering that the target group is a language class, more specifically EFL, it sounds logical that the linguistic aspects of the novel are also analyzed. Therefore, the language used will be analyzed next.

## **The language**

Language is a key aspect in the EFL classroom and there are several ways to explore it. A historical novel can serve as a tool to show how language was used, which words were used and by whom, and whether it was used to exercise power over minorities. In the case of *Falling Angels*, the readers will notice that the language differs according to the social class to

which the character belongs. Maude, for instance, calls her parents Mummy and Daddy, while Lavinia says Mama and Papa, and Simon Ma and Pa. The girls even question this difference and Lavinia says that “Mama and Papa is much more elegant.” (Chevalier, 2006, p. 10). Even though Maude belongs to a slightly higher class, Lavinia’s family gives much more importance to the traditions than the Colemans, which could justify their choice. Just these six forms of the words mother and father would be sufficient to work with during a whole EFL class, discussing whether their use changed or not in England, then expanding the discussion to the other countries where English is used.

The expressions used by Simon when referring to Jenny’s love affair with the gardener and her pregnancy are also examples of how the language is used within the different social classes. He uses language that the girls do not understand to refer to the affair – “Oh, him. He’ll be knocking her, then.’ ‘What, someone’s hitting Jenny?’” (Chevalier, 2006, p. 58-59). Then, when Jenny has to leave the Colemans to give birth, he explains to Maude why with the same inappropriate language that he used to refer to the affair – “She’s not ill,’ Simon said. ‘She’s banged up.’” (Chevalier, 2006, p. 159). Even Mrs. Baker, the other servant at the Colemans, reacts when Maude repeats that Jenny was “banged up” and asks Simon if he was teaching her “this filthy language” (Chevalier, 2006, p. 159). Even though Simon is poor and not educated, the language he uses gives him power over the girls of a higher social class, which is enough to illustrate how important language is.

As a matter of fact, Thi My Van (2009) analyzes different approaches of teaching literature in the EFL classroom and one of the approaches, critical literacy, reveals the interrelationship between language use and social power. The author mentions that many EFL classrooms neglect the social aspects of language and how texts deal with issues of ideology and power relations in society (p. 7). This approach would, then, serve to help the students question the status quo presented as obvious and unchangeable by some texts (p. 8). This

agrees with the new historicist perspective that wants to give voice to those who are usually forgotten, and understand how their personal narratives are placed in the grand narratives. By discussing how the characters use language, it is possible to see how Simon, for instance, has power over Maude and Lavinia, even though he belongs to a lower social class. His ‘inappropriate’ language, unknown for girls of this age and social class, gives him an unconscious power, as he owns knowledge over them. His intention is to explain to them what is going on with Jenny, but he does not manage because they are not aware of what the expressions he uses mean. New historicists also claim that power does not come only from the top but it circulates in all directions (Tyson, 2015, p. 270). In this sense, Thi My Van (2009) suggests that critical literacy should “encourage learners to explore how social and political factors shape the language they are learning” (p. 8). Equally important in this investigation is Skolverket’s recommendation that “spoken language, also with different social and dialect features” should be part of the core content of the English course for upper secondary (Skolverket, 2011a, “Core content: Reception”). Therefore, it is essential that the students have access to the contemporary language as well as the language used previously and by different groups of people, to understand its evolution along the years.

## **Discussion**

This analysis aimed to discuss the main themes represented in the novel *Falling Angels* and how an EFL class could benefit from a discussion of them. When discussing the historical events or figures, the teacher becomes responsible for informing the students about the fact that they are reading a fictional representation of the past, as well as explaining that all representations and interpretations of the past are influenced by author’s own experiences. By discussing the mourning etiquette, the EFL class has an opportunity to discuss religion,

traditions and conventions from the past and relate them to the present through an emotional connection that comes from seeing the past from 'within', as described by Howell (2014) and mentioned in this analysis several times.

The portrayal of the characters shows a division of social classes and how this division affects their lives in different ways, depending on whether they are men, women, rich, poor, adults or children. One of the consequences of this division in social classes is that some people have more power than the others, and they are usually those who will dictate what and how history is told in the future. In contrast, there are those whose narratives are usually forgotten since they have no power, the minorities and their little or alternative narratives, described by Tegmark (2012) and Turk et al. (2007), and also mentioned in this investigation in several occasions. The last aspect approached in this analysis was how the language in the novel can be used in the EFL classroom, whether focusing on its form and how different words were used, or focusing on its role and social aspects.

By working with these aspects in the EFL classroom, the English teacher will be able to approach several points present in the curriculum for upper secondary school in Sweden, as well as specific learning objectives of English and history subjects. "An international perspective is important to be able to understand one's own reality in a global context and in order to create international solidarity. [...] A historical perspective in teaching enables students to develop an understanding of the present, and a preparedness for the future" (Skolverket, 2013, p. 6). So, as stated earlier in this investigation, the English teaching in Sweden implies more than just language teaching, it is also a preparation for life in a multicultural society with all its challenges.

## Conclusion

This investigation sought to analyze how historical fiction, and more specifically the novel *Falling Angels*, can be used in the EFL classroom in upper secondary in Sweden. The study was informed by New Historicism and used some of the objectives of the Swedish national curriculum for upper secondary, as well as the English and history syllabi as reference. The focus was on the awareness of historical, cultural and social aspects of the different societies where English is used, while learning and improving the English language.

As mentioned in the introduction, there was no previous research on this novel which focused on teaching it in the EFL classroom. Therefore, one of the objectives of this investigation was also providing an analysis of a contemporary novel that does not appear among the most read novels in secondary schools. This could serve, then, as an alternative for English teachers looking for new texts to work with. For future investigations, it would be possible to perform an empirical survey among students and teachers who have worked with the novel in the classroom in order to confirm whether the aspects analyzed here work or not as material in the EFL classroom.

In summary, it is possible to suggest that the use of historical fiction in the EFL classroom gives the teachers many possibilities to work with. It also gives the students an opportunity to develop their language skills while developing self- and collective awareness. Particularly in the case of *Falling Angels*, the novel contains many elements that agree with some of the objectives described in the English and history syllabi. The themes analyzed in this investigation are just some of the possibilities, and it is possible to affirm that the novel can be further explored both in the English and history classrooms.

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