

Historical fiction in EFL education

Using The Book Thief to promote fundamental values and interdisciplinary work



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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to analyze the contemporary historical fictional novel *The Book Thief* (2005) by Markus Zusak through the perspective of New Historicism. The investigation seeks to investigate if this particular novel can be used in English education in a Swedish upper secondary school to promote learning and discussion of human rights, values and democracy. This essay also researches if there are any benefits or disadvantages using historical fiction to collaborate interdisciplinary with the subject history. To conduct this investigation, a close reading of the novel *The Book Thief* was performed and analyzed through the perspective of New Historicism as well as a close reading of the syllabus for English and History for upper secondary school in Sweden as well as a close reading of the curriculum for upper secondary school in Sweden. This study has shown that the themes brought up in *The Book Thief* can be used in the teaching of English in Swedish upper secondary school to discuss and work with human rights and fundamental values and that literature can be a gateway to integrate these subjects in to everyday teaching. Historical fiction, and in particular the novel *The Book Thief*, has through this study proven a good complement for battling xenophobia and develop a greater understanding of not only different cultures and people but an understanding of history. This study also concludes that historical fictional novels can be a tool to develop a greater historical understanding and historical empathy.

Keywords: Historical fiction, fundamental values, human rights, interdisciplinary work

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Introduction

Teachers at upper secondary school in Sweden are required to incorporate values, human rights, democracy and solidarity between people into the teaching of every subject. This is stated in the curriculum for upper secondary school by The Swedish National Agency for Education but as it is not stated explicitly how to incorporate these, sometimes delicate subjects, this is something teachers struggle with putting into practice.

Through the values taught by the school, the pupils are supposed to become prepared for their future life, that being in further studies, societal life, working life and everyday life (Skolverket, 2013, p. 8). Thus, the school has an immense responsibility to foster pupils to become empathic, understanding, knowledgeable and tolerant citizens of our society (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4). Therefore, it is important that the work with fundamental values is not disregarded due to lack of time or not being able to understand how to incorporate it into everyday education.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how contemporary historical fiction, and in particular the novel *The Book Thief* (2005) written by Markus Zusak, can be used in English education in Sweden. The investigation aims to explore if this particular novel can provide a discussion about values, human rights and democracy as well as creating an awareness of history, which in collaboration with a history teacher could be beneficial. The ambition with this investigation is to explore if it is possible to use *The Book Thief* as a vehicle for integrating values into the English education in Sweden through literature and history which could possibly also aid teachers in their work with values.

The novel was written in 2005 by Markus Zusak and is a work of fiction, with the exception of historical facts, which would categorize this novel as historical fiction. According to Encyclopædia Britannica a historical novel is a novel that takes place in a historic setting and aims to convey the spirit, social conditions and manners of this particular

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time (“Historical novel”, n.d.). To analyze the historical events taking place in the novel I will be using the New Historical perspective as a theoretical framework together with a close reading of the syllabi for the subjects English and history. I will also perform a close reading of the curriculum for upper secondary school to connect it to the Swedish educational context and the values the school is required to teach. A more in depth explanation of New Historicism and how to use this framework in an analysis of a novel will follow in the theory section of this essay. To be able to investigate and to support my claims I will in this study also inform about previous research on historical fiction, integrating values in the education and working interdisciplinary with English and history.

Previous research

Previous research on the specific subject of the benefits of using historical fiction in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms in Sweden to promote English learning, nurture democratic values and compassion as well as using historical fiction interdisciplinary in history class, has proven difficult to find. However, studies on possible benefits and drawbacks of using historical fiction to promote historic awareness and knowledge of historical facts and if literature can help develop compassion, empathy and understanding of other people has been easier to find and consequently that is the kind of previous research I have used to legitimize my own findings and analysis later in this essay. Studies that combine English studies with other subjects such as social studies have also been used in my analysis together with my own findings to support claims that history and English could be used beneficially interdisciplinary. Some of the previous research used in this essay does not focus on EFL but on English as a Second Language (henceforth abbreviated as ESL) or English as a first language but they are still considered relevant to my essay as they focus on the interdisciplinary work between English and history/social studies.

Historical fiction and interdisciplinary work

Beginning with the previous research on historical fiction and interdisciplinary work, Short (1997) claims that fiction and autobiographies have the power to promote "historical insight, knowledge, and understanding" (p. 179) with the prerequisite that the literature is chosen judiciously by the teacher. This is also supported by Hinton, Suh, Colón-Brown and O'Hearn (2014) who draw the conclusion that historical fiction can promote knowledge as well as historical empathy and historical awareness if the students are provided with contextualization and enough historical background before reading the novel. Short (1997) further states that historical fiction can help excite students when it comes to history and help them sustain their historical interest. Nonetheless, Short (1997) claims that there are dangers using literature to promote historical knowledge and uses examples from Holocaust education from schools in England in Wales where he claims that fiction containing tendencies, neglect of the history of anti-Semitism and other marginalized groups and a stereotypical and faulty depiction of Jews as alien residents in Germany. Those kind of factual errors might in worst case create polarization and the use of the term "Germans and Jews" is another example by Short (1997, p. 181) that can create this kind of misconceptions.

