Let’s Speak about the Unspeakable

Using Anderson’s Speak in the Swedish Upper Secondary Classroom to discuss Sexism and Sexual Assault

Author: Michaela Eriksson
Supervisor: Anna Greek
Examiner: Anne Holm
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Abstract

This essay examines how Anderson’s *Speak* can be used in the Swedish Upper Secondary classroom to talk about the difficult topics ‘sexism’ and ‘sexual assault’. The paper discusses several examples of where the power structures between the genders affect the main character of *Speak*. The novel contains a connection to Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, which is also discussed in this essay, focusing on the timelessness of the issues discussed. The conclusion is that the difficult topics in *Speak* are important to discuss in the classroom, because a functional way of battling sexism is through vocalizing the problem.

Keywords
Speak, Sexism, Sexual Assault, Rape, EFL, Literature, Difficult Topics
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1 Introduction

Pupils spend 40 hours per week at school, it is their working place and the place where they spend most of their waking hours. Therefore, it is crucial that they feel comfortable and relaxed in the classroom and with their peers. Consequently, this essay focuses on how to target difficult topics in the classroom, using literature as a tool. The target group used in this essay is English 5 in the Swedish Upper Secondary classroom. The reason for this choice is that English 5 is the only mandatory course in English at an Upper Secondary level.

The Swedish Curriculum for Upper Secondary School (henceforth cited as “Curriculum”) states that whilst in school, pupils shall be treated and taught in a democratic way. This includes learning about human rights, equality, and compassion, as well as that the teachers should bring these values into the classroom. Besides empirical knowledge, pupils should eventually leave school with an understanding of, and empathy towards others (“Curriculum” 4). The syllabus for English (henceforth cited as “Syllabus”) closely corresponds to this section in the curriculum in stating that “students should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (“Syllabus” 1).

The content of communication for English 5 declares that the course should teach pupils about societal- and working life, as well as living conditions, social issues, and other conditions affecting everyday life. There is also a focus on experiences, feelings, and ethical issues (“Syllabus” 7). This content is closely connected to the goal of teaching democratic values, fostering pupils into compassionate adults. Thus, there are several different instances in the steering documents that suggest that pupils should be exposed to difficult topics, such as sexism, sexual assault, as well as the consequences of being the target of these.

To concretize how to use literature when discussing difficult topics, the main literary source of this essay is the novel *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson. *Speak* depicts the first year of High School for Melinda, a girl who has been raped and is being bullied and ignored by her peers, resulting in a depression. Due to her trauma, Melinda develops an attitude problem as well as selective muteness, with the result that she pushes away those who want to help her. It is possible to discuss several difficult topics using *Speak*, but the focus in this is on sexism and sexual assault.

There are several reasons for choosing this novel in particular. Firstly, it is written and aimed at teenagers and young adults. Secondly, it deals with several very difficult topics necessary to talk about. Thirdly, it is written in a rather simple language with clear sections
and chapters, making it easy to grasp and understand. Finally, this novel is used in actual Swedish Upper Secondary schools, suggesting that it is relevant to the Swedish teenagers.

Even though *Speak* addresses sexism and sexual assault to a great extent, the novel *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne is also incorporated in the analysis due to its appearance in *Speak*. The English teacher in *Speak* teaches *The Scarlet Letter* to Melinda and her classmates, and in several ways does the two novels portray the same struggle. Both Melinda and Hester (the main character of *The Scarlet Letter*) are shunned by those around them. When reading the novel, Melinda relates to Hester, and in an Upper Secondary classroom, it is possible that pupils might relate to Melinda and/or Hester as well.

To highlight examples of sexism as well as the consequences of sexual assault, feminist theory presented by Moi is the main analytical tool. Furthermore, psycho-analytical terms, and other feminist approaches are also incorporated to create a wider understanding of the structures that enable these issues to exist. Theories highlighting the benefits of using literature to target difficult issues are also used throughout this essay. When concretizing how to connect *Speak* to the EFL classroom, both distinct didactic theories and previously conducted research on how to use *Speak* in the classroom are presented.

The essay is divided into five parts, with this introduction being the first one. The other four parts are as follows: *Literature review* where previous research and theories are presented and discussed, *Sexism and Sexual Assault in Speak* that analyses the novel with the purpose of finding concrete examples of sexism and sexual assault, *Using Speak in the Swedish Classroom* that connects the examples presented in section three with didactic approaches, and finally the *Conclusion* that ties everything together.

