

Of Theory of Mind and Scaffolding

*Using John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men to Develop Upper Secondary Students'
Theory of Mind*



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Abstract

This research project presents an example of how students and teachers can work together to analyze *Of Mice and Men*. In this paper, critical theory is used as a form of scaffolding, in order to both develop students' Theory of Mind (ToM) and make canonical literature more accessible. The research questions answered in this paper are concerned with asking how critical theory can be applied to the novella and develop students' ToM, and in what way a developed ToM can make canonical literature more accessible. Despite the existence of a vast amount of research conducted on *Of Mice and Men*, ToM, critical theory, scaffolding, and the literary canon, as individual items of analysis, this paper addresses the lack of existing information about how to combine these items and implement them into an English upper secondary class in a Swedish school. This research project uses a qualitative content analysis and a close reading and analysis of two characters, Crooks and Curley's wife, along with the impact that loneliness, as a result from societal injustices, has on these two characters, in order to demonstrate how to teach *Of Mice and Men* through scaffolding. In conclusion, this paper shows that adopting this method of teaching literature can allow the students to feel better acquainted with canonical literature, while simultaneously developing their Theory of Mind.

Keywords: *Of Mice and Men*, Theory of Mind, empathy, scaffolding, ZPD, critical theory, John Steinbeck, Crooks, Curley's wife

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Abstract | |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Theoretical Framework..... | 3 |
| Theory of Mind (ToM) and Empathy..... | 3 |
| The Literary Canon..... | 4 |
| The Importance of Relevance When Teaching the Literary Canon..... | 5 |
| Critical Theory..... | 6 |
| Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)..... | 7 |
| Research background..... | 8 |
| The Social-Improvement Hypothesis..... | 8 |
| The Model of Similarity..... | 9 |
| ToM and an Accessible Literary Canon..... | 10 |
| John Steinbeck's Female Characters..... | 11 |
| African-American Representation in John Steinbeck's Literary Works..... | 12 |
| Method & Material..... | 13 |
| Method..... | 13 |
| Material..... | 15 |
| Of Mice and Men..... | 15 |
| Analysis..... | 16 |
| Skolverket's Aims..... | 16 |
| Analysis of Crooks and Curley's Wife..... | 17 |
| Crooks..... | 17 |
| Curley's Wife..... | 19 |
| Working with ToM, Critical Theory, and <i>Of Mice and Men</i> , in the Classroom..... | 23 |
| Conclusion..... | 26 |
| References..... | 28 |

Introduction

To be able to understand why people behave a certain way, or express themselves in a specific manner, is a crucial skill to have when forming interpersonal relationships. We are able to explain other peoples' behaviors, and to a certain extent, predict their future actions, once we understand that they have beliefs and desires which motivate their actions. We create a theory about an other's mind and attempt to conceptualize how they, in turn, perceive others' minds. An other, in this case, refers to an individual that we have "othered" and do not personally identify with. The aptly named Theory of Mind (ToM) grants us the ability to put ourselves in other peoples' shoes, and empathy grants us the ability to co-experience and share other individuals' feelings. These are abilities that we not only apply to people in our immediate surroundings, but to characters we meet in works of literature as well, or, more specifically, literary fiction.

Despite there being a vast amount of research conducted on what Theory of Mind is, and the role it plays when reading literary fiction, there is a lack of information about how to approach literature in order to trigger the use of one's Theory of Mind. Furthermore, there is a gap in the amount of research conducted on how to approach English literature in a Swedish school, in order to develop students' ToM, and the role that ToM has in making canonical literature more accessible.

This research project is aimed towards upper secondary students and is based on John Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937). This research project justifies the choice of literature by providing a qualitative content analysis of the work, and how to use it in the classroom, while simultaneously establishing a teaching based on scaffolding and critical theory. This brings forth discussions about sexism, ageism, ableism, poverty, machismo, etc., thus allowing the students to engage their critical thinking. Though there is plenty of research concerning this novella and the

characters in it, this research project aspires to show that once students learn how to, and that they are able to, apply critical theory to canonical literature, they are more likely to gain a deeper understanding of characters, and thus develop their Theory of Mind.

Skolverket supports this research project's aim by stating that "[e]ducation should impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based. [...] Each and everyone [sic] working in the school should also encourage respect for the intrinsic value of each person and the environment we all share" (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4). By using critical theory as a method of scaffolding when using *Of Mice and Men* in the classroom, which is concerned with Skolverket's aforementioned aims, the students should be able to reach their zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the development of their ability to use their Theory of Mind. One could argue that it would be enough for students to solely focus on learning how to use critical theory when reading, however, as stated by Beach, Appleman, Hynds, and Wilhelm (2011), when reading, students also want to know how human behavior displayed in literary texts can be applied to their own lives, which requires them to be able to find shared points of experience that relate their own unique ones (p. 66). A combination of critical theory and ToM will allow them to fulfill their need to approach literature in that manner.

This research project will attempt to answer the following questions, in order to reach a conclusion about the chosen topic:

1. How can applying Critical Theory to John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* develop the students' Theory of Mind?
2. How can a developed Theory of Mind make the literary canon more accessible?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework follows the introduction in order to define the key concepts, and theories, used in this research project, for a facilitated lecture of the research background.

Theory of Mind (ToM) and Empathy

One of the primary theories discussed and used in this research project is that of Theory of Mind (ToM). The IEP (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy), which is a peer-reviewed academic resource, describes ToM as “the branch of cognitive science that investigates how we ascribe mental states to other persons and how we use the states to explain and predict the actions of those other persons” (Marraffa, n.d., n.p.). Although ToM is a branch of cognitive science, this research project approaches the theory and defines it as a set of skills possessed by an individual. The definition of ToM used in this research project is based on the one used by Leverage, Mancing, Schweickert, and William (2011), which is that ToM is an accumulation of skills such as mindreading, empathy, and the ability to conceptualize another’s perspective, and it is a basic necessity for human communication (p. 12). The ability to put one’s self in another’s shoes, or mentalize another’s actions, is a fundamental ability, that comes into play when not only communicating with people in our surrounding, but when we read literature as well, with a special emphasis on fictional texts. Zunshine (2006) acknowledges that although literary texts will affect each reader in an individual manner, these texts demand that the reader processes “complexly embedded intentionalities [sic] of their characters, configuring their minds as represented by other minds, whose representations we may or may not trust” (p. 124). Similar to how our formation of interpersonal relationships relies heavily upon our Theory of Mind and our ability to mentalize another’s actions and understand their behavior, narrative fiction asks us, the reader, to slip into the shoes of the character we’re faced with, and by doing so, “invites, triggers, controls, and manages [our] empathy” (Breithaupt, 2011, p. 503).

As indicated per the previous sentence, ToM and empathy work in similar ways, and this research project deals with both of these concepts. Just as is the case with Theory of Mind, cognitive empathy is concerned with the ability to mentalize another's actions and attempts to understand how these actions are motivated by specific behaviors. However, cognitive empathy is just one part of empathy. Empathy, unlike ToM, is defined by the "capacity of an observer to receive access to the emotional state or intellectual awareness of another being or fictional construct" (Breithaupt, 2011, p. 502), which means that it does not only identify actions (ToM and cognitive empathy), but instead also refers to the sharing and matching of one's emotions to another's (affective empathy) (McInnis, 2014, p. 2). In other words, when a reader is moved to tears, or laughter, when reading, it is most likely due to affective empathy. According to Julianne Chiaet (2013), literary fiction boasts the possession of complex characters with a focus on their psychology and relationships, whereas the exact same cannot be said for nonfiction or popular/science fiction, which tends to focus on otherworldly and exciting situations but has predictable or consistent characters. Although this opinion is not shared by all, Chiaet argues that literary fiction contains a lack of a detailed description of the characters' minds, which results in the readers being forced to conceptualize their intentions and motivations (Chiaet, 2013, para 5), thus making them put to practice their cognitive and affective empathy, along with their ToM. The model of similarity gives a possible explanation of how readers experience, or practice, empathy when they put themselves in the shoes of the characters they meet in literary fiction. This model will be discussed in the research background.

The Literary Canon

As mentioned in the introduction, this research project not only focuses on how critical theory can be applied to the novella in order to develop a student's Theory of Mind, but how working with the development of ToM can allow students to feel a heightened sense of accessibility when

confronted with literature pertaining to the literary canon. This research project defines the literary canon as a collection of literary texts that represent a specific genre or time in history. This collection of literary texts varies from country to country, and continent to continent, but, in this case, there will be a focus on the Western canon of literature in which we find *Of Mice and Men*, among other well-known classic literary works. Many schools and educational institutions rely on a literary canon when teaching literature because there is a popular consensus that the canon provides students with the opportunity to view the society and cultural norms of a particular place as it was in the past (Lombardi, 2018, para 8).

The Importance of Relevance When Teaching the Literary Canon

Beach et al. (2011) discuss methods of teaching literature to secondary and upper secondary students and illustrates the importance of relevance when doing so, along with the roll that canon literature plays in upper secondary schools and how to approach it when teaching it. The authors recognize the fact that the list of canon literature taught at schools can be quite narrow and enduring. However, as an English teacher, there will undoubtedly come a time in which one will have to tackle a canonized literary work such as Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960), or even John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

This chapter explores the manner in which a teacher can explore important themes in these aforementioned canonical works while simultaneously making it relevant for the students and their experiences. As hinted in the previous sentences, "relevance" is the key word in this chapter in the sense that students "want to know that the lessons of human behavior related in works of literature can be applied in their own lives" (Beach et al., 2011, p. 66) and "teachers need to be well versed in the criteria that lead to canonization" (Beach et al., 2011, p. 64). This can prove to be a challenge with canonized literature, especially when introduced to a class of students studying English as a

Foreign Language, due to the fact that these works often take place in an environment that accurately represents an era in, for example, American history, and may use the language and terms of that particular time. This can be unfamiliar territory and could, in turn, create some dissonance between the students and the literature. It is therefore the “critical task of the literature teacher [...] to help [them] see this relevance where they might otherwise not” (Beach et al., 2011, p. 66). One matter of seeing this relevance could be through “using a variety of critical methods [in order to] see canonical texts from a variety of critical perspectives” (Beach et al., 2011, p. 70) because it would challenge the students’ possible notion of what classical literature is and the methods in which they have previously approached and analyzed literature. In other words, the students understand that there is no single way of reading and perceiving literature. In fact, the students learn that there is a variety of critical perspectives that they can apply to the texts which, in turn, bring forth different social themes that are deeply embedded in the literary works they read, that would have otherwise risked being overlooked.