The study previously mentioned by Hinton et al. (2014) is of particular interest for this essay as one of the novels the study uses and exemplify from is *The Book Thief*. Hinton et al. (2014) concludes that contextualization is crucial when it comes to the use historical fiction if the students are going to be able to understand the characters and the circumstances surrounding them, "How and why individuals acted as they did is tied to what was going on in the world around them- that cannot be separated. Knowing and understanding that context and the chronology of that context allows the reader to have a true understanding of the characters in the novel" (Hinton et al., 2014, p. 23). This is also supported by Hicks and Martin (1997) who state that after their study the pupils who were both taught about The Dark Ages as well

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as instructed to read historical fiction on the subject developed a more rounded view of the Medieval Period than the control group that did not read any historical fiction on the subject.

A fourth study in connection to historical fiction is by Tegmark (2012) which aims to explain *how*, *what* and *why* culture can and should be used in language education. This is a study about foreign language learning in a Swedish context which makes it relevant for my study. Tegmark argues that fiction can function as a gateway for students to develop their interest in history and acquire "a better understanding of the complexity of historical representation, public memory and self-identity" (Tegmark, 2012, p. 22).

In addition, Tegmark claims that the so called grand narratives of history are still the ones being taught in educational settings all over the world. These narratives shape our view of history and culture and he therefore argues that exposing students to "little narratives" will make the students learn about conflicting narratives and perspectives (Tegmark, 2012, p. 25). This is further explained by stating that the students then can discover that their previous knowledge of a historical event is based on one historical narrative out of many and that there are often a range of narratives to the same event (Tegmark, 2012).

For my analysis of *The Book Thief* and how this novel can promote positive benefits for learning English and history, the part of Tegmark's study that had most relevance was where he explains that the focus of the subject history is usually to inform the pupils of historical events. To complement this knowledge, literary studies in foreign language class can aid by focusing on the "human experience" of historical events brought up in history class (Tegmark, 2012, p. 26). However, Tegmark concludes that historical fiction is not better than historical facts when it comes to learning about history but that there is value in presenting alternative representations of history and peoples life's that the pupils might not come across otherwise and that the L2 classroom can play an important role in this (Tegmark, 2012).

Lastly, Hinton et al. (2014) also argues that interdisciplinary work between the two disciplines English and history/social studies has benefits but that there are concerns in regard to how time-consuming a collaboration might be for the teachers.

Norms and values through literature

When it comes to previous research regarding working with norms and values in the school the doctoral dissertation by Alkestrand (2016) where she addresses the work teachers are required to do in class in regards to fostering values and norms in the Swedish school has been used for this essay. The central part of her investigation revolves around the question if fantasy literature can be used as a vehicle to discuss democracy, human rights and multiculturalism (Alkestrand, 2016). My investigation has similar aims but will aim at looking at historical fiction as the vehicle of choice. Nevertheless, Alkestrand's (2016) doctoral dissertation is previous research on the benefits of incorporating the work with norms and values in to the education through literature. Alkestrand (2016) states that fictional literature indeed has the ability to foster and promote values since it can provide lessons of confrontations that occur in the fictional world. Alkestrand (2016) further means that the reader can bring those lessons from the fictional world into the real world and apply new realizations, approaches and knowledge on events in his or her own life. This is also supported by Prestwich (2004) who explains that literature can present moral dilemmas and certain personality traits of the characters which can promote discussion and insight about right and wrong and ethics.

When it comes to fostering historical empathy, Hinton et al. suggest that historical fiction "can offer a connection to alienated students, mirror the lives of young adults and provide a forum for adolescents to discuss what it means to come of age, including navigating difficult problems, accessing tools needed to become problem solvers, and fostering empathy" (Hinton et al., 2014, p. 23) which thus both foster a sense of history as well as promoting the

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fundamental values the school should teach stated previously in this essay. Similarly, Hinton et al. (2014) refers to a book by Sara L. Schwebel where the author states that using historical fiction could be an opportunity for the pupils to understand the past and nurture their sensitivity to promote a discussion about how to use the past today when it comes to moral questions.

Lastly, Gibbs and Earley (1994) argues that historical fiction can bring the past to life and help the pupils understand their own, and others, heritage as well as fostering some of the core values according to the authors being kindness, courage and respect. It is further argued that the novels chosen for this kind of purpose should be "well-written, emphasize human relations, and cause the reader to consider the actions of characters as they relate to core values" (Gibbs & Earley, 1994, p. 14) and that this approach using literature is provided as a direction for teachers on how to implement values into the education as there sometimes is no plan for this at schools (Gibbs & Earley, 1994).