Thus, this essay investigates how to use *Speak* in the Swedish EFL classroom as a tool when discussing the difficult topics of ‘sexism’ and ‘sexual assault’. By incorporating feminist theory and different didactic approaches, the aim is to concretize how to target these issues in the EFL classroom.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Theories on the Importance of Literature

In “Politicizing young adult literature: Reading Anderson’s *Speak* as a critical text”, Janet Alsup stresses how the issues teenagers and adolescents face need to be discussed. She claims that discussions may prevent the issues from getting out of hand and becoming violent situations (Alsup 158). Alsup argues that a major advantage of using literature to discuss
issues is that pupils get the opportunity to talk about their issues through a fictive character. By doing so the issue might not feel as intimate and personal, making it easier to discuss with others (Alsup 160). She also highlights that when pupils read and discuss difficult topics, they become more aware and knowledgeable about the world. When reflecting on the emotions and feelings of others, they become ‘critical feelers’. By engaging in the lives of other people, pupils may get a ‘world citizenship’, or in other words, they can develop a deeper empathy toward others (Alsup 159).

Using literature as a tool to help pupils grow is also discussed by Judith A. Langer in Envisioning Literature, where she connects literature to life. She argues that by reading books, pupils can contemplate their own lives and their own potential. Literature can inspire pupils to be better persons, or to understand why someone acts in a certain way. Langer arrives at the same conclusion as Alsup, that by reading literature, pupils get the tools to become more empathetic and understanding (Langer 5). Langer continues to explain that “subjective experience occurs … when we bring new experiences and ideas closer to ourselves in ways that let us ‘see’ them from the inside” (7). She compares this engagement in the feelings and experiences of the fictive characters as a more personal way of reading than if you keep the characters emotions separate from your own (Langer 7). The perks of investing in the characters actions and emotions are closely connected to the goal of this essay, to find how Speak can be used to address and create an awareness of sexism and sexual assault.

In ‘Be the Tree’: Classical Literature, Art Therapy and Transcending Trauma in Speak’ Jessi Snider discusses how the novel connects our present-day issues of rape and sexual assault with literary works in the past portraying the same themes (299). By bringing these timeless themes into a modern perspective, Speak is a way for pupils to relate to the topics (Snider 300-301). Snider continues to highlight the similarities between Speak and classical works on sexual assault, for instance, Lavinia’s muteness in Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus. By doing this, Anderson connects the issues of our modern day to the same one’s centuries earlier (Snider 303). This comparison is of relevance when connecting Speak to The Scarlet Letter because sexism (and sexual assault as well, even though that is not prominent in The Scarlet Letter) is unfortunately timeless and present in the literature of most periods. By bringing in the historical perspective, pupils might find it easier to understand how widespread the issues actually are and have been. Finally, Snider discusses the form of art therapy used in the novel. The drawing of a tree is the representation of Melinda’s way to deal with having been raped. The more she brings into her tree the further she goes in her healing process (Snider 309).
2.2 Feminist Theories

In ‘Feminist, Female, Feminine’, Toril Moi highlights the importance of understanding the difference between these three terms. Moi begins her section on feminism by defining ‘Feminist criticism’ in the literary field as a “practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature” (Moi 117). Furthermore, Moi suggests that a feminist critic is not bound to any specific theory or method when performing literary criticism, as long as their work is influential “to the study of the social, institutional and personal power relations between the sexes” (Moi 118). This provides an opportunity for feminist critics to keep their political view, placing focus on power relations rather than blame.

When discussing the term ‘female’, Moi highlights that being female does not equal a feminist approach. She states that books written by women do not immediately work against the patriarchal stereotypes set for men and women, they can still be heavily influenced by these stereotypes and not feminist in their content (Moi 120). Nevertheless, several feminist critics choose to work with books written by women. However, this in itself is a political choice, but not because books written by female authors are automatically feminist (Moi 122). Instead, one may assume that the preference for working with books written by women is an attempt to bring attention to these authors.

Finally, Moi defines ‘feminine’ as a social construct on how women are supposed to behave based on society and culture. She continues to highlight that even though the concept of femininity is a construct, it is very deeply rooted in society, making these constructs seem as the natural and the norm (Moi 122-123). Moi describes how typically feminine traits developed by the patriarchy are used to control women, but also problematizes changing what we define as feminine. The problem with this, she argues, is that even though the definition of what is feminine may change, it does not change the fact that a woman must behave in a certain way to be considered a “normal” female (Moi 123).

Moi ends her chapter by clarifying that it is when readers, authors, and critics use these terms that they become meaningful. She claims that her definition of the terms should be used as a starting ground for further exploration of the issues tied to them, not to put an end to any debate the terms might cause. She ends by stressing that the purpose of feminist criticism is to reveal the patriarchal structures that affect women, by finding meaning and symbolism in texts (Moi 132). This final part, as well as the three terms defined previously, will be the focus when using feminist criticism in this essay. Choosing Speak is an active choice because
of its female protagonist and female author, but also due to its content that provides several examples of how women are being treated due to being female or because of feminine stereotypes (sexism).

In addition to Moi, “Feminist Perspectives on Rape” by Rebecca Whisnant provides a deeper understanding of the societal issues that concern sexual assault. Whisnant claims that when victims speak up about the sexual assault they have been subjected to, it provides a wider understanding of how common sexual harassment and rape actually is. Whisnant continues to declare that even though many women speak up about what they have been subjected to, there are still many victims who decide not to file reports against their perpetrators.

Whisnant also highlights the topic of ‘consent’, where she problematizes its usage when discussing if a particular act was actually rape. She claims that there is a problem when a woman is supposedly consenting if she is not explicitly saying no, because that suggests that for instance, an unconscious woman is consenting because she is not protesting. Furthermore, Whisnant describes how a focus on the victim’s apparel or relationship to the perpetrator may even leave the concept of consent irrelevant because the perpetrator could have understood the victim as ‘asking for it’. Finally, Whisnant points out that peritraumatic paralysis, freeze fright, is another problem when discussing consent. This due to the fact that freeze fright results in an apparent lack of physical resistance, that might be interpreted as consent. The issue of consent is very important when reading Speak. Melinda struggles with whether she was raped or not, and the boy who raped her argues that he did not do anything wrong.

When discussing sexism and sexual assault, a prominent term is the Madonna-whore complex, and how it affects both men and women in their everyday lives. In ‘Sigmund Freud and His Impact on Our Understanding of Male Sexual Dysfunction’, Uwe Hartmann explores theories presented by Freud and how they can be applied in the modern-day society. The Madonna-whore complex is, in short, the idea that a man cannot feel complete sexual desire towards someone he also respects and wants to be in a relationship with. In other words, females who are sexually desirable (the whore) are not relationship material (the Madonna) and vice versa (Hartmann 2335). Freud explained this dysfunction as the male having unresolved and confusing feelings for his mother. When faced with finding a woman to be in a committed relationship with, the man cannot get aroused by the woman because she reminds him too much of his mother (Hartmann 2335). Hartmann’s conclusion is that even though modern medicine does not use Freud’s psycho-analytical theories as a first stage in treating erectile dysfunction, they still use it when other methods are non-working (Hartmann 2338).
This implies that the Madonna-whore complex is something still very relevant when looking at sexism and the relationships between men and women in a 21st-century society.

Finally, feminism may be a difficult theory to discuss in a classroom environment, because it might cause discomfort. In the article ‘Uncomfortable Classrooms: Rethinking the role of student discomfort in feminist teaching’ Maria do Mar Pereira addresses this issue by mainly suggesting that it needs to be difficult. She claims that discomfort makes you question the world and become a more critical observer. Furthermore, she argues that teaching difficult topics has proven effective in creating a deeper knowledge and social transformations amongst her students (Pereira 131).

2.3 Didactic Theories

The article by Alsup contains a section on how to use *Speak* in the critical classroom. She begins by addressing the fact that even though teachers might be reluctant to use controversial books in their classroom, this is a necessity when helping pupils through their difficulties and struggles (Alsup 162). By focusing on a fictional character, pupils can discuss difficult topics without the risk of exposing themselves and their private feelings. This can consequently result in an awareness of for instance how the parties they go to look like, with alcohol and violence. (Alsup 163). Finally, Alsup addresses the non-conventional portrayal of a rape victim. When reading *Speak*, Alsup argues that it is not like other sad stories about rape, but a novel that gets more complex the further you read. The reason for this is that the narrative is constructed in such a way that requires the reader to continue reading. It is not apparent from the start how the rape occurred, and the reader does not get the full story until very late in the novel. Furthermore, the novel ends on a positive note where Melinda stands up for herself, making the novel even more relevant when discussing the topic ‘rape’ in a classroom environment (Alsup 165).

Chris McGee’s article “Why Won’t Melinda Just Talk about What Happened? *Speak* and the Confessional Voice” problematizes the focus on having Melinda open up about her issues. McGee questions whether an adult can actually identify and write about experiencing difficulties in adolescence. He claims that there is a too large focus on that Melinda must tell someone what happened, when that is the ‘adult way’ of handling teenage problems. McGee argues that the focus throughout the novel is on Melinda finally telling an adult what happened, and in that sense moving away from Melinda’s trauma (McGee 186). This critique of the novel itself can also be applied to this essay, because the purpose is to find a way to talk
about difficult matters. If it is the adult way to talk about issues and teenagers want to handle it differently, then that might cause problems in the classroom.

While McGee’s argument is important to take into consideration when discussing *Speak*, the main focus of this essay is to highlight how to talk about difficult topics. The analysis keeps McGee’s argument in mind when considering pupils that may feel too uncomfortable when discussing sexism and sexual assault, but the main focus lies on the importance of speaking up. This is further supported by Whisnant’s argument that by talking about sexual assault it is possible to reduce the stigma around it, as well as Pereira’s argument that it needs to be difficult and uncomfortable to understand these issues to a full.

As a way of approaching the class discussions, *Teaching Literature to Adolescents* (Beach et al.) is used to present theories of how to talk about literature in groups. The section ‘Getting response started’ provides pointers on how to get a good conversation going in the group(s). The tentative, exploratory thinking is important because it focuses on pupils’ perception of the text. Pupils need to be aware that there are no wrong or right answers and that they are entitled to react to the novel (Beach et al. 178-179).

In “Something to *Speak* About: Addressing Sensitive Issues through Literature” Mark Jackett provides concrete examples of how he has worked with the novel in a classroom environment. He has tried different ways of targeting the novel in order to provide various methods of discussion and reflection. One way that he did not find rewarding to use was the fishbowl method. This method involves five pupils having a discussion in the middle of the classroom, while the other pupils sit around them and listen. The purpose is that the other pupils will trade places with one in the middle when they have something to add to the discussion, but Jackett contemplates that because it was such a sensitive topic they were discussing, pupils did not feel comfortable enough to do so (Jackett 103). In hindsight, Jackett suggests that a small-group discussion would have been better when discussing sexual assault, due to its sensitive content and that the fish-bowl discussion did not provide the pupils with a safe environment.

Beach et al. provide an insight into why smaller groups are preferable when discussing difficult topics. The obvious incentive is that a smaller group creates the opportunity for every pupil to engage in the discussion (Beach et al. 183). Furthermore, another advantage of these smaller groups, where pupils get more freedom, is that they can discuss matters relevant to their own lives (Beach et al. 184).

The question of how to conduct group discussions connects to ‘the three sharings’, discussed by Aidan Chambers in *Tell Me Children, Reading & Talk with The Reading*
Environment. ‘The three sharings’ are enthusiasm, puzzles, and connections; they gradually make the group members go through the things they have in common as well as those they disagree on.

To share enthusiasm is the first stage where you simply discuss what you liked/disliked about a book, it does not have to be analytical and aims at finding similarities in opinion with your friends (Chambers 103-104). To share puzzles is when you discuss things that you did not understand in the novel. By raising these topics for discussion, it is possible to acquire a new perspective on the literary work from one of your peers that had an idea on what the puzzle (difficulty) was about (Chambers 104-105). Finally, to share connections is to figure out a pattern. By connecting events and symbols in the text, you are able to create and understand meaning. One way of doing this is connecting the fictional events to similar events in your own life, another is comparing the text they are reading with another text (Chambers 105-107). In Speak, Melinda reads The Scarlet Letter and feels a connection to Hester, and in the EFL classroom, pupils might relate to Melinda and/or Hester.

‘The three sharings’ method is good when discussing difficult topics, because it requires that you establish a common ground in the first stage, before beginning to discuss puzzles and connections that might be more difficult and complex to talk about. Beach et al. support this by claiming that it is important to not overwhelm pupils by asking too complex questions too soon. They suggest starting with questions that engage pupils in themes and events and then continue to open-ended questions that might be a bit more complex. Pupils may then create their own questions that can be brought to further discussion (Beach et al. 180). Finally, giving pupils the time and opportunity to invest in the characters on a deeper level lets them contemplate the actions and choices of the characters (Beach et al. 181).

In addition to evaluating methods of discussion, Jackett also reveals how he taught the novel to a group of pupils. Firstly, he had them read the section from the beginning of the book that illustrates Melinda calling the police at the party. Secondly, he asked his pupils to write some comments on why she had called the police. Jackett describes that most of his pupils agreed that Melinda had been scared because she was drunk. What Jackett finds alarming though is that the “students could not foresee Melinda’s real reason for calling the police” (103), suggesting that they are not aware of the dangers existing in their lives (Jackett 103). Jackett argues that continuous discussion about sexual harassment and assault creates an awareness that might prevent these issues from affecting pupils’ own lives (Jackett 105).

As Beach et al. suggest, Jackett continued to bring in more difficult questions later in the reading project. He explains that pupils were given an article on rape and sexual assault to
read, something that resulted in pupils rethinking what happened to Melinda. Jackett argues that if pupils had read the article in the beginning, they would probably have recognized Melinda’s signs of being a victim of rape. By introducing the article at a later stage in the reading process, Jackett made pupils rethink their own preconceptions (Jackett 103).

Finally, Jackett claims that in future usages of *Speak* he “hope[s] to eliminate the concerns that some of the boys in the class shared that they felt like ‘criminals’ while discussing the novel” (104). In order to avoid this difficulty, this essay uses feminist theory to show what life is like for the female main character. The purpose is not to place blame on boys, but rather to highlight the patriarchal structures that affect everyone.

3 Sexism & Sexual Assault in *Speak*

First, in order to be able to analyse sexism and sexual assault in the novel, it is important to understand exactly what Melinda went through. As a reader you do not get that explained until late in the novel, but from the very beginning it is apparent that something happened to her that sent her into depression, becoming a sad and cynical shadow of herself:

> I used to be like Heather. Have I changed that much in two months? She is happy, driven, aerobically fit. She has a nice mom and an awesome television. But she’s like a dog that keeps jumping into your lap. She always walks with me down the halls chattering a million miles a minute. My goal is to go home and take a nap.

(Anderson 28)

This quote describes everything she believes that she lacks. She is not happy, driven, or fit, qualities that could be argued belong to the feminine stereotype presented by Moi. She does not have a nice mother and her own television is not good enough. This, together with the aspiration of going home to sleep, portrays a person who does not feel any joy in life anymore.

Melinda was raped at a summer party, she had been drinking and was thrilled when an older, good-looking boy – Andy – started flirting with her. He asked her to dance, they kissed, and she was overjoyed that she would start high school having a boyfriend (Anderson 156-157). Then it went as follows:

> I open my mouth to breathe, to scream, and his hand covers it. In my head, my voice is as clear as a bell: ‘NO I DON’T WANT TO!’ But I can’t spit it out. I’m trying to remember how we got on the ground and where the moon went and wham! shirt up, shorts down, and the ground smells wet and dark and NO! – I’m not really here, I’m definitely back at Rachel’s, crimping my hair and gluing on fake nails,
and he smells like beer and mean and he hurts me hurts me hurts me and gets up and zips his jeans and smiles. (Anderson 158)

This is an emotionally difficult sequence to read, because even though it does not contain any graphic descriptions of the event, it portrays Melinda’s pain in an explicit way. It is possible that pupils in the Swedish Upper Secondary school can relate to this act of sexual abuse, validating its relevance in a classroom environment despite subjectively being difficult to read. This is also connected to Langer’s subjective experience, where the sequence becomes difficult to read because we ‘feel’ Melinda’s feelings when reading (7).

The novel depicts Melinda’s year when she comes to term with what happened to her. On several instances the reader is made aware that she feels that the grown-up world (parents, teachers, police) let her down. This disappointment manifests as cynical comments, mostly internally, but some are also vocalised. One example of an internal comment is when Melinda is in Biology class scanning through the chapter they are about to work with. What she focuses on is that there is “[n]othing about sex. We aren’t scheduled to learn about that until eleventh grade.” (Anderson 169). In addition to being a bitter remark to society, this is also a statement that highlights the difficulty of discussing sexuality in schools. They are not ‘supposed’ to learn about sex until they are older, yet Melinda and several of her peers have already been exposed to sexual activities.

Melinda’s cynical outlook on the world is also apparent when she describes the different cliques in her year. Even though she describes herself as an outcast, she does so while also showing disgust towards other groups, naming them ‘Idiot Savants’, ‘Human Waste’, and ‘Future Fascists of America’ (Anderson 4). This sequence, where Melinda presents her classmates, also introduces her former best friend Rachel. She is introduced as one of several girls laughing in the seats behind Melinda, our protagonist being certain that they are laughing at her. The sentence “[i]f there is anyone in the entire galaxy I am dying to tell what really happened, it’s Rachel” and the following reaction where Rachel mouths that she hates her (Anderson 5), provides an insight into Melinda’s struggle of losing her best friend. This struggle manifests in a disgust and hatred toward others, but also in self-loathing. When Melinda describes how terrible everyone else is, while at the same time revealing that she has no one to socialize with, it suggests that she feels that she is even worse than the people she despises.

Melinda’s contempt with the world is also prominent when she describes the girls in the cheerleading squad. Melinda expresses a duality in the cheerleaders that connects to the Madonna-whore complex, expressed by the question “[h]ow else could they sleep with the
football team on Saturday night and be reincarnated as virginal Goddesses on Monday?” (Anderson 35). Melinda portrays the cheerleaders as “gorgeous, straight-teethed, long-legged, wrapped in designer fashions, and given sport cars on their sixteenth birthdays” while also claiming that they “get group-rate abortions before the prom” (Anderson 35). These contrasting images of the cheerleading squad concretize the Madonna-whore complex, because the girls need to have two completely different personalities to fit in the societal norms. This expectation of women being compliant to several different stereotypes and roles is further explored when Melinda realises why the popular girls have been very friendly to a boy she describes as awful. This not-so-pleasant boy was responsible for taking photos for the yearbook; therefore, those who wanted to be pictured in a favourable manner had to flatter him throughout the year (Anderson 198). Melinda specifies that it is the girls that had been suspiciously friendly to the photographer, implying that he took advantage of his assignment to get attention from the girls. These examples are supported further by Moi’s feminine stereotypes (123), the girls are supposed to be nice and compliant, otherwise, they are seen as rude or not ladylike.

Another example of sexism is portrayed by writings on the bathroom stall. Melinda reads about a girl who is declared a whore who has been intimate with several boys, resulting in a number of girls writing mean things about her on the bathroom wall (Anderson 201). Melinda does not reflect on the comments, whether true or false, suggesting that it is easy to ruin a girl’s reputation by stating that she is a whore. This shows the duality and complexity of the Madonna-whore complex, where girls who do not fully comply to the Madonna part becomes shamed. Melinda takes advantage of the news-board the stall is painted out to be, and writes a new title called ‘guys to stay away from’, putting Andy’s name on top of the list (Anderson 203).

Throughout the novel, Andy continues to sexually harass and taunt her. At one point they are both in detention and Andy sits down next to Melinda, when the teacher is not looking he also blows in her ear. Melinda freezes and thinks that she is “BunnyRabbit (sic!) again, hiding in the open” (Anderson 137). The feeling of freezing and not being able to move, or speak, reoccurs in the novel when she is forced to interact with Andy. This freeze fright reaction is common in rape victims, and when contemplating how Melinda reacted while being raped, she could not bring herself to move then either. This example relates to the problem discussed by Whisnant, that if a victim does not clearly show disapproval, it might be difficult to get a rape verdict because the perpetrator could have interpreted it as consent. Melinda’s freeze
fright concretizes this dilemma because it is obvious to the reader that she is not consenting to
the rape, neither is she comfortable around him, even though she stays silent about it.

Another example is presented in the chapter ‘The Beast Prowls’, a title foreshadowing an
appearance from Andy. Melinda is in Art class, something that has become her sanctuary, and
her rapist comes into the classroom and turns the light off. She realises who it is and gets
terrified. Melinda describes her reaction metaphorically, once again referring to a rabbit:
“Little rabbit heart leaps out of my chest and scampers across the paper, leaving bloody
footprints on my roots” (Anderson 186). While there, he shows her no respect; he ruins her
drawing and when he leaves he also tears her paper apart (Anderson 186). This could easily
be interpreted as a metaphorical rape, where Andy once again destroys a part of Melinda. By
ruining her artwork, he also sets her back in recovering from her trauma, since her artwork
has become an outlet for expressing her feelings about what happened to her (Snider 309).

The ongoing trauma continues to affect Melinda’s social life throughout the year. When
she is invited to a party at the house of her Biology lab-partner, she declines because she is
scared about what could happen. She discusses this mentally, where one part of her wants to
go and have fun, being ‘normal’. Meanwhile, the other part of her is cautious and anxious,
considering if he is lying and that one should always be prepared for disaster (Anderson 154).
This fear of sexual assault prevents Melinda from living her life, making her cautious of all
male acquaintances.

Early in the novel, it is prevalent that Melinda’s trauma, and her reaction to it, results in
other pupils bullying and ignoring her. The descriptions of these instances are frequent in the
beginning, but further along the school year, Melinda stops describing the ways her peers
harass her. It is not that their behaviour changes, but that Melinda delves even more into
herself and her role as an outcast. When her parents get called to a meeting with the principal
and guidance counsellor about her cutting class, Melinda sits in and listens to how the adults
do not know her situation at all. She expresses this by the following internal monologue, “[d]o
they choose to be so dense? Were they born that way? I have no friends. I have nothing. I say
nothing. I am nothing.” (Anderson 136). She does not focus on the bullying anymore because
she thinks it is as it should be, she feels as if she deserves to be ignored because she is
nothing.

The first day of school she meets Heather, a girl who just moved there and does not
despise her like the others do. They become friends, but eventually, Melinda pushes Heather
away. Even though it is apparent to the reader that Melinda has neglected Heather, it does not
appear as if Melinda herself has recognized this. Heather explains that she thinks they are too
different, and that they never were true friends anyway. This hurts Melinda severely, and she lashes out on Heather for not supporting her through her bad times (Anderson 124). This bitterness is Melinda’s way of not portraying herself as vulnerable, because even though she says these accusing things to Heather, she is terrified of losing her as a friend. This is subsequently another result of the sexual assault Melinda suffered; she says herself that she used to be like Heather (Anderson 18) and probably would the old Melinda have enjoyed spending time with her.

When Melinda’s former best friend Rachel starts dating Andy, she struggles with how she should react. After some contemplation she decides to tell her, and while it is still unknown to Rachel who raped her, she is being truly sympathetic with Melinda. When she asks who did it, and Melinda answers honestly, Rachel assumes that she is lying and being jealous (Anderson 213). Melinda could probably predict that Rachel would not react in a positive way when being told what Andy had done, but despite that she decided to try. This shows how deep Melinda’s trauma is, because even though Rachel has treated her terribly throughout the year she still feels obligated to warn her about Andy. Despite not believing Melinda at first, Rachel does eventually break up with Andy.

At the end of the school-year, when Melinda is packing up her belongings, Andy confronts her about telling Rachel that he raped her. He ridicules her and claims that he did not rape her, that she wanted it as much as he did, and that she is jealous that he is with someone else. He also continues to accuse her of destroying his reputation, something he wants to punish her for. At first Melinda cannot react to the new attempted rape, but finally she is able to scream ‘no’ and push him away (Anderson 224-225). Melinda is able to defend herself even though Andy hits her; she finds a piece of broken glass that she is able to threaten him with. This time, besides being able to defend herself, the lacrosse team comes to her assistance and henceforth she does not have to deal with the assault on her own (Anderson 227). This final encounter with Andy once again portrays the power structures discussed by Whisnant and Moi. Andy takes the position of a perpetrator that interpreted Melinda’s lack of protesting as consent, making it irrelevant if he realised Melinda’s discomfort or not. This complexity is further explained by Moi, who explains how the patriarchal structures are used to control women (123) or in this case to falsify Melinda’s rape claim.

Finally, bullying is a prominent theme throughout the novel. It is connected to both sexism and sexual assault even though that may not be the intention of those bullying Melinda. The reader knows that Melinda acts the way she does because she was exposed to a major trauma, but her peers believe she called the police to be mean to them. Because the novel is written
from Melinda’s point of view, it is impossible to be certain of how much ‘actual bullying’ occurred. Never the less, what is obvious is that Melinda feels bullied continuously throughout the pages, and that is relevant when discussing difficult matters from the victim’s point of view.

Connected to this is also several instances where Melinda feels targeted as a victim even though the situation itself does not seem that traumatic. An example is her former friend Nicole, who is in her P.E. class and is also a so-called jock. Melinda states that “Nicole is just not a bitch. It would be so much easier to hate her if she were.” (Anderson 23), depicting an inner struggle in Melinda. Even though she dislikes Nicole for not speaking to her, she still admires her for being athletic, confident, and friendly. Melinda tries to convince herself that she hates Nicole, but what is apparent is a jealousy, resulting in Melinda making herself feel worse about herself because she compares herself to this seemingly perfect girl (Anderson 21-22).

Ultimately, Melinda was subjected to sexual assault which resulted in both direct and indirect consequences. Amongst the direct ones are her depression and her anxiety of socializing with persons of the opposite sex. Indirectly, the sexual assault led to her entire school shunning her for calling the police, but also to a lack of faith in the world that manifested as an attitude problem. These consequences are crucial arguments as to why it is important to talk about difficult topics in school, because that awareness is obviously lacking in Melinda’s peers, teachers, and parents.

4 Using *Speak* in the Swedish classroom

The fact that *Speak* takes place in a school environment where there is a lack of talking about difficult topics and the consequences of these, makes it apparent that Melinda could have received help a lot sooner if someone had recognized what had happened to her.

As stated in the theory section, discussing difficult themes is rewarding when striving towards an awareness of how to react to and deal with struggles in life. By bringing in this subjectively written novel it is possible to understand the feelings of a girl who has been the victim of rape. The way Melinda reminisces about the night she was raped, it is obvious that the act ruined her life. As mentioned earlier, she does not describe the rape in the explicit way a third-person narrator would have done, moving the focus away from the event itself and to Melinda’s feelings. These feelings and those that follow are important to address because, as Alsup presents it, understanding fictional characters’ emotions is a way of becoming more empathetic (159).
When discussing sexual abuse with pupils, it is important to stress that Melinda is not responsible for what happened to her. The patriarchal power structures that exist in our society as well as the different traits a ‘normal’ woman should have, might be a way to explain how blame can be placed on the victim rather than the perpetrator. Moi discusses this when describing feminist criticism as among other things revolving around the power relations between the sexes (118). The way Melinda does not explicitly say no to Andy when he rapes her defines the problem with consent discussed by Whisnant. How Melinda stays silent, and the way she voluntarily goes with him initially, could both be interpreted as consent by the perpetrator. It is the power relations that make it possible to place blame on Melinda. A characteristic of these power structures is that they make it seem as though it is a woman’s responsibility to make sure that she is not raped. (Whisnant)

Melinda struggles with if she was raped or not, and does not come to terms with it fully until the end of the novel. At one instant she is sick, lying in bed, and watching tv; she is watching talk shows and contemplates what they would say about her situation. Her hypothetical talk show hosts all agree that she was raped, that it was terrible and not in any way her fault. They also encourage her to speak up about what happened to her (Anderson 190). Melinda knows that it was not her fault that she was raped, but she feels as though she is doing something wrong by not talking about what happened.

This highlights the problem stated by McGee. Melinda contemplates if there is something wrong with her for not speaking up, which would suggest that ‘correct’ way to deal with this kind of trauma is to talk about it. As McGee argues, it is an adult author who has tried to put herself in the shoes of an adolescent. Therefore, it could be interesting to discuss this with actual adolescents in order to understand what they think of sharing their problems with adults. In doing so, it is possible to find out if pupils find the adult world as incompetent as Melinda proclaims them to be, for instance that they do not understand and because of that there is no point in telling about problems. If this is not the case, it could also be interesting to hear their opinions on the according to McGee seemingly different way of handling issues.

However, when discussing the question of speaking up or staying silent about trauma due to sexual assault, it is important to inform the pupils of how telling about sexual assault gradually removes the taboo for rape victims. As Whisnant explains it, when women start to share their experiences, others are encouraged to do the same. The number of rape victims that report their perpetrators is still low, and it is crucial to at least inform pupils that by speaking of sexual assault it is possible to help victims find the courage to report rape (Whisnant), as seen in the recent ‘MeToo’ campaign.
As a way of not overwhelming pupils, it could be appropriate to start the discussion about rape with the focal point on someone that is not Melinda. Beach et al. stress that it is important not to start off with too difficult questions (180). Introducing the topic ‘rape’ with the paragraph describing what happened to Melinda could result in a less nuanced discussion than if the discussion had targeted that paragraph further along the discussion when the pupils are more comfortable discussing the topