

Högskolan i Halmstad

Sektionen för lärarutbildning

Engelska 61-90 hp

- **Using Fiction to support gender equality: the case for
Neverwhere and Pride and Prejudice -**

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Abstract

This essay is a discussion of how fiction can be used in teaching English as a second language to promote gender equality. The novels analyzed are *Pride and Prejudice* and *Neverwhere*. Firstly, the term gender is explained. Secondly, there is some research that demonstrates how gender is a social construction. The focus of this essay is on the role of the teacher, since his or her expectations and his or her way of interacting with students is crucial to promote gender equality in the classroom. Additionally, there is a discussion of the strategies that can help the teacher to detect bias in the teaching material. Furthermore, there are suggestions on how the novels can be used to promote gender equality through using the content-based approach.

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1. Introduction

As a woman, who was raised in a male dominated society, I believe that it is important to contribute to gender equality so that new generations of both men and women have the same rights as well as the same opportunities and responsibilities. The first International Human Rights article states, “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”.¹ The Swedish School Law highlights that those who work in the schools should “support equality between the sexes” (chapter 1 § 5).² The promotion of gender equality is a common goal in the current Swedish curriculum at all levels of education. In the case of elementary school and secondary school, the objective is “that schools should actively and consciously promote equal rights and opportunities for men and women” (Lgr 11). As for the non-compulsory school system, the Swedish curriculum Gy2011 states that pupils shall be encouraged to develop their interests without prejudice as to gender differences.³ Both international and national laws thus urge the promotion of gender equality.

The European Commission defines gender equality as the result of the absence of discrimination on the basis of a person’s sex in opportunities and the allocation of resources or benefits or in access to services.⁴ Unfortunately, the reality is different around the world. As stated by the European Commission, the situation for men and women in the EU is still unequal. The European Commission has issued a strategy for equality between women and men for the years 2010 and 2015. The key actions to take are to: “address the role of men in gender equality as well as to promote good practice on gender roles in youth education,

¹ The United Nations. “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights”. un.org The United Nations website. n.d. web. December 2011

² The Swedish National Agency for Education. “Skollagen”. skolverket.se Skolverket. n.d. Web. 27th June 2011.

³ The new Swedish curriculum Gy2011 is still not available in English, so the corresponding quotes have been translated into English. The new Swedish curriculum is based on the former Swedish curriculum Lpf 94, which is still available in English.

⁴ European commission. “Strategy for equality between women and men 2010-2015”. ec.europa.eu. European Commission website. n.d. web. 28th January 2011

culture and sport”⁵. Since education is part of the solution, teachers have a crucial role in promoting gender equality. Nevertheless, research demonstrates that the behavior and attitudes towards students can promote gender equality or reinforce gender roles rather than eliminate them (Sadker, Silber xiii). Thus, the aim of this essay is to discuss the importance of the role of the teacher in promoting gender equality in the classroom as well as to exemplify how fiction can be exploited as a tool to help students detect and correct gender bias.

The novels that will be analyzed and used in the discussion are *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen and *Neverwhere* by Neil Gaiman. In both books, the gender roles of some of the characters challenge traditional roles. In this essay, I will first discuss what gender involves, and then look at some research on the impact of the role of the teacher, before moving on to discuss some strategies to detect and correct gender bias and how they can be linked to the novels.

1.1 Literature overview

Pride and Prejudice was written by Jane Austen in 1812. According to Debra Teachman, both the American War of Independence and the French Revolution were “driven by the pursuit of equality of all men and the idea that individuality and merit count for more than birthright” (ix). As a consequence, well-educated women “began to imagine a world in which they could have the same rights and privileges as men” (ix). Perhaps the ideal of equality affected Austen. Even though there are no explicit statements related to gender equality in *Pride and Prejudice*, she wrote how the same issues, such as social class, patronage and privilege, affected men and women. Austen’s novel gives also a hint of how social evolution could be the key towards a more equal society. The motive for having chosen *Pride and Prejudice* for this essay is to show how Austen’s idea of social evolution can

⁵ Ibidem

contribute to gender equality. An additional reason is that, Austen's novel is also widely read among English students from all over the world and they can learn about gender equality as they read it.

Pride and Prejudice is written in the third person from Elizabeth Bennet's point of view. Elizabeth has four sisters, Jane, Lydia, Mary and Kitty. Without a male heir, Mr. Bennet's cousin, Mr. Collins, is to inherit all the possessions of the family when he dies. Being aware of their situation, Mrs. Bennet is worried about their future and does everything in her power to make sure that her daughters will marry. At a ball, the Bennets meet Mr. Bingley, a young and attractive wealthy bachelor, and his noble friend, Mr. Darcy. Mr. Bingley and Jane fall in love. Mrs. Bennet's lack of discretion and her youngest daughters' behavior as well as the inferiority of the connections of the Bennets (Austen 150, 151) makes Mr. Darcy feel suspicious about the honesty of Jane's feelings towards his friend. As a result, Mr. Bingley breaks his connection with Jane. In the meantime, Mr. Collins proposes to Elizabeth hoping to avoid any conflict with the Bennets originated by the entailment. She refuses to marry him and he marries her best friend, Charlotte Lucas, instead. Despite having mixed feelings about the Bennets, Mr. Darcy is attracted to Elizabeth, which leads to another marriage proposal that she turns down. Her decision is based on Darcy's interference with the relationship between Jane and Mr. Bingley, as well as Darcy's actions against Mr. Wickham, who falsely claims to have been treated cruelly and unjustly by Darcy. Mr. Darcy writes a letter to Elizabeth explaining his decision. Eventually, Mr. Darcy puts aside his pride and reveals who he really is, proving that Elizabeth's prejudice against him was wrong. After having observed how Mr. Darcy treats his servants and her relatives, she begins feeling attracted to him. In the end, both Darcy and Elizabeth learn that first impressions can be misleading as well as the fact that it is possible to be happy without fulfilling society's expectations.

Neverwhere was written by Neil Gaiman in 1996. The book is about Richard Mayhew, who is an ordinary young man leading a plain life. His life changes the day he helps Door, a teenage girl bleeding on a sidewalk. After having helped her, he discovers that another side of London exists. Richard learns that there are two Londons, namely: London Above, which is the ordinary London; and London Below, inhabited by “the people who fell through the cracks in the world” (Gaiman 127). Door needs to escape from the assassins, Mr. Croup and Mr. Vandemar who killed her family. She asks Richard to contact the cat-like Marquis de Carabas, who can help her find out that was responsible for the murder of her family. Once Door and de Carabas have gone away, Richard becomes invisible to the people in London Above. Therefore, Richard decides to look for Door and de Carabas in London Below. Richard is helped by rat-speakers to look for Door. As Richard travels through London Below, he realizes that this is a much more dangerous place than London Above. Luckily, he meets Hunter, a female warrior who protects him and guides him to Door. Hunter is hired by Door as a bodyguard. After that, they begin a journey that will change their destiny.

The fact that London Below is unlike London Above is the main reason why I selected it for this essay. In London Below everyone does as they please, since the underground culture does not have fixed expectations. Hence, there are no traditional gender roles. Another reason is that by comparing London Above and London Below, it is possible to imagine what life would be like in a world without gender.

1.2 Method

The content-based approach to teaching is the method advocated in this essay. Stephen Davis explains that this approach involves: “learning *about something* rather than learning *about language*” (Habte-Gabr and Bryan 22). The advantage of this approach is that

students learn about a topic at the same time they practice the language they have learned and use the language they are learning. Another benefit is that “content-based instruction makes a connection between real life and real-world skills” (Habte-Gabr and Bryan 22). In real life, we acquire new skills in order to learn something new. Using fiction can be a useful tool in this method because “literature mirrors national culture and can therefore acquaint students with the aesthetic, moral, and spiritual values of [a] nation and the rules of the social system” (Spack 704, 705). Hence, students can learn how the world works by reading fiction. Since the topics that literature deals with are meaningful, there is greater likelihood that students will be motivated. Because the aim of this approach is learning about a topic, students can focus on understanding what gender equality involves as they put into practice the language they have learned. In this essay, the content-based approach is applied when discussing the strategies to detect and correct gender bias.

2. What is gender?

To succeed as a teacher in promoting gender equality, it is important that the teacher grasps what it means. First of all, it is essential to clarify what *gender* means since it is easily confused with the term *sex*. The Oxford Dictionary defines *sex* as: “either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and most other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions”.⁶ In other words, *sex* identifies the biological differences between men and women. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, gender refers to “the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex”.⁷ To illustrate this, in *Neverwhere*, Hunter grabs a small boy by the ear to ask him something. The narrator writes, “Ow, he said in the manner of small boys” and also that “the boy had the towering arrogance only seen in the greatest of artists and all nine-

⁶ Oxford Dictionary. www.oxforddictionaries.com. Oxford Dictionary Online. n.d. web. 2011

⁷ Merriam-Webster dictionary. www.merriam-webster.com. Merriam-Webster dictionary online. n.d. web. 2011

year-old boys” (Gaiman 260). This example shows that arrogance is associated with the behavior of small boys. On the other hand, girls are regarded as being emotional, for instance, when Door is at her home after her family was murdered, the narrator explicitly says that she was “crying like a little girl” (Gaiman 82). So that there are typical associations with one sex, there must be something that makes that a boy or a girl behave according to their sex.

The American philosopher Judith Butler states that, “all gender identity is performed or enacted” (quoted in Rivkin and Ryan 900). She refers to what Simone de Beauvoir claimed, namely, that: “one is not born, but rather, *becomes*, a woman” (quoted in Rivkin and Ryan 900). Mary Crawford and Roger Chattin explain that: “an individual at birth: is given a gender label; develops a gender identity (male or female); is exposed from birth onward to prescriptions and proscriptions consistent with that label and identity; and comes to behave and evaluate himself or herself in terms of those norms” (13). This means that a person is not born with a gender, but that some repetitive rituals or acts within a culture or society make a person either masculine or feminine. In Jane Austen’s time, there were clear rituals and expectations for men and women. For example, concerning female upbringing, Austen writes in *Pride and Prejudice* that a woman was expected to “have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages” (Austen 33). This example shows that girls became members of the feminine gender when they were educated to entertain. The danger of developing a female gender identity could lead to the “production of superficial women with shallow values” (Roberts 163). Since school is a society within society, it is there that students can learn about how gender can either be constructed or deconstructed. Therefore, it is important to discuss what the teacher can do to counteract gender construction.

3. The role of the teacher

The next step towards promoting gender has to do with the role of the teacher, since it is he or she who is supposed to guide students. Even if Mr. Bennet is not a teacher in *Pride and Prejudice*, it is possible to learn what the impact of having certain expectations does to an individual. For example, he considers his daughters to be “silly and ignorant” (6), except for Elizabeth, who in his opinion has “something more of quickness than her sisters” (Austen 6). These examples can be interpreted in two ways. Either Mr. Bennet’s expectations contributed to the way his daughters behave or he is just being honest and Elizabeth is more intelligent than her sisters. If the first option was true, that may explain why Lydia is “wild” (Austen 214) and runs away with Mr. Wickham, while Lizzy dares to express her opinion. Teachers might have the same challenge as Mr. Bennet, to avoid having fixed expectations raised by the sex of their students.

Several studies show that boys dominate classroom discussion (Crocco, Libresco 112), the outcome is that teachers tend to pay them more attention than female students (Dumais 59). Even experienced teachers tend to let boys give their opinion and ignore girls. This behavior may be due to society’s gender construction. As stated, research demonstrates that teachers’ behavior and attitude towards students can either promote gender equality or reinforce gender roles. The current Swedish Curriculum points out similarly that teachers play an essential role in constructing genders: “The way in which girls and boys are treated and assessed in school, as well as the demands and expectations that are placed on them, contributes to their perception of gender differences” (Lgr11). Therefore, teachers need to be more aware of what they expect from their students, since it can either contribute positively or negatively to the way they construct genders. Fenstermaker and West define *doing gender* as: “creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential or biological. Once the differences have been

constructed, they are used to reinforce the *essentialness* of gender” (13). Furthermore, they argue that gender “is something that one *does*, and does recurrently, in interaction with others” (Fenstermaker and West 16). On average, students spend one third of their day at school, where they interact with other students and teachers. Therefore, teachers are responsible not only for transmitting knowledge of fundamental democratic values, but also in preparing students for work as well as responsible participation in society (Gy2011). It is important that teachers analyze their expectations and behavior towards students since both boys and girls are equal.

Studies regarding whether there are significant differences between genders regarding cognitive skills, learning styles, and psychological development, have been carried out. As for cognitive skills, some teachers believe that girls are better at mathematics than boys, while others argue that boys are slow readers in comparison with girls. Professor Kimberly Cassidy, reveals that even though there are some anatomical differences in the brains of males and females, these brain differences do not have anything to do with gender differences in cognitive ability. Hence, they “should not be used as a justification for avoiding equity issues in the classroom” (39, 40). An example of the difference related to reading according to one’s gender is shown in *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth tells Mr. Darcy that she is sure that they never read the same things, “or not with the same feelings” (Austen 75). Another illustration is when Mr. Collins pays a visit to the Bennets. He claims that he never reads novels and that he has observed “how little young ladies are interested by books of a serious stamp” (Austen 56). These examples may indicate that what boys and girls choose to read depend on their education. Another explanation might be that since Austen was famous for her “sparkling social comedy and accurate vision of human relationships” (Austen introduction), those examples can also mean that she was being ironic and critical of the way girls were considered in her times. Ironically, gender differences regarding learning skills

have not changed that much. All these things can be discussed in the classroom if *Pride and Prejudice* is used.

Concerning social differences between boys and girls, Cassidy claims that females achieve greater intimacy in contrast with boys, who are discouraged by society from self-disclosure, which result in boys achieving intimacy through alternative behaviors such as when they play sports as a team (43). It can be argued that this was reflected, for instance, in Jane Austen's time, when a popular male activity was hunting. Nowadays, most young men spend time together practicing sports or in the case of young adults, like Richard in *Neverwhere*, socialize at a pub. Thus, the psychological development of boys and girls is the same, even if it is achieved in different ways depending on what the society considers acceptable regarding each gender. Moreover, research shows that there is not a gender "characteristic" regarding learning styles. An important criticism against learning styles in general is that there is considerable weakness in the reliability and validity of many of measurement instruments (Cassidy 51). In conclusion, there is no evidence that supports that there is any important difference between genders in terms of cognitive skills, learning styles, and psychological development. The only obstacles are the expectations of both society and teachers. Nevertheless, there are teachers who do avoid gender labeling.

I interviewed some high school teachers regarding their views on gender in the classroom. One of them, a male teacher, explained that he does not think of students as boys or girls, just as individuals.⁸ He told me that he has two teenagers at home, a boy who is sensitive and feminine in many ways, and a tomboy girl. He claims to have raised his children as people with different abilities, skills and interests. In his opinion, there is nothing wrong with his children even though they are not what society would consider feminine or masculine. The aim is that they feel confident about who they are as individuals. Other

⁸ Anders, Hübel. Personal interview. April. 2011.

teachers, who were in the same room, also agreed that they avoided thinking about genders and just focus on students as individuals. Everybody is unique and learns in different ways.

I also asked them whether they have seen any difference in the way boys and girls behave and learn in the classroom. All of them agreed that there are no patterns or rules. Sometimes boys misbehave, sometimes girls do. Sometimes boys are more engaged in learning, sometimes girls are. In their experience, avoiding labeling students as female or male has contributed to help them see who students are.

Finally, the male teacher pointed out that he tries to promote gender equality in the sense that all students have the same rights, responsibilities, as well as consequences for their actions. The fact that the teacher is a man does not change the situation. A female teacher, shares the same philosophy and as a result students feel confident and satisfied having a teacher who sees them, not their gender or race. Teachers' expectations play an important role in promoting either gender bias or gender equality. As discussed before, since gender is a social construction, everybody needs to reprogram his/her brain to promote gender equality. Once teachers understand how important their role is in promoting gender equality, it is advisable for them to learn how to recognize bias and which strategies they can use in the classroom. Likewise, in London Below in *Neverwhere* everybody can do and be whatever they want because there are not fixed expectations in contrast with London Above and *Pride and Prejudice*.

4. Recognizing Bias and Strategies to promote gender equality in the classroom

Having understood the importance of the role of the teacher, the next point to discuss is the teaching materials. One of the obstacles to promoting gender equality is that there are various forms of bias in curriculum materials such as textbooks. David M. Sadker and Karen Zittleman (2007) have identified the following forms of bias in teaching materials:

cosmetic bias, linguistic bias, stereotyping, invisibility, and fragmentation. These types of bias in textbooks will be explained and compared with examples of the novels that can be used to counteract each bias.

4.1 *Cosmetic bias*

Sadker and Zittleman discuss cosmetic bias:

textbooks publishers are aware that educators and reform movements are demanding better, fairer and more comprehensive materials in education. Occasionally, publishers and authors minimize the process by creating an illusion of equity. Two common shortcuts are pictures of nontraditional people prominently displayed or special sections or displays that discuss yet segregate women and other groups (Sadker, Zittleman 273).

In many textbooks I have come across, I have seen how the majority of people in the pictures displayed are middle-class Caucasian. In some illustrations, someone whose skin color is darker is also present but there is no real balance. In other words, the images do not show the multiculturalism that there is in our modern society. As a result, some groups of people are segregated.

In contrast, in *Neverwhere* there is multiculturalism, mainly in London Below, and it is not traditional cosmetic bias. One of the characters is Carabas whose “eyes burned white in an extremely dark face” (Gaiman 45). Even though it is difficult to know his race, it is clear that he is not white. Another character is Hunter whose voice is “rich as cream and honey” and who is “a tall, with long, tawny hair, and skin the color of burnt caramel” (Gaiman 101). Both characters play an important role in *Neverwhere*. Carabas is a clever catlike man who can solve problems and helps Anesthesia find out who the murderer of her family is even if his own life is in danger. Hunter is a well-known and respected heroine who has a reputation for “being the best bodyguard in the Underside” (Gaiman 261). Something to

highlight is that these two characters are neither servants, nor a stereotype of the “magical negro”, which is how Black people have been represented in the media and whose task is to help “white people improve themselves” (Glenn & Cunningham 137). Both Carabas and Hunter hire out their services to the best offer. No wonder Hunter claims that she does not “owe no man fealty” (Gaiman 102). Hunter’s words may indicate that she is free to do with her life and that nobody owns her.

Glenn and Cunningham state that Black and White relations can be challenging because people use the images projected by media to draw conclusions regarding these relationships (137). Since students can also be affected by media regarding different cultures, it is important to study the topic of multiculturalism. Students can read *Neverwhere* and analyze whether the role of De Carabas and Hunter is just to help Richard and Lady Door, as a “magical black” would do; or if they just happen to be non-white characters that have their own reasons to help them. Students can also discuss if there would have been any difference in the plot if the race of the characters was different or if they lived in London Above. The aim is to help students realize that everybody has the same rights, possibilities and responsibilities regardless their cultural background. Students can also study about both women and men who have become successful despite social constructions where only white men succeed, for instance Rigoberta Menchú or Nelson Mandela.

As Sadker and Zittleman point out, women are also segregated. Sadker and Sadker emphasize that “when girls do not see themselves in the pages of textbooks, when teachers do not point out or confront the omissions, our daughters learn that to be female is to be an absent partner in the development of our nation. And when teachers add their stereotypes to the curriculum bias in books, the message becomes even more damaging” (8). *Pride and Prejudice* can be used to show how gender is constructed. Students can analyze the following extract: “a woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing,

dancing, and the modern languages to deserve the word” (Austen 33), which can be used as a warm-up to study about manners and customs of life in Jane Austen’s time and in that way they can get acquainted with what life was like for young people then.⁹ Students can discuss why cultural and artistic activities were regarded as feminine in Austen’s time and compare if such activities in modern times are still considered feminine. Music and other artistic expressions are important for many teenagers, so that they can contribute to the discussion by giving their opinion and sharing their experience.

Another exercise is the study of the topic related to heroes. Before reading *Neverwhere*, students can complete individually the following sentence: A hero is:_____.¹⁰ Then, the teacher can elicit some answers and discuss with the class what character traits a hero should have. Next, the teacher can ask for some examples of a male hero and a female hero. Students can be encouraged to focus on identifying the hero in *Neverwhere* and to justify their choice. They may come up with different options, for instance Richard, Door, Hunter, or De Carabas. Additionally, students can think about examples to reflect on how characters can be anything they want in London Below regardless of their sex. Finally, they can discuss whether boys and girls have the same opportunities and responsibilities nowadays or if this is only possible in the fictive London Below.

Another activity to challenge cosmetic bias is to compare different covers of the novels. Teachers can invite students to “judge the book by its cover”, in other words to discuss how the cover of a book can affect a reader. Encouraging students to contribute with what they know and feel about a topic is an effective way to challenge conventional assumptions about gender. Students may discuss, for instance, which cover appeals them more and why, whether the cover matters when selecting a book to read or why they think

⁹ Jane Austen’s House Museum. “Manners and customs of life in Jane Austen’s time”. Downloadable resources. www.jane-austen-house-museum.org.uk. n.d. web. 2011.

¹⁰ Exercise based on Brown and Roy’s research (Sadker & Silber 171)

there are different covers of the same novel.¹¹ By understanding how social constructions work, students may realize that gender constructions can be changed.

<p>A) The cover resembles a fashion magazine. Elizabeth is in the center. The headlines are related to the novel, for instance “Lizzy on Love, Loss, and Living”.</p>	<p>B) There are two shadows. On one side there is a gentleman and on the other side there is a lady. They are walking away as they turn around to look at each other.</p>
<p>C) The cover is divided in two. There is a picture of London Above and underneath there is a picture of a sewage that represents London Below.</p>	<p>D) There is a young woman standing on a street crowded with people who walk by ignoring her. Next to her there is a door to the underworld. The scene seems to be a page of a comic book.</p>

4.2 Linguistic bias

Masculine terms and pronouns, such as *he*, or *our forefathers*, have denied the participation of women in our society. To illustrate this, many occupations are labeled with *man*, for instance, policeman, fireman, etc. As a result, the “legitimacy of women working in these fields is denied” (Sadker, Zittleman 272). To avoid it, teachers can use neutral terms, for example: police officer instead of policeman, firefighter instead of firemen. In *Neverwhere*, there is an asexual character, namely the angel, Islington. When referring to this character, Gaiman uses the neutral pronoun *it*, for example: “It was not a man, it was not a woman. It was very beautiful. Its voice was quiet” (Gaiman 197). Interestingly, the narrator uses the pronoun *it* to refer to the angel, whereas, Richard ends up using the pronoun *he*, even though

¹¹ The original covers have been erased for Copyright issues. Each cover is described instead.

the angel is asexual: “Islington. I actually met him. It. Him. He’s an angel. I mean a real angel” (Gaiman 303). The fact that Richard uses the pronoun *he* when referring to the angel might be the result of gender construction in *London Above*. In *London Above* just like in our society everything is either masculine or feminine, we tend to refer to things as “he” or “she” more often than “it”. Maybe that is why Richard could not help address the angel as a masculine being. The topic of how nouns can change our perception of things can be discussed in the class. Students can discuss how they visualize the angel when Richard uses the pronoun “he” and how they would imagine the angel if Richard used the pronoun “she” or “it” instead.

One strategy to tackle linguistic bias is by switching the gender of some of the characters. Once students are acquainted with the novel they are reading, they can be challenged to reflect on what would happen if the main character changed her or his sex. For instance if Richard was Rachel in *Neverwhere*, or if Elizabeth was Henry and Darcy was Daisy in *Pride and Prejudice*. Some of the questions they can discuss and write about are: How would the work be altered? Could the plot develop as in the original work? Why? Why not? Are the characters stereotypically gendered? What descriptions or actions lead you to that conclusion? (Brown and Roy 177).

One way of fostering critical thinking is with dialogic instruction, in which both teachers and students ask authentic questions, instead of test questions. This type of instruction involves thoughtful interaction between teacher and students. Nystrand stresses that: “the effectiveness of instructional discourse is a matter of the quality of teacher student interactions and the extent to which students are assigned challenging and serious roles requiring them to think, interpret, and generate new understandings” (7). This strategy has the advantage of being flexible. Students do not necessarily need to read the whole novel. Even a passage can be made relevant and analyzed and to promote gender equality. An extract that

can be used is the description of the people in the market in *Neverwhere*: “Someone was well over seven feet tall, and was covered in tufty ginger-colored hair. Someone’s teeth had been sharpened to points. Someone picked Richard up with a hand the size of a sheep’s head, and put Richard almost so close to someone’s mouth” (Gaiman 113). Teachers can focus on the pronoun *someone*, and invite students to discuss how the scene changes if that *someone* is substituted by the pronouns *he* or *she*. The teacher can remind students of the flexibility in London Below, where many combinations of historic characters and sex are possible.

The keys to counteracting negative gender construction in dialogic instruction are teacher-student interactions and time awareness. Jones and Dindia examined teacher-student interactions initiated by teachers. They claim that: “the extent to which teachers respond to student questions or provide additional explanations contributes significantly to individual student performance (443). Their research also shows that teachers have the tendency to initiate conversations more often with male students than with female students. They also give more feedback to boys than girls, since female students tend to be quiet (Jones & Dindia 446, 447). Unless teachers are more aware of their teacher-student interaction, they will not succeed in counteracting gender construction in the classroom. Their teaching style can have the opposite result of what they try to achieve with, for instance dialogic instruction, which is to stimulate all students to have a thoughtful interaction where everybody can have a new understanding of a text. Time awareness can also be essential in motivating slow or shy learners. Those shy students might be girls who tend to be quiet when boys dominate discussions. McKeathie and Svinicki recommend that the teacher should wait 5 to 30 seconds after having asked a question. They claim that this technique increases the opportunities that students need in order to participate (39). Questions can also be rephrased and examples can be given to motivate students to give their opinions. It is crucial that teachers bear in mind

that not only a discussion of the impact of nouns can counteract linguistic bias, but also their teacher-student interaction can either reinforce or counteract linguistic bias.

4.3 Stereotyping

Saker and Zittleman define stereotyping as the assignation of “traditional and rigid roles or attributes to a group, the diversity, abilities, and potential of that group are limited” (Saker and Zittleman 272). They also warn against the use of models, pictures, and other displays that could reinforce stereotyped roles. It is not easy to avoid gender stereotypes in fiction. Neil Gaiman admits in his essay “all books have genders” that *Neverwhere* has a male storyline but that each role is “taken and twisted 45 percent from skew, but they are stock characters nonetheless”.¹² It is distressing what Gaiman claims that: “books have genders, at least in [his] head, or at least the ones [he] writes do”. He goes on to say that *Neverwhere* belongs to the masculine gender, while *Stardust*, another of his books, is part of the female gender.

It is evident that there are many characters in *Neverwhere* that are stereotypes. For example, Jessica’s character is a stereotype of a shallow woman in search for a husband. The topics of marriage and clothes are associated with her:

Richard would accompany Jessica on her tours of such huge and intimidating emporia as Harrods and Harvey Nichols, stores where Jessica was able to purchase anything, from jewelry, to books, to the week’s groceries. (...) Jessica saw in Richard an enormous amount of potential, which properly harnessed by the right woman, would have made him the perfect matrimonial accessory. (Gaiman 11)

Even if the characters in *Neverwhere* are stock characters, since Gaiman “twisted them”, some characters are interesting to study. For example, even though Lady

¹² Gaiman, Neil. “All books have genders”. www.neilgaiman.com. Neil Gaiman’s Official site. Web. 2011

Door is considered royalty in London Below, her appearance differs from clothes worn by royalty in London Above, “her layers of clothes looked like she had at least made an effort to get the worst of the filth and the blood off them. (...) she had put on the brown leather jacket she had been wearing when he had found her” (Gaiman 53). Door’s lack of interest in fashion is also shown when they are at the first market held at Harrods, one of the most exclusive stores in London, where she does not stop to change her outfit but is only interested in hiring a bodyguard. Regarding marriage, Richard has a glimpse of what his life could be like if he returns to London Above. He sees himself meeting a girl and marrying her. But, instead he chooses to stay in London Below.

Pride and Prejudice has been considered part of the feminine gender. It is sometimes classified in the chick lit genre instead of the romance genre. The “chick lit is a genre. (...) Its form and content are, more or less, formulaic: white girl in the big city searches for Prince Charming, all the while shopping. (..) Chick lit is the daughter of the romance novel and the step-sister of fashion magazine” (Merrick introduction). Even Austen’s contemporary Charlotte Brontë underestimated *Pride and Prejudice*. In her letter to George Henry Lewes on January 12th, 1848, she wrote:

Why do you like Miss Austen so very much? I am puzzled on that point. (...) I had not seen *Pride and Prejudice* till I had read that sentence of yours, (...) and what did I find? (...) I should hardly live with her ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses. (...) She has a grasp of mind which, if I cannot fully comprehend, I can very deeply respect: she is sagacious and profound; Miss Austen is only shrewd and observant. (Baratz-Logsted introduction)

The result of stereotyping is that it limits the abilities and potential of certain groups. Besides, it also denies everyone knowledge of the diversity, complexity and variation

of any group. In relation to *Pride and Prejudice*, there are some examples of gender stereotypes. Some male hobbies were related to sports, for instance, Mr. Darcy enjoys fishing (Austen 195) while Mr. Bingley, usually hunts (Austen 259). In the case of traditional stereotyped female interests, fashion, shopping and marriage are popular topics among women. An example of fashion is Mrs. Bennet comment on Mr. Bingley's sisters: "I never in my life saw anything more elegant than their dresses" (Austen 13) and concerning shopping, Lydia requests her father to lend her and her sister money: "for [they] had just spent [theirs] at the shop" (Austen 169). Her attitude shows that Lydia, is just like Jessica the stereotype of a shallow woman. Regarding marriage, Mr. Darcy says that: "a lady's imagination is very rapid; it jumps from admiration to love, from love to matrimony, in a moment" (Austen 24). Mr. Darcy's words probably reflected his and other men's prejudice against women who were only searching for a husband. Even though the previous examples are just fictive characters, they still show how society hinders men and women to do as they please.

Nevertheless, I do believe that even if books have genders, it is still possible to use fiction to promote gender equality. *Pride and Prejudice* breaks with society's expectations in subtle ways. Regarding relationships with the opposite sex, in Austen's time men had the power to choose who to marry as long as they had connections and resources, while women were attractive to marry if they had a good reputation and a good dowry. Marriage was planned and "happiness in marriage [was] entirely a matter of chance" (Austen 20). However, Elizabeth challenges society when she believes that it is possible to marry someone she is attracted to without planning it.

Marriage was an important issue in Jane Austen's time because women did not have the resources or opportunities to be independent, and they were always dependent on their family or husband. Some critics consider that Austen romanticizes marrying for love, which is wrong, since she also portrayed what life was like for a woman who married a

soldier, as like in the case of Lydia. Austen's intention was probably to make her female reader use her intellect when selecting a husband.

According to the current Swedish Curriculum: "pupils shall be encouraged to develop their interests without prejudice as to gender differences" (Lgr 11). In other words, the interests of the students ought to be taken into consideration when teaching regardless whether their interests are considered by society as being feminine or masculine. Promoting gender equality is made tangible by putting into practice the content-based approach.

A topic to be studied could be stereotypes against individuality. Martino and Kehler remind us that "differences among boys and among girls are greater than those differences between boys and girls" (414). In other words, there should not be stereotypes since each person is different. In *Pride and Prejudice*, there are examples of how Elizabeth Bennet is in favor of individuality. While other women are brought up to please, and entertain, her education was different. To illustrate it, Mr. Darcy's aunt, Lady Catherine is shocked to know that the Bennets could not play a musical instrument nor have had a governess even though they have the resources. After having listened to Elizabeth, Lady Catherine replied: "you give your opinion very decidedly for so young a person" (Austen 130). As a result of her education, Elizabeth becomes a confident and wise woman. When she marries Mr. Darcy, her sister-in-law's "mind [receives] knowledge which had never before fallen in her way" (Austen 299). Once students are familiar with expectations for young people in Austen's time, they can discuss what they would do if they lived in that time, whether they would dare to be themselves or if they would do as society demands.¹³

Similarly, in *Neverwhere*, individuality is important in London Below where everybody is free to do what he or she wants without prejudice. For instance, Door is a young

¹³ Jane Austen's House Museum. "The world that Jane Austen presents". Downloadable Resources. www.jane-austen-house-museum.org.uk. n.d. web. 2011.

woman who decides what to do with her life. That is why she warns de Carabas not to “patronize” her, and reminds him that he works for her not the other way around (Gaiman 131). Hunter, for example, is not only a female warrior who is respected for who she is and is not labeled as a “tomboy”. Another example is de Carabas, who chooses to call himself Marquis even though he is not (Gaiman 236). Besides, he is supposed to be brave since he is paid to protect Door, however, he confesses to be a coward (Gaiman 38). Last but not least, Richard decides to quit a comfortable but boring life in London Above, to become Sir Richard the warrior in London Below (Gaiman 344). In contrast, the young rat-speaker Anaesthesia is not as brave nor confident as Door is something that costs her life (Gaiman 105). There are advantages to be yourself. In the classroom students can discuss the stereotypes boys and girls have to deal with, as well as what the advantages of individuality are and what they need to do to go against the flow and be themselves.

4.4 Invisibility

Invisibility refers to the omission or underrepresentation of certain groups, like women for example. “When women and people of color are missing from displays and materials, the implication is that these groups are of less value and importance in our society” (Sadker and Zittleman 272). Sadker and Sadker explain in *Failing at Fairness- How Our Schools Cheat Girls* that “each time a girl opens a book and reads a womanless history, she learns she is worth less” (Sadker and Sadker13), as a consequence they achieve less. To tackle the problem of invisibility, yet again, the content-based approach can be applied. In this case, the main topic can deal with examples of men and women of achievement who belong to the groups that are underrepresented. In *Neverwhere*, there are examples of both brave men and women. For instance: Hunter is a fierce female warrior who can defeat strong men (Gaiman 122), or Door who has the courage to find out who the assassin of her family is and she is not easily intimidated (Gaiman 131). Regarding men, Richard, the protagonist, has the courage to

pass the Blackfriars ordeal (Gaiman 253) and becomes the warrior who succeeds in killing the beast (Gaiman 315). In the classroom students can come up with real examples of women and men like Hunter, Door or Richard, for instance female police officers or fire fighters.

Similarly, in *Pride and Prejudice*, there are also good examples of both men and women of achievement who challenged stereotypes within gender limits of their time. For example: In Mr. Darcy's case, his achievement is not measured in terms of his wealth and connections but in the way he treats others. His servants allege that he "has always been the most generous-hearted boy in the world, (...) as well, as "the best landlord, and the best master" (Austen 190). Being the landlord, Darcy could treat his servants as he pleased, but he has always been respectful towards them. His highest achievement is probably, saving the reputation of the Bennets (Austen 238) without expecting anything in return.

As for Elizabeth, her behavior proves that women do not have to be invisible in society, but that they also have a voice. She may not be a heroine like Hunter, who fights against beasts, but she fights against society's expectations. For instance, not to marry the first man who proposes despite her mother's wishes.

Another way to avoid invisibility is by making visible the invisible and underrepresented groups. Since the teacher's role is crucial in promoting gender equality, teachers can sometimes display material in the classroom, which can be inspiring. According to the Herald Journal, "statistics show that anywhere from 40 to 65 percent of the population are visual learners, 30 to 40 percent are auditory learners, and 5 to 20 percent are tactile learners".¹⁴ Teachers can bear in mind that the majority of students are visual learners who need to see or to visualize images to learn or to understand something. That is why displaying motivating images can tackle invisibility when the textbooks fail to do it.

¹⁴ Herald Journal. "What type of learner are you". www.herald-journal.com. Web. 2011

4.5 Fragmentation / isolation

To separate issues related to some groups, makes these issues seem less important and not a part of the cultural mainstream. The issue of sexuality has become more complicated as time goes by. When I was studying in the seventh grade, back in the 1990's, there were three gender categories based on sexual orientation, namely: heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual. Lately, there are new categories or labels, such as transsexual and asexual. According to the American Psychological Association:

adolescence can be a period of experimentation, (...) sometimes they have same-sex feelings or experiences that cause confusion about their sexual orientation. Some are attracted to their same sex but do not identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual, because of the stigma associated with a non-heterosexual orientation. Some are presumed to be homosexual or bisexual just because they do not abide by traditional gender roles.¹⁵

Thus, teenagers need to understand that everyone is entitled to have the same rights and opportunities regardless of his or her gender identity.¹⁶ According to the Swedish school curriculum Lgr11, teachers should:

ensure that all students, independent of social background and regardless of gender, ethnic belonging, religion or other belief, sexual orientation or disability, have true influence over the work methods, work structures, and educational content, and ensure that this influence increases as they grow image and maturity.

By taking into consideration every single group, like the homosexual community, and their issues when planning the course, it is possible to promote gender equality.

¹⁵ American Psychological Association. "What about sexual orientation and coming out during adolescence?". www.apa.org. web. 2011.

¹⁶ Adolescence refers to the age of 12 to 18 years old.

In *Neverwhere*, for instance, Hunter's homosexuality is not relevant (Gaiman 214). She is respected for who she is and what she has achieved. Another case is "the Fop With No Name" who, according to Richard, looks like an "early eighteenth-century rake, (...) his face was powdered to white, his lips painted red" but is strong enough to compete for the position of Door's bodyguard (Gaiman 116). His appearance can be used as a basis for a discussion, since wearing make-up and clothes with ribbons, jabots and laces has been sometimes a sign of "masculinity" in some periods of time, for instance in the 18th century. Students can also compare the appearance of the Fop With No Name with modern gender dress code related to masculinity.

Further discussion can be directed towards famous artists. For instance, how come some male singers or members of some bands wear make-up and wear tight and revealing clothes on the stage whenever they perform, but they are not considered feminine. This type of discussion can lead to a gender construction debate on the importance of being member of any gender that is not necessarily related to one's sex.

Nevertheless, Fenstermaker and West claim that it is unavoidable to construct gender because of the social consequences of sex category membership (21), such as rejection, intolerance, discrimination, and bullying. Furthermore, Butler states that "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (903). An example of this is the case of Brandon Teena, whose story inspired the film "Boys don't cry". Brandon was born female but chose to live as a man. When his secret was revealed, his life was in danger. He was raped and murdered. Brandon was punished because he did not do his gender "right". Teachers do not need to wait until a student decides to reveal his / her sexual orientation to discuss issues that homosexual or transgendered people can face. If teachers integrate issues from all groups, not only can they promote gender equality but avoid bullying caused by, for

example, not doing one's gender right. Learning about different social studies can contribute to open the eyes of both teachers and students.

Another way of counteracting fragmentation is, for instance by studying about feminism. Bell hooks defines feminism as: "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (1). She clarifies that it does not mean to hate men and adds that "it implies that all sexist thinking and action is the problem, whether those who perpetuate it are female or male, child or adult" (1). Because even women and children can be sexist, it is important to teach both boys and girls the impact that social construction has on the life of people. Students can discuss in the classroom what life would be like without gender and what they can do to make it possible.

5 Conclusion

National and international laws as well as the Swedish School Curricula urge the promotion of gender equality. There is no question that gender roles are a social construction that can limit the potential and possibilities for men and women. Teachers have an important role in counteracting traditional gender roles. As discussed in this essay, teachers need to reflect on how their behavior, expectations, language and use of teaching materials can contribute to the promotion of gender equality.

A useful strategy the teacher has is the content-based approach that focuses on learning something through using the language instead of learning about the language. An instrument within this strategy is fiction, in this case Gaiman's *Neverwhere* and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Both novels can be used in the classroom to study how gender is socially constructed since they reflect society's expectations and culture.

Achieving gender equality in the classroom takes time. One of the reasons for this is that students already have some experience regarding what teachers and the society

expect from them. Thus, it is a challenge to break with old patterns. A major goal of education is to increase students' critical and rational thinking (Lgr11, Gy2011). McKeathie and Svinicki state that: "change is more likely to happen in situations in which the teacher and the students reflect, listen and learn from one another" (338). Fiction as a resource can be useful because it can provide plenty of topics to discuss in the classroom.

This essay provides examples of strategies to identify bias in teaching materials as well as advice for the teacher on how to make good use of fiction such as *Neverwhere* and *Pride and Prejudice*, in order to promote gender equality. Even if there are some examples of gender stereotypes in both novels, there are also examples of characters that challenge society's expectations, for instance Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* and the characters in London Below in *Neverwhere*. The specific biases to be identified in teaching materials are: cosmetic bias, which refers to how women and other groups are segregated in images; linguistic bias, which has to do with how the use of specific nouns can deny the participation of women in our society; stereotyping which is the assignation of traditional rigid roles to a group limiting its potential; invisibility which is the underrepresentation or omission of certain groups in teaching materials; and last but not least, fragmentation or isolation which is done when issues to certain groups are separated leading to making these issues seem less relevant or not part of the cultural mainstream. Once the bias is identified, the content-based method can be put into practice to tackle gender construction and to promote gender equality.

It is a challenge to counteract traditional gender roles, especially when the teacher needs to re-program his or her own thoughts or beliefs. Nevertheless, it is motivating to be involved in the process of helping new generations of men and women to realize the benefits gender equality has and that it high time for a change.

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