Theory

New Historicism

The focus of the analysis of *The Book Thief* is to study a fictional historical novel and how it can be used in the English education for the purpose to discuss the themes of the book. This, in regards to discussing values, human rights and democracy in English class as well as creating an awareness of history which in the context of a collaboration with a history teacher could possibly be beneficial. I chose to analyze the novel through a New Historic perspective as it has an alternative way of looking at history, the people in history and how history has been interpreted.

New Historicism is a form of literary theory which originated in the late 1970's when the interest in the connection between history and literature increased (Brannigan, 2001). New

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Historicists aim to look at interpretations of history and why events have been interpreted in a certain way (Tyson, 2015). An illustration of the key aspects of New Historicism that I have taken into account in my analysis will follow below in this part of my essay.

One of the most important aspects of New Historicism for my analysis is that it focuses on the narratives of marginalized people. This to create "a plurality of historical voices" (Tyson, 2015, p. 273) and bring the private life of ordinary people to the foreground of historical inquiry instead of focusing on the military, those in power and the passing of laws as is customary in traditional historicism (Tyson, 2015, p. 274). Another aspect of this is the "thick description" which aims to focus on the private life of people in history by looking at cultural productions, family dynamics, sexual practices and social conventions, to name a few, this to bring private life into the center of historical inquiry (Tyson, 2015). In the analysis, I will continue to explore how *The Book Thief* can shed light upon some of the groups in this part of history that is often neglected.

Another prominent aspect of New Historicism is the realization that there is no history, only representation of history and that all history is a matter of interpretation by both historians and readers of historic material, texts describing historic events as well as historical fiction (Tyson, 2015). History is inevitably subjective according to New Historicism and New Historicism also claims "the impossibility of objective analysis" and that historians writing about history are inevitably biased by their own (and their own time's) view of the world and values (Tyson, 2015, p. 269).

The historic events and themes depicted in *The Book Thief* includes the celebration of Hitler's birthday, Hitler Youth, The Berlin Olympics in 1936, the invasion of Poland and The Night of Broken Glass to mention some. All of these events have been interpreted by historians and due to the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War Two these interpretations are, according to New Historicism, biased. This in the sense that the winners write the history and

in that way the fact that *The Book Thief* was written after the war one can conclude that this says something about the time it was written in (Tyson, 2015).

In connection to previous paragraph about interpretation, another key aspect of New Historicism is the claim that there is no monolithic spirit of an age and that one cannot say that there is a totalizing explanation of history. It rather claims that negotiating and overlapping discourses interplay and that no discourse is permanent (Tyson, 2015).

Discourses are not the only thing that changes over time, but according to New Historicism our perception of what is right, natural and normal also changes due to in what time and culture these are interpreted (Tyson, 2015). Similarly, what we define as abnormal, normal, and criminal are also social constructs, a matter of definition which changes during time. An example of this is for example homosexuality which has been seen both as a crime and as admirable during different times of history (Tyson, 2015, p. 271)

The analysis that follows will take all of these accounts into consideration and will aim to analyze the novel and the historical events depicted in it through the lens of New Historicism.

Syllabus and curriculum

Stated in the policy documents for upper secondary school in Sweden, the National School System is based on democratic foundation and the education should "establish respect for human rights and the fundamental values on which Swedish society is based" (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4). The school is also required to foster solidarity between people, promote the ability to empathize with others and "encourage respect for the intrinsic value of each person and the environment we all share" (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4). The curriculum for upper secondary school in Sweden also concludes specific goals in regards to the knowledge, norms and values the school should promote. These include statements such as that the student "can consciously

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determine their views based on human rights and fundamental democratic values, as well as personal experiences”, ”reject the subjection of people to oppression and degrading treatment” (Skolverket, 2013, p. 10) and ”can use non-fiction, fiction and other forms of culture as a source of knowledge, insight and pleasure” (Skolverket, 2013, p. 8).

To summarize, the curriculum urges teachers to impose ethical, environmental, international and historical perspectives in all different subjects to provide the students with tools to develop their own personal views as well as preparing the students for their continued life (Skolverket, 2013, p. 6).

In addition to the curriculum, teachers are also required to follow the syllabi for the different subjects where more specific details about the learning outcomes are stated. For this study, I have chosen to study the general aims of the subject as well as the syllabus for the course English 6 and later on I have also looked at the syllabus for history and in specific the course History 2a.

In the syllabus for English, the general aims of the subject concludes that English is a language that surrounds us every day and in all parts of society and that ”knowledge of English increases the individual’s opportunities to participate in different social and cultural contexts” (Skolverket, 2011, ”English”). It is further stated that the aim of English education is for the students to both acquire a knowledge of the language as well as the surrounding world and that the students should be introduced to both written and spoken English of different kinds and be able to relate the content to their own experiences and knowledge (Skolverket, 2011, ”Aim of the subject”).

Continuing on to the specifics of the course English 6, the core content that the course should cover includes ”Themes, ideas, form and content in film and literature; authors and literary periods” (Skolverket, 2011, ”Content of communication”), ”Contemporary and older literature, poetry, drama and songs” (Skolverket, 2011, ”Reception”) as well as touching on

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current issues, opinions, ethical and existential issues and lastly knowledge of values, history, culture and traditions in parts of the world where English is used (Skolverket, 2011, "Content of communication"). In addition to the core content mentioned above there are other objectives of this course but the ones mentioned above are the ones I have focused on for my analysis.

This investigation will focus on English education in Sweden but to be able to investigate whether an interdisciplinary collaboration between English and history, in regard to historical fiction, would be fruitful to both disciplines I have also analyzed the history syllabus for History 2a. In the general introduction of the subject history it is stated that "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, 2012, "History") and later on where the aim of the subject is presented it is continuously stated that students should be able to develop their understanding of how our view of the present and our perceptions of the future are influenced by our knowledge and interpretations of the past (Skolverket, 2012, "Aim of the subject"). Stated as the first bullet point of what teaching of the subject history should promote, are opportunities to develop the "knowledge of time periods, processes of change, events and persons on the basis of different interpretations and perspectives" (Skolverket, 2012, "Aim of the subject"). One of the aims stated that are of most relevance for my analysis is that "Teaching should contribute to the realization that people in every age should be understood in relation to the conditions and values of their time" (Skolverket, 2012, "Aim of the subject") and this is where I hope historical fiction, analyzed through New Historicism, could be a possible way of practicing this.

Moving on briefly to the specifics of History 2a, it is stated in the core content that "different historical world views, views on gender equality and the value of human beings" (Skolverket, 2012, Core content) should be brought up through thematic specialization and

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how history is used in culture as film, literature and music and the importance different historical themes has in these different genres.

With this background of what is stated by The Swedish National School System about knowledge requirements, norms and values the analysis later on in this essay will be conducted.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

In 1948 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly. The document sets out to protect the fundamental human rights all over the world and it has been translated into 500 different languages (un.org).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) is divided into different articles and stresses the importance of every human's intrinsic value, the fact that all human beings are born free and equal, that no human should be subjected to torture and degrading treatment, that every human has a right to a nationality and that adult men and women are free to marry whomever they chose (1948). The Declaration is seen as a milestone document in the history of human rights and as mentioned previously in this theory section, teachers are urged to incorporate work with human rights in to the teaching of every subject in upper secondary school in Sweden (Skolverket, 2013).

Method

This study revolves around a close reading of *The Book Thief* using a New Historical perspective as the theoretical framework and contrasting the themes and the content of the

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novel to the syllabi of English and history in upper secondary school as well as the curriculum for upper secondary school. Since this literary analysis is based on theory, previous research and subjective interpretation of the novel, this will be a qualitative content analysis (Nunan, 1999). The analytic approach was chosen since the subjective interpretation of different literary texts suits the aim of this research as it aims to see patterns and themes in the policy documents as well as in the fictional novel (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

The study begun with a close reading of the syllabi of English and history for upper secondary school as well as the curriculum for upper secondary school. The content analysis conducted for this part of my investigation was deductive as I beforehand decided upon investigating if certain themes in connection to democracy, human rights, literature, ethical dilemmas, equality, culture and historical periods appeared in the policy documents (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). When finding statements in connection to these themes in the policy documents I highlighted these and performed a summary of my findings which can be found in this investigation's theory part above. This summary was then used further on as I continued on with a literary analysis of *The Book Thief*.

After conducting an investigation of the policy documents, a close reading of the fictional historical novel *The Book Thief* were followed through where I focused on three aspects: Firstly, reading the novel with the English and history syllabi for upper secondary school in mind, investigating if the novel could be used in connection to these two subjects in regard to what the syllabi states about content, aims of the subject and knowledge. Since this investigation focused on the English classroom the weight of the close reading was on the English syllabus but, as I mentioned, I also wanted to be able to understand how this novel could be used interdisciplinary and therefore it was also important to take the syllabus of history into account. The second aspect included reflection on what the curriculum for upper secondary school state about the fundamental values, norms and human rights and if there

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were themes in this novel that were relevant and could promote a discussion about these. The novel was also read with The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) in mind as I wanted to investigate if there were any themes in relation to this in the novel.

Lastly, the novel was also read with the intention to investigate if this particular novel could be beneficial in an interdisciplinary learning environment combining English and history. Here, the focus was on which historic events were being mentioned and how they were described in the novel. When analyzing the novel through these three aspects I used Post-it-sticky notes in three different colors to be able separate the aspects as well as finding the right passages for the analysis.

Analysis

This analysis will begin with a brief description of key elements of *The Book Thief* (2005) and will later move on to discuss and analyze themes and events through a New Historic perspective with the aim to investigate if these events and themes depicted could be used in the English classroom in Sweden. Afterwards an analysis of how this novel could be a part of teaching when it comes to values, human rights, norms and democracy will be conducted. Both parts will be analyzed based on previous research of similar subjects, its applicability to the Swedish educational context and through the lens of New Historicism.

The novel *The Book Thief* is narrated by Death who is the omniscient narrator and specifically has chosen to follow Liesel, whom he refers to as the book thief. Death becomes interested in her as she appears in three occasions and comes very close to death but succeeds to avoid him. Death narrates the story from the first time he saw Liesel, being when her little brother died on their way to Molching, and continues to tell the story of her young life and the

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instances where he comes very close to her. Death tells the story in first person and through a close third person point of view which gives insight to both Death's own opinions and views, as well as the different characters' thoughts, memories and emotions. The events Death describes generally takes place between 1939 and 1943 but sometimes he flashes back in time to past memories of the characters and sometimes he shows the future fate of the characters.

The Book Thief was written in 2005 by Markus Zusak and would classify as a historical fictional novel written in contemporary time as is stated in the preliminaries of the novel where the author writes "This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact, any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, is purely coincidental" (Zusak, 2005, p. 6). As is stated in the syllabus for English 6, teachers should cover different ideas, forms and themes in literature, both contemporary and older, this novel is a suitable choice since it is a novel written in contemporary time and deals with a couple of specific themes that will be explored further later on in my analysis (Skolverket, 2011, "Reception"; Skolverket, 2011, "Content of communication").

As previously mentioned, the novel takes place between 1939 and 1943 in the historical setting of the first years of World War II. Zusak has chosen to use a fictional town, Molching, as the setting but uses geographical places like Munich and Dachau to put it in a historical context. This is not a major cause for confusion and if the pupils are informed about the fact that Molching is not a real town, and put into a context, I think this can be an even better way of letting the story unfold and create a fictional world in the historical setting without being restricted by a real town (Hinton et al., 2014; Short, 1997).

Continuing on the subject of context, one example of the importance of this is on page 346 where Death says "Their fingernails had scratched at the wood and in some cases were nailed into it by the sheer force of desperation, and their spirits came towards me, into my arms. We climbed out of those shower facilities, onto the roof and up, into eternity's breadth"

(Zusak, 2005, p. 346). Here, an explanation of the fact that the phrases "shower facilities" or "shower rooms" (McKay, 2010, p. 769) were used to deceive the prisoners that they were taken to a shower and not into a gas chamber would be necessary to inform the pupils about to ensure that they understand why these expressions are so loaded.

Dualities of Nazi Germany

There are many historical events and themes depicted in this novel which provide both a background setting and reasons for the actions and beliefs of the characters in this historical fictional novel. Beginning with one of the major themes of this novel, in regard to history, the dualities of the Nazi society is in the center of the novel. As Short (1997) writes, historical fictional novels have the opportunity to show more complex and layered parts of a society, which one may not find in history text books, and in this regard *The Book Thief* is an excellent way of avoiding polarization and help the pupils acquire a historical insight and empathy. *The Book Thief* shows the life of ordinary Germans whom, at least in the beginning of the novel, are not noticeably affected by neither the persecution of opponents of the Nazi-regime nor the approaching war.

A specifically good example of a character that shows this duality is the father of Rudy, Alex Steiner. Alex is a tailor in Molching but due to the bad economy at the time in Germany his family is very poor and barely has any food. He is a member of the Nazi Party but states that he does not hate the Jews. Nevertheless, Alex is benefiting a great deal from the fact that Jewish business owners within the same trade has been forced to close their shops which makes his business blossom. Alex struggles with his conscience because he does not wish the Jews of Molching any harm but he also knows he has to provide for his family and it is explained as "Somewhere, far down, there was an itch in his heart, but he made a point not to scratch it. He was afraid of what might come leaking out" (Zusak, 2005, p. 64).

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Again, providing the pupils with enough background information about the economic situation in Germany at this time would help the readers understand Alex Steiner better and the fictional character would together with this information give the pupils a more rounded view of German society at this time as well as creating historical awareness (Hinton et. al., 2014; Hicks & Martin, 1997). This also ties in with the aims for History 2a, previously explained, where it is stated that "Teaching should contribute to the realization that people in every age should be understood in relation to the conditions and values of their time" (Skolverket, 2012, "Aim of the subject").

Looking at the theme of duality and the different aspects of this time through the perspective of New Historicism, this novel shows through for example Alex Steiner and the Hubermanns that there is no monolithic spirit of an age, but rather overlapping discourses (Tyson, 2015). New historicism also claims that no discourse is permanent which also is of interest when reading this novel. *The Book Thief* was written in 2005 which is 60 years after the end of World War II and all of the events depicted in the novel has been interpreted by historians after the defeat of Nazi Germany as well as interpreted by everyone who has read about the events. The cruelties of what the Nazi regime subjected the groups considered "untermensch" to has become common knowledge and our view of the genocide of Jewish people, disabled, and homosexuals, to mention some groups, are biased due to the fact that Nazi Germany did not win the war which might otherwise had led to a different view of this time (Tyson, 2015). Possibly could the protagonist Liesel, the daughter of communists (Zusak, 2005, p. 38) and the accomplice in the hiding of a Jewish man (Zusak, 2005, p. 205), instead have been an exemplary member of Bund Deutscher Mädchen.

Another way in which this novel is a good example of how discourses change and how winners write the history is how members of the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei), SS soldiers and Gestapo are portrayed. In this novel, the people in full support

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of the regime are portrayed as bad people while the ones who are against it, or whom at least show a conscience like Alex Steiner, are depicted as good people. One example of this is when two men from the Gestapo comes to recruit Rudy to a school where he would be trained for the military, Rudy's sister describes it as "There are two monsters,' she said. 'They've come for Rudy'" (Zusak, 2005, p. 404). This shows that though this novel show different sides of ordinary Germans and the complexity of every time period, it is definitely biased by our time's view of Nazism as we are biased by the knowledge we have of Gestapo and the hideous crimes committed by them and the regime (Tyson, 2015).

Little narratives and plurality of historical voices

When it comes to *The Book Thief*, history has not only been interpreted by historians, but by a son writing about his mother and father's memories during the World War II (Farmer, 2016; Zusak, 2005) which possibly could have influenced the author's view on certain events. On the other hand, this could possibly also have provided the story further with narratives from the point of view of groups that generally have not been included in traditional history, in this case children, as well as shedding light on events going on in the private life of the characters. In New Historicism, focusing on the private sphere and cultural production is described as a "thick description" (Tyson, 2015, p. 274), here private life is put to the foreground of history in contrast to traditional historicism. Similarly, Tegmark (2012) uses the concept of "little narratives" to describe conflicting and alternative narratives of a historical event or a different perspective of a time period in contrast to "grand narratives" which are the standard history that is predominantly taught (Tegmark, 2012).

In *The Book Thief* (2005) Death moves in and out between the grand narratives and the "little narratives" (Tegmark, 2012) by for example looking out on the world in 1942 through his own eyes saying "1. The desperate Jews- their spirits in my lap as we sat on the roof, next to the steaming chimneys. 2. The Russian soldiers: taking only small amounts of ammunition,

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relying on the fallen for the rest of it. 3. The soaked bodies on a French coast beached on the shingle and sand” (Zusak, 2005, p. 308).

As mentioned previously, contextualization is crucial for the learning of history through fiction and this quote is something that definitely needs to be put into context and informed about previously by a history teacher. In this case there would need to be 1) information about the concentration camps and gas chambers, 2) background information about the situation in Soviet and 3) knowledge of the fights on French beaches like Dunkirk.

Worth mentioning about the quote above is the fact that it refers to ”Russian soldiers” when they at that time would be considered Soviet soldiers. As previously pointed out, *The Book Thief* is a fictional novel written in contemporary time about historical events and is not supposed to be used as factual information, this is yet another detail of this novel that would need to be put into context and explained for it to be suitable to use this novel in interdisciplinary education with history (Hinton et al., 2014; Short, 1997). The fact that Zusak is referring to ”Russian soldiers” could be inadvertently but seen through the lens of New Historicism it could also be a manifestation of the fact that it was written in a time when it was no longer The Soviet Union but Russia. This then tells us something about the time in which the novel was written (Tyson, 2015).

The previous quote is an example of a grand narrative and these are used frequently in the novel tied together with the ”little narratives”. In contrast to the grand narrative previously the same year, 1942 is summed up through Liesel’s eyes like this ”She became thirteen years of age. Her chest was still flat. She had not yet bled” (Zusak, 2005, p. 310). This part could be seen as a thick description as it describes what is important to Liesel at that point in time. At the same time as her country is in war, she is still just a girl going through the same things girls through history before and after her goes through. This shows an alternative view on wartime which is generally seen as countries fighting each other, leaving out the individuals.

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In *The Book Thief* the author Zusak succeeds in showing a "plurality of historical voices" (Tyson, 2015, p. 273) as well as giving voices to marginalized groups by for example using Liesel as the protagonist. Liesel, as a young girl born to communist parents, would in traditional history have been marginalized and ignored in favor of traditional historical topics, but through literature she is given a voice and we get to see life from her perspective. This is a good complement to the knowledge received in history class since one can focus on the "human experience" (Tegmark, 2012, p. 26) through literary studies in the L2 classroom. As Tegmark (2012) further states, historical fiction is not better than facts when it comes to learning history and it is important to take into account that *The Book Thief* is a fictional novel. However, there is value in using historical fiction in English class both when it comes to interdisciplinary work as well as for learning English. Through *The Book Thief* the pupils are getting a possibility to familiarize with contemporary literature (Skolverket, 2011, "Reception") and an opportunity to discuss ethical and existential questions in the classroom (Skolverket, 2011, "Content of communication").

Lastly, I would argue that reading *The Book Thief* would be beneficial in English education in Sweden as the students would practice their ability to use their acquired knowledge of World War II from history class and then through literature they would be able to relate the content and events of *The Book Thief* to that previous knowledge as well as to their own experiences (Skolverket, 2011, "Aim of the subject").

Values

When it comes to themes regarding democracy, human rights and values in *The Book Thief* these often go hand in hand with the historical facts and events. There are many episodes in this novel where the reader is introduced to ethical and moral dilemmas as well as examples of unfair or inhumane behavior towards others. These themes and events could then be a catalyst for a discussion about the values the school is required to teach the pupils. This is

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also supported by the curriculum for upper secondary school which states that the pupils should be able to use fiction and non-fiction as a source of knowledge, insight and pleasure (Skolverket, 2013, p. 8).

In the curriculum for upper secondary school in Sweden, it is stated that the education should be based on a democratic foundation and that respect for human rights and the fundamental values Swedish society is based on should be established in school (Skolverket, 2013). To be able to teach this to students through literature a novel like *The Book Thief* could be very useful. As stated by Gibbs and Earley (1994), historical fiction can help the students understand the time they live in and the heritage of others and themselves by bringing the past to life. Literature is not only a vehicle for discussion and insight, it is also stated in the syllabus for English 6 that themes, ideas, form and content in literature should be covered (Skolverket, 2011, "Content of communication") as well as touching on current issues, opinions, ethical and existential issues (Skolverket, 2011, "Content of communication"). *The Book Thief* and its themes has proven a good vehicle for covering the aims of the syllabus as well as being a gateway to discussing values, human rights, norms and democracy stated in the curriculum which will be proven further in this analysis.

The most prominent event in *The Book Thief*, where the question of right and wrong and the intrinsic value of every human is depicted, is where Hans offers a piece of bread to a Jewish man passing through Molching on his way to Dachau, "The Jew stood before him, expecting another handful of derision, but he watched with everyone else how Hans Hubermann held out and presented a piece of bread, like magic" (Zusak, 2005, p. 389). This event has great consequences for many of the characters in the novel and Hans not only risks the Jewish man's life, but also his own, his family's and Max's life for offering the piece of bread. Reading about an event like this could promote a discussion about right and wrong and this kind of moral dilemma could more easily be approached by the teacher as it is taking

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place within the fictional world but is still applicable to situations in the pupils' lives (Alkestrand, 2016; Prestwich, 2004). Discussing this event in class with pupils would be an excellent way of fostering solidarity, empathy and respect for others as well as a chance to talk about human rights and promote the rejection of oppression and degrading treatment of people (Skolverket, 2013; Gibbs & Earley, 1994). The event discussed previously is followed by a quote that would be of great use discussing the intrinsic value of every human being "If nothing else, the old man would die like a human. Or at least with the thought that he *was* a human" (Zusak, 2005, p. 390). The old Jewish man receiving the bread from Hans feels like he is seen and that he is a human after possibly living through oppression, dehumanization and systematic racism for a long time.

Dehumanization is a tool used "to deprive of human character or attributes" ("Dehumanized", n.d.) and can be linked to the National Socialistic ideology during the Nazi regime in Germany, as well as genocides, colonialism and racism throughout history. During the Nazi regime people considered "untermensch" were dehumanized and considered "wrong" and a "liability" to the society. I would argue that through the perspective of New Historicism it is important to inform pupils today that, just like certain groups were considered "wrong" in history, certain things are perceived as "normal", "abnormal", "right", "wrong" or "criminal" today. This is just a social construction dependent on the time of which it was interpreted in (Tyson, 2015).

Possibly one of the greatest acts of kindness and generosity in the novel, which also connects to intrinsic value of every human and respecting others, is the hiding of Max by the Hubermanns (Zusak, 2005, p. 205). This is a great risk for the family, but as Hans feel obliged to help Max since he knew Max's father (Zusak, 2005, p. 175) as well as being against the unfair and hideous treatment of Jews (Zusak, 2005, p. 184), Hans decides that they should hide Max. Already struggling to make ends meet, this is not just kind seen from the

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perspective of them committing a crime in Nazi Germany, it is also a sacrifice for the family to feed and take care of yet another person during the hard and poor times. What the Hubermanns and Liesel goes through, in terms of hardships, can not be compared to the fate awaiting Max if he gets caught, and this could be yet another part of the novel which would come in handy fostering empathy, solidarity and generosity to other people (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4). Seeing to people less fortunate, as well as condemning unfair treatment and reject oppression of others could be discussed through the acts of the Hubermann family's and related to the values of the Swedish society (Skolverket, 2013, p. 10; Gibbs & Earley, 1994).

The third theme of this novel I wish to analyze is in relation to human rights and citizenship. It is stated in the curriculum for upper secondary school in Sweden that the pupils should "have knowledge about human rights" (Skolverket, 2013, p. 8), have opportunities to nurture their individual sense of justice (p. 4) and that the pupils should be introduced to an international perspective to promote their understanding of their own reality in a global context which should lead to a creation of international solidarity (p. 6).

Through the character Max Vandenburg, this novel deal with human rights, citizenship and nationality. As Max is Jewish he has been deprived of his German citizenship due to his religious beliefs. After he has been into hiding for a while and is leaving for Molching he thinks "With a clean-shaven face and a lopsided, yet neatly combed hair, he had walked out of that building a new man. In fact, he walked out German. Hang on a second, he *was* German. Or more to the point, he *had* been" (Zusak, 2005, p. 163). Not only has Max been deprived of his citizenship in Germany, but according to my interpretation of this paragraph, he also feels that he has no nationality anymore. This excerpt would be a good start to discuss human rights and through literature describe the feeling of not belonging and have been bereaved of a part of ones identity. This could then be tied into The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

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where it is stated in article 15 that "Everyone has the right to a nationality" (UN General Assembly, 1948).

Similarly, another article in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is article 16 which states that "Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution" (UN General Assembly, 1948). This is brought up in the novel *The Book Thief* a couple of times as when Max is talking to his friend, discussing how they used to fist-fight "Yes we could. You can't marry a Jew, but there's no law against fighting one" (Zusak, 2005, p. 194). This short extract is very powerful and could make the pupils reflect upon if there are norms regarding love and marriage today in our society and determine their views of this based on their acquired knowledge of human rights and their own personal experiences (Skolverket, 2013, p. 10). As the novel revolves around the time right before The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed, this is also an opportunity for the pupils to use their historical knowledge and capacity to draw conclusions to why they think this document was constituted at this particular time in history.

Furthermore, I believe that in a time like the one we are living in now there is a great importance to teach pupils the value of each person and that historical fiction can be a great vehicle for this. Thus, the pupils would come across lessons of confrontations, see new approaches to difficult problems and use newfound realizations from literature on to moral and ethical dilemmas in their own lives (Alkestrand, 2016; Prestwich, 2004; Hinton et al., 2014). This is also stated in the syllabus for English 6 where the teacher is required to cover opinions, ethical and existential issues (Skolverket, 2011, "Content of communication").

Conclusion

This investigation has aimed at analyzing if *The Book Thief* could be used in the English classroom in Sweden. The focus of this investigation has been to analyze if themes in this novel are reconcilable with the syllabi for history and English and with the curriculum for upper secondary school. The analysis has been conducted with these policy documents in mind as well as through the perspective of New Historicism.

As Sweden is becoming an increasingly more culturally diverse country, the school has an immense responsibility to equip its pupils with knowledge, empathy, solidarity and respect for people of other religions, ethnic affiliation, sexual orientations and gender. This to be able to defy xenophobia and intolerance and to promote an understanding of other people (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4). To be able to cover these fields and combat discrimination and degrading treatment, a historical perspective on the teaching should be implemented as it could enable the pupils to "develop an understanding of the present, and preparedness for the future" (Skolverket, 2013, p. 6). By using *The Book Thief* and the historical background of the time it takes place in, I believe pupils can learn from the past and open their eyes to discrimination going on today.

The themes and events of this novel are possible to incorporate in to English education in Sweden as it deals with fundamental values, human rights and solidarity to other people and the novel is also suitable as a complement to teaching of history as it can broaden the pupils' historical empathy as well as give them a more rounded view of the subject (Hicks and Martin, 1997; Hinton et al., 2014; Skolverket, 2013, p. 4). Also, reading historical fiction will enable the pupils to think critically and apply their own knowledge to the fiction and

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understand that the novel is based on interpretations not only by historians and the author, but interpretations by themselves (Tyson, 2015).

This study has to some extent showed explicit ways of teaching interdisciplinary and teaching fundamental values through literature by investigating if it is possible to use *The Book Thief* for those purposes. Though, this investigation can not be seen as a practical guide for how to use this book in practice but rather an inspiration, legitimized by previous research and analysis, for how teachers could work interdisciplinary and incorporate the work with values in the education.

In conclusion, there are benefits to using historical fictional novels like *The Book Thief* in English education at upper secondary level in Sweden as it promotes an accessible way to address fundamental values in everyday education as well as promoting historical knowledge.

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