Critical Theory

Using critical perspectives, or lenses, when reading texts is an ability that falls under the term of critical theory. This theory is up for debate and its’ definition is not always agreed upon amongst researchers in this field. Tyson (2006) explains that literary criticism is the interpretation of a text, and critical theory is the examination of the criteria upon which the interpretation rests, thus leading the reader to the conclusion that critical theory attempts to explain “the assumptions and values upon which various forms of literary criticism rest” (Tyson, 2006, p. 6). Tyson asks the readers to read literary works “against the grain”, or to disregard of a typical reading, by applying different interpretations, or lenses, that stem from different parts of society (post-colonialism, feminism, Marxism, etc.) to the literary works they are exposed to. This method of analysis is crucial to the success of developing students’ ability to feel empathy when reading this novella.

Students, and people in general, have a hard time creating an emotional bond, or feeling empathy, for things they do not understand. Skolverket makes evident the importance of including content in the classroom that will enable students to gain a multifaceted view of society. Critical theory, though not solely confined to an English context, is closely related to the core content that Skolverket asks teaching to cover, such as living conditions, values, and traditions.

This research project explores the profound impact that loneliness has on two characters (Crooks and Curley's wife) through discussing sexism (with a focus on misogyny) and African American criticism, which are critical perspectives that belong to the umbrella term of critical theory. The aim is to show that once students learn how to, and that they are able to, apply critical theory to canonical literature, they are more likely to gain a deeper understanding of characters, cultures, the setting, customs, etc., pertaining to a specific period in history. In doing so, the students end up using their ToM in order to better understand previously "difficult" sections of the literary work. For example, if students are introduced to the Great Depression, and discuss women's vs men's roles in the 1923's, when reading *Of Mice and Men*, they may be at more liberty to feel empathy for, and therefore be motivated to attempt to mentalize Curley's wife's actions in the novella and understand where her cruelty was birthed.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

The Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD, which was coined by Vygotsky in 1978. In short, ZPD describes the kind of learning that is challenging, yet within reach of students, or learners in general, as long as they are provided with guidance and scaffolding (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010, p. 29). An example of this could be a specific skill set that students are expected to complete, such as being able to conjugate verbs, to learn how to find the volume of a cylinder, or, in this case, to have developed their Theory of Mind after having read *Of Mice and Men*. This skill set is initially

incapable of being completed without the help of the teacher, however, as the students begin to show signs of progress, the teacher can proceed to progressively reduce the help given in class. Once the students show that they have completed this skill set, the teacher will already have removed themselves entirely from the learning process because they are no longer necessary for the completion of this skill set. Another term for the help teachers give students who are learning something new, is called scaffolding. Just as is the case with a building that is undergoing renovations to its façade, students need the support of a scaffold when reaching a learning goal or completion of a skill set. Once they have achieved that goal, the scaffold is removed because it is no longer necessary. This research project attempts to explain how scaffolding the students' reading of *Of Mice and Men* with the help of critical theory, will allow the students to reach their ZPD, which is, in this case, the development of their Theory of Mind.

Research background

There is little to no research that deals with this exact topic in an explicit manner, but rather an array of articles and dissertations that deal with individual themes and areas that are relevant to this research project. This section will briefly summarize the main points of sources used in this essay.

The Social-Improvement Hypothesis

Keith Oatley (2011) explores the Social-Improvement hypothesis in his chapter, which is based on the long-existing belief that reading fiction is good for you, due to the fact that it supposedly improves our social abilities because it allows us to practice projecting ourselves into the minds of others, which, in turn, allows us to sympathize and empathize with them, and understand the world

from their point of view (Oatley, 2011, p. 43). Oatley explains how this hypothesis has been tested empirically at least two times. The first was a test that involved shifts of attitude. In other words, individuals were exposed to displays of behavior, by fictional characters, that weren't the norm but that would nonetheless provoke a positive reaction. Two such examples were: a child being stoical about separation from parents and a member of a minority standing up for equality (Oatley, 2011, p. 43). The second empirical test was one in which European participants read either a chapter of a novel about the difficult life of Algerian women or an essay on women's rights in Algeria. The result of this test showed that those who read the novel felt that they would be less likely to accept the Algerian norms for relationships, due to the fact that the depiction of individuals in fiction prompted the readers to project themselves into the role of a character (Oatley, 2011, p. 44). Both empirical tests presented results that showed how exposure to fiction in literary works can hone social skills, and the ability to empathize, by recognizing the existing parallels between the minds of characters and the minds of individuals in our society. Part of the reason as to why we are able to recognize existing parallels between characters and people we know, is because we are capable of feeling empathy due to a phenomenon called the model of similarity.

The Model of Similarity

As mentioned in the subsection above, it is believed that reading fiction is good for you because it allows you to improve your social abilities by projecting yourself onto the minds of others.

Empathy lies at the root of this and one of the reasons as to why we are able to project ourselves is due to the model of similarity that Breithaupt describes in his chapter about models of empathy. In short, we believe that we are, or imagine that we are, similar to other beings because we come to an understanding about an individual that is derived from ourselves, but put into a

different circumstance (Breithaupt, 2011, p. 505). This similarity allows us to then co-experience, and/or share, our emotional states or the emotional states of others, which falls under the definition and category of affective empathy, which is described in the theoretical framework. However, Breithaupt admits that this model fails to explain the attraction of empathy, because if we are, truly, all the same, then there should be no need to feel for or like another individual (Breithaupt, 2011, p. 505)

Instead, the similarity should be viewed as an imagined similarity, and should instead be seen as a projection, which essentially changes what empathy means. To project an emotional understanding of another means that the key source of empathy derives from some form of personal memory instead. In other words, we would use the knowledge of pain, sadness, joy, etc., from our own experiences (Breithaupt, 2011, p. 510). In order to feel this way, the literary fiction has to be able to evoke such feelings within the reader and bring about the “similarity”-effect. To feel in this manner allows the reader to access the literature in an entirely different manner, due to the fact that they recall memories and sentiments that come from a personal place, and in turn, make reading a more personal experience.

ToM and an Accessible Literary Canon

Holm’s degree project (2017), explores Theory of Mind for the purpose of scaffolding by conducting a thematic analysis and close reading of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1816). The aim of this study was to cognitively approach both novels in order to “provide possible scaffolding for learners of English as a foreign language, in an attempt to make canonised [sic] literature more easily accessible” (Holm, 2017, p. 1). Holm states that learners “might be able to use an emotional connection with the literature to understand and learn the language” (Holm, 2017, p. 2). However, she also points out that introducing classic literature not only enables the students to increase their proficiency in the language, but also provides the

students with a culture capital (Holm, 2017, p. 2). The method used to collect data in Holm's study was a focus on three prevalent themes in each novel: fear, love, and aversion. She collected and analyzed material from the novels that contained both conversations and situations in which these themes would manifest themselves. The conclusion of this study was that "by using a cognitive approach while including canonised [sic] classic novels in the EFL classroom, these novels have been made to be more accessible to young Swedish readers in today's society" (Holm, 2017, p.52). Holm's dissertation supports the second research question in this study because, as summarized above, her research deals with the connection between the accessibility of the literary canon and using ToM as a resource to do so.

John Steinbeck's Female Characters

Čerče (2000) wrote her article, to elucidate the complexity of Steinbeck's unnamed character, Curley's wife, who will be analyzed in the latter part of this research project. In her article, Čerče briefly covers various instances in which readers and critics of *Of Mice and Men* come across this character and feel disappointed with both the portrayal of the only female character in his novella, and some of the portrayals of other female characters in his literary works. One critic, called Peter Lisca, accuses Steinbeck's works for having female characters that are constantly overshadowed by men. Another critic, Mimi Reisel, argues that Steinbeck displays misogyny in his work as a direct result and reflection of his own problematic marriage to Gwyndolyn Conger. A third critic, by the name of Mark Spilka, wrote a scathing review of *Of Mice and Men*, in which he suggests that George and Lennie are characters that have been put in place to channel the supposed hate that the author felt for women, due to the manner in which those two characters interact with Curley's wife. Čerče does not attempt to disprove these comments and analyses of Steinbeck's works, but she does attempt to challenge them, along with the impression that some may have of

Curley's wife. She introduces two categories of female characters, from Steinbeck's novella, are introduced in this text, and those are: "the noble women" and "the silly girls". The "noble women" can be seen in novels such as *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), with Ma Joad, and Mordeen in *Burning Bright* (1950). There are no explicit examples of "silly girls" in this article but they are described as vain and preoccupied with their appearance (Čerče, 2000, p. 86). However, although Curley's wife may appear to belong to the "silly girl" category, Čerče argues that she belongs to a category of her own. Čerče does not disagree with the fact that Curley's wife is painted in a negative light, but she instead tries to explain this character's peculiar behavior by using direct quotes from the novella, in order to show how the character's behavior is a direct result of isolation due to a jealous and aggressive husband. The analysis of Curley's wife in this research project shares the same point of view as the one made in Čerče's article.

African-American Representation in John Steinbeck's Literary Works

Though not an analysis of *Crooks* or *Of Mice and Men*, Barden wrote an article about John Steinbeck's only other fictional black character, by the name of Joe Spencer, from an unpublished novella titled *Lifeboat*, which later became a movie directed by Alfred Hitchcock. In this article, Barden discusses the Steinbeck's discontent at Hitchcock's inclusion of slurs against organized labor and the portrayal of Joe Spencer in the film. This was because he ended up being a stock-comedy character, rather than the noble individual that he had carefully created for his novella (Barden, 2017, p. 177). Barden carries on explaining how Steinbeck's *Lifeboat* was created in the 1940's and how he (Steinbeck) spoke about race and discrimination as a statement, and how Joe Spencer was both the most likeable and most well-spoken character in the novella. One scene from *Lifeboat* is discussed in particular and it is one in which a German individual is about to be tossed off of the lifeboat, in which the plot takes place, and Joe is adamant that nobody harms him, despite

him being “the enemy”. Barden’s article describes various scenes in which Joe shows his true and noble colors. The article concludes that while Crooks, from *Of Mice and Men*, was a damaged individual with sociological implications (Barden, 2017, p. 181), Joe was a character who defied stereotypes, such as the “Magical Negro”, who typically has supernatural powers and uses them to save white people, but he could be labeled as the coined term, “Numinous Negro”, being a mortal with great integrity and inspires individuals without regard to ethnicity or background (Barden, 2017, p. 181). In other words, this character’s dignified behavior is not excused or explained as a side effect of some kind of magic, but is instead an ordinary, mortal, character trait. This article serves as an example of how characters in literary works, who are people of color, were portrayed during the Second World War, and it will serve the analysis of Crook’s character in the latter part of this research project.

Method & Material

Method

A qualitative content analysis was used in this research project, in order to gather non-numerical data, and examine pre-existing materials (previous research, policy documents, a novella, theories, etc.) so as to arrive at a conclusion about a new suggested manner of teaching literature, or, more specifically, teaching canonized literature. This method of analysis was selected due its unobtrusive nature and the fact that it is commonly concerned with attempting to understand human behavior, which is apt when taking into consideration the fact that this research project focused largely on the Theory of Mind and empathy in students. In this case, an unobtrusive method of analysis was preferred because the research project was mainly focused on gathering information from textual sources, in order to reach a specific aim. An obtrusive method could have included an interview or a questionnaire, but that was not the approach selected for this research project. Two critical perspectives helped scaffold the close reading and analysis of Crooks and

Curley's wife in *Of Mice and Men*, and the loneliness and isolation they faced in the novella, along with an explicit connection to Skolverket's curriculum and English teaching. When performing the close reading, the relevant excerpts of the novella were selected by finding, and marking, moments of the selected characters' dialogue that included explicit mentions of loneliness due to experienced racism and misogyny. The analysis of these excerpts relied entirely on the theoretical framework and previous research in order to motivate how the characters' feelings, intents, and actions were caused by very specific experiences as a result of the aforementioned racism and misogyny. The purpose of such an analysis was to gather the necessary information, based on research and close-reading, in order to demonstrate an example of the content one could use in a classroom when scaffolding students' learning, and reading, of *Of Mice and Men*, while simultaneously stimulating the use of their Theory of Mind. Lastly, due to the fact that this research project was conducted in Sweden, an unequivocal and perpetual link to Skolverket's aims had to be maintained in order to justify the reason for teaching this novella in this specific manner.

The analysis, which succeeds the method and material section of this research project, made use of the sources found in the theoretical framework and research background, along with Skolverket's curriculum, in order to give examples of some ways that teachers can use critical theory to teach *Of Mice and Men*. The analysis was conducted in three parts. The first one was concerned with justifying the choice of the Skolverket's quotes used in this essay, the second one was dedicated to the analysis of Crooks and Curley's wife and the loneliness they share in common, and the third part discussed how to implement the findings of this research project into a classroom scenario. This research project was aimed towards students and teachers of English in upper secondary school in Sweden, hence the explicit connection to Skolverket's curriculum.

A limitation with the selected method of conducting research on this topic was that it was purely theoretical. This research project dealt with the creation of an alternative method for analyzing literature, in this case belonging to a literary canon, in the classroom, without any trials having been performed in a real school environment. This could potentially harm the external validity since the results of the study were never officially tested in a classroom scenario, and therefore can't be generalized to a wider population.

Material

Of Mice and Men

This research project used John Steinbeck's novella, *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and two of the characters in it, as its primary source of material for the analysis. One of the main reasons for choosing this novella resides in the fact that it is a literary work that has a long tradition of being taught in schools, worldwide, for the past 80 years, and has thus become an institution and part of the literary canon in several countries. The fact that it is a literary work that pertains to the American literary canon and is written by a white and male author in the 1930's, can prove to be a challenge for students in a multicultural classroom in Sweden. At first glance, this novella does not seem to reflect some of the important values that Skolverket promotes in the curriculum, namely, the importance of internationalization, the increasing cross-border mobility, and cultural diversity. Skolverket is also firm when it comes to having no tolerance towards discrimination of any kind, be it ableism or homophobia; it has no place in the schools in Sweden. However, that is precisely why *Of Mice and Men* was selected for this research project. Through scaffolding and critical theory, this research project aims to demonstrate a way to teach literature that shows discriminatory situations in order to engage the students' critical thinking. Few books belonging to literary canons are devoid of sexism, racism, ableism, etc., and avoiding all contact with these

books is not synonymous to promoting the aforementioned zero-tolerance that Skolverket displays towards such topics.

As mentioned in the introduction, this research project justifies the choice of literature by providing a qualitative content analysis of the work, and how to use it in the classroom, while simultaneously establishing a teaching based on critical theory, which, in turn, brings forth discussions about sexism, ageism, ableism, poverty, machismo, etc. The following analysis will introduce the reader to two characters shackled by the same weight; loneliness. However, while this loneliness does manifest itself in the same manner, it is birthed by two different social factors, which are: sexism and racism. These characters are: Crooks and Curley's wife.

Analysis

Skolverket's Aims

Skolverket states that “[e]ducation should impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based. [...] Each and everyone [sic] working in the school should also encourage respect for the intrinsic value of each person and the environment we all share” (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4). As explained in the theoretical background, Theory of Mind deals with the ability to put oneself in the shoes of another individual and the ability to mentalize their actions, and empathy takes it one step further by allowing the individual to share, or co-experience, what another individual is feeling. One of the key manners in which an individual is able to impart and establish respect for another is by being able to understand that others have their own perspectives and reasons for acting the way they do, and how external factors can influence their behavior. What follows is an analysis of Crooks and Curley's wife, the loneliness they share, and the dissection of their character through the critical lenses of sexism and racism, or more specifically, African American criticism, by using quotes from the novella and the

support of critical theory. The aim with such an analysis is to allow the students to achieve a sense of familiarity with the characters, and their situation, thus allowing themselves to develop their Theory of Mind. This will, in turn, hopefully motivate the students to co-experience the sentiments of the character and make a novella, such as *Of Mice and Men*, a less daunting read.

Analysis of Crooks and Curley's Wife

Crooks

Before initiating the analysis of the selected character, it is important to mention how the teacher teaching this novella will have to go beyond discussing racism as a general form of discrimination with the students in the class, and instead delve into the specifics of African American criticism. This must be done in order to do justice to Crooks's character, and in order to fully understand where his pain and loneliness stem from.

In order to read *Of Mice and Men*, which was first published in 1937, students should acquaint themselves with the people and events that took place both prior and during that time. Examples of such events are the Great Depression, birthed by the crash of Wall Street in 1929, and the Civil War, which spanned between 1861 and 1865. Although the Civil War was won in 1865, and although it granted freedom to slaves across the United States, there was an exclusion of African American history and culture from education up until a century after the war had been won (Tyson, 2006, p. 360). Important events such as the slave uprisings, the slave rebellions of plantations, the Underground Railroad, the rebirth of black literature, art, poetry, philosophy, etc., known as the Harlem Renaissance, were kept in the shadows and not given the attention they deserved (Tyson, 2006, p. 360).

Although John Steinbeck created the character of Crooks to be a well-read and noble individual, in comparison to the white ranch hands in *Of Mice and Men*. Nonetheless, the fact that he is the only African American character that Steinbeck ever published is not a matter to overlook.

There was only one other African American character in his unpublished, but cinematized, *Lifeboat*; however, unlike the well-disposed nature of that character, Crooks's nature is dominated by a mean streak and a bitterness about him. However, when conducting a close reading of him, when paying close attention to his dialogue and inner monologue, the reader realizes that his distrust of others, and perceived meanness, is a result of his anger and disappointment in society.

The scene that first introduces the reader to Crooks's pain is disguised by the joy that this character openly takes in tormenting one of the protagonists of the story, namely, Lennie, who is mentally disabled. It begins with Lennie entering Crooks's bunk, which is located next to the stables in the ranch and is a place in which none of the men at the ranch set foot, due to Crooks being black and odorous (Steinbeck, 1989, p. 8). Lennie, not knowing this rule, walks in and initiates a conversation with Crooks about his (Lennie's) best friend and caretaker, George. Seizing the opportunity to be a thorn in his side, Crooks proceeds to start taunting Lennie with thoughts of abandonment:

“I said, s'pose George went into town tonight and you never heard of him nomore.” Crooks pressed forward some kind of private victory. “Just s'pose that,” he repeated. [...] Crooks' face lighted with pleasure in his torture. “Nobody can't tell what a guy'll do,” he observed calmly. (Steinbeck, 1989, p. 92)

Crook ends up receiving the reaction he sought after when Lennie begins to fret about the possibility of being abandoned by the one person he cares most about in the world. His meanness is no longer, and his desire to hurt Lennie instead overtures into a well-worded explanation of how his aggressive demeanor is a direct result of his anguish felt at the hands of isolation on behalf of his current life situation:

Crooks said gently, "Maybe you can see now. You got George. You *know* he's goin' to come back. [...] S'pose you couldn't go into the bunkhouse and play rummy 'cause you was black. [...] I tell ya," he cried, "I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick," (Steinbeck, 1989, p. 93)

However, Crooks not only experiences loneliness in a first-hand way at the ranch; this was a lesson he learned at a very young age:

"I ain't a Southern Negro," he said. I was born right here in California. My old man had a chicken ranch, 'bout ten acres. The white kids come to play at our place, an' sometimes I went to play with them, and some of them was pretty nice. My ol' man didn't like that. I never knew till long later why he didn't like that. But I know now. [...] There wasn't another colored family for miles around. And now there ain't a colored man on this ranch [...]." He laughed. "If I say something, why it's just a nigger sayin' it." (Steinbeck, 1989, p. 90-91).

Crooks is well-read and well aware of the injustice he faced. Despite the fact that he was born and raised in California, and that the Civil War between the Northern and Southern states had happened over 70 years ago, he constantly faces adversity at the hands of a society that reduces his entire being to that of an individual who is deemed to be filthy, and of less worth, due to the color of his skin.

Curley's Wife

This character's tale of loneliness starts with the first mention of her name, or rather, the lack thereof. Never given any name other than Curley's wife, Curley's wife's story is one that the reader may have heard many times before.

Just as was the case with the close reading of Crooks, Curley's wife's reading must begin with a lesson in history. Stretching from 1929 to 1939, the Great Depression was a severe worldwide

economic depression that was caused by the crash of Wall Street's stock market in October of 1929. In stark contrast to this time of economic distress, the period between 1920 and 1929 was known as the Roaring Twenties and marked a period of economic prosperity. However, *Of Mice and Men* did not take place during the Roaring Twenties, but it did take place during both the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Despite the 19th amendment being put into place at that time, giving women the right to vote, some women did not want to vote because they did not see themselves as mentally capable to the extent that men were. Conservative politics also hindered women from flourishing, and instead attempted to ensure that a woman's place was in the home. For many women during this time in history, economic security and social status depended on a successful marriage.

Curley's wife once had dreams of becoming an actress, and she was a handsome woman who was sought after by numerous men, but the promise of her face on the silver screen vanished along with the very man who had promised to love her and send her to Hollywood. Curley's wife was aware of women's rights at the time and knew of the expectations put in place by society, so she married the first man she could, which happened to be Curley. Their wedding day marked the beginning of a meanness bred from embitterment and loneliness.

Living on a ranch without any other women and being married to a jealous husband with a mean streak, Curley's wife tries to get attention in any way she can. This character can easily be mistaken for the silly and vain girls commonly found in Steinbeck's novels, however, as mentioned in Čerče's article, Curley's wife is nothing of the sort, despite the emphasis the novella places on her looks and sexual behavior. In fact, when her character is first introduced in the novella, the men refer to her as a "tart" and a woman who "gives the eye" to other men on the ranch (Steinbeck, 1989, p. 39).

When Curley's wife appears, she consistently attempts to engage the men in conversation by asking them if they have seen her husband, Curley:

"Hi, Slim," she said.

Slim's voice came through the door. "Hi, Good-lookin'."

"I'm tryin' to find Curley, Slim."

"Well, you ain't tryin' very hard. I seen him goin' in your house."

She was suddenly very apprehensive. "Bye, boys," she called into the bunkhouse, and she hurried away. (Steinbeck, 1989, p. 44)

This sudden change in behavior sheds light on the conflict that goes on inside of Curley's wife. She tries her best to charm the men and to keep a conversation flowing with them at all times, but her suave demeanor changes rapidly at the mention of her husband's whereabouts. She loses the portrayal of independence she started out with at the beginning of her conversation with the men at the bunk, and instead overgoes into silence and a hurried pace towards the home she shares with her jealous husband. Nevertheless, though this initial encounter with Curley's wife might inspire the readers to regard her with empathy, the following scene can potentially inspire them to feel disgust.

This scene starts towards the end of the scene with Crooks that was mentioned in the previous section. Curley's wife walks into Crooks's bunk and finds Crook, Candy, and Lennie, having a conversation about future plans to buy a farm on a piece of land. She attempts to ridicule their plans and when Crooks stands up to her, she abuses her position of power as the wife of Curley, who is the foreman of the ranch, in order to invoke fear, consequently tormenting Crooks into silence:

She turned to him in scorn. "Listen, Nigger," she said. "You know what I can do to you if you open your trap?" [...] She closed on him. [...] "Well, you keep your place then, Nigger.

I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny." (Steinbeck, 1989, p. 103)

Although Curley's wife's character might initially lack the amount of depth required for an individual to sympathize with her fear of her husband, and her desire to talk to people for company, this scene with Crooks is unforgivable. She is aware of the way that the other men at the ranch talk about her, and she feels how her husband keeps her on a leash, but in this scene, she is met with the three men that she feels are "below" her. Crooks, who is African American, Candy, who is old and physically disabled, and Lennie, who likes her but is mentally disabled.

Nevertheless, Curley's wife's role in the novella is short-lived as her life is taken just a few minutes after she is candid about how lonely she feels, barely giving the reader enough time to consider her as anything else but cruel. In this scene, she walks into the barn on the ranch and finds Lennie playing with his puppy and she decides to take advantage of this moment to talk to him about her feelings, because she feels as if he is the only one who will listen to her, despite his initial apprehension as a direct result of George's instructions to avoid speaking to her at all costs.

In a conversation with Lennie, that is reminiscent of the one that Crooks had with him too, Curley's wife begins to speak about how she feels:

"Why can't I talk to you? [...] I get lonely," she said. "You can talk to people, but I can't talk to nobody but Curley. Else he gets mad. How'd you like not to talk to anybody?" [...]

Her face grew angry. "Wha's the matter with me?" she cried. "Ain't I got the right to talk to nobody? Whatta they think I am, anyways?" [...] And then her words tumbled out in a passion of communication, as though she hurried before her listener could be taken away. (Steinbeck, 1989, p. 109-111).

This confession of loneliness never left the barn, because in the next minute, Lennie kills her accidentally while trying to stroke her hair. Maybe she'd be seen in a different light if the right person had heard her confess the way she feels, however, that remains an unknown fact because when she died, the views the men had of her never changed. In fact, when Candy found her dead in the barn, the way he described what he saw was:

“Curley’s wife lay with a half-covering of yellow hay. And the meanness and the plannings and the discontent and the ache for attention were all gone from her face.”

(Steinbeck, 1989, p. 116)

Curley’s wife died during a time in which, ironically enough, women’s rights were on the move but hers were never to be found. She died only moments after the first time she showed any depth and true emotion, and she was rewarded with death at the hands of the one who had listened to her in her sole moment of vulnerability.

Working with ToM, Critical Theory, and *Of Mice and Men*, in the Classroom

When reading this novella without the intention of using it in a classroom, it may be easy to overlook what is said in the dialogues held by Crooks and Curley’s wife, that involve Lennie Smalls. These excerpts of conversation hold the explanation as to why the characters can, at times, be so cruel, and how this behavior is a direct result of loneliness. In fact, when performing a close reading of both characters, the reader bears witnesses to some compelling similarities between both characters’ dialogues, which shows an undeniable similarity between the roots of their ostracization. For example, both Crooks and Curley’s wife feel as if they are unable to socialize with the men at the ranch due to their social class.

As mentioned throughout this essay, the aim of this research project is to demonstrate an example of how to scaffold the teaching of *Of Mice and Men* through critical theory, in order to develop the students' Theory of Mind. This paper also aims to demonstrate how canonical literature can become somewhat more accessible to the students, by going through the process of using critical theory to analyze the characters and the environment of the literary text.

When working with an analysis of a literary text in this manner, and with the goal of achieving a developed Theory of Mind through the aid of scaffolding; the teachers should help guide the students' thought and discussion processes in the right direction. As stated in the theoretical framework, Theory of Mind deals with the ability to conceptualize an other's perspective and understand what motivates the behaviors they display. In this case, in order to develop their ToM, the students need the opportunity to explore the thought process and actions of the characters in *Of Mice and Men*.

For example, when introduced to the scene in which Crooks takes joy in his torment of Lennie, the students are demanded to be well-acquainted with his (Crooks) complexly embedded intentionalities, and to be able to read between the lines, in order to mentalize his actions. This scene provides the teacher with a teachable moment in which they can work with the dialogue between Crooks and Lennie, in order to discuss what motivates Crooks's mean comments and agitated demeanor. The students should be able to explain his behavior by making use of the African American critical perspective that they will have been using throughout their reading of the novella. Once they rationalize his actions, it will be easier for them to project their own mind on his character, and in turn, co-experience his emotions, such as is explained in the section about the model of similarity.

So too is the case for Curley's wife and her confrontation with Crooks. Though her actions are unjustifiable, the students will have to be able to interpret the thought process behind Curley's wife's threats to lynch Crooks, and how that differs from her behavior around other men. The students will also have to try and comprehend why both Crooks and Curley's wife show their sole moments of vulnerability to Lennie Smalls. Once the students have finished reading the novella, the teacher can return to the scene in which Curley's wife becomes apprehensive when Slim tells her where her husband is. The teacher can work with students in order for them to understand where her sudden change of behavior stems from, which might even provoke them to sympathize or empathize with her. This falls in line with the Social-Improvement Hypothesis discussed in the Theoretical framework. If answered correctly, the students will have employed their Theory of Mind, since they would have demonstrated the ability to mentalize an other's actions despite what their initial emotional response to these characters might have been.

In conclusion, in order to follow Vygotsky's ZPD and scaffolding, the teacher has to make sure to give the students the proper tools to dissect the novel and the characters, in order for them to develop their Theory of Mind. The role that empathy plays, in this case, is that it may motivate the students to continue using this method of reading and analyzing literature if they feel as if they are able to co-experience and share feelings with the characters in the text. As mentioned in the research background, when discussing the model of similarity; individuals project their personal experience of pain, loss, joy, etc., to characters and people they meet, and, in turn, co-experience or share their feelings. In other words, they use their affective empathy to relate to others' experiences. The combination of learning tools to use when analyzing and reading literature can possibly allow students to feel as if other novels, that are similar to *Of Mice and Men*, are less

daunting, more inviting, and more accessible, due to the fact that they are prepared to approach them in the right way.

Conclusion

Though the students reading this novel might not be able to immediately relate to ostracization as a direct result of racism, or a destructive marriage, they will most likely be acquainted with the feeling of loneliness, the fear of rejection, and feeling like an outcast. As mentioned in the discussion, through scaffolding the reading of *Of Mice and Men* with the help of critical theory, and through the right approach to in class discussions and questions, students may be able to develop their Theory of Mind. They will hopefully be able to apply the skills they used, when analyzing this novella, to other literary texts within a literary canon. Canonical literature should feel easier to approach, or access, because the students and teachers will be better equipped to work with it.

As mentioned in the method of this research project, one of the main limitations of this study was the fact that it was purely theoretical and had never been applied to a real classroom scenario. This affects the external validity of this research project because it makes it more difficult to generalize the findings in this paper to a wider population, as would have been possible to do had this study involved real testing of the developed method of analysis. Another limitation was the factor that time played. Though this research project did not solely rely on the analyses conducted on Crooks and Curley's wife, it may have been better to include an analysis of a third character, such as Candy, in order to better demonstrate the effects of scaffolding with the help of critical theory.

Further research into this subject could be the application of this method into various classrooms in order to see if it works, and thus improve external validity and be of more use to teachers who turn to this research project with hopes of finding a new method of approaching canonical literature. Finally, developed analyses of both Crooks and Curley's wife could be more fruitful, together with an additional analysis of another character from Steinbeck's novella, *Of Mice and Men*.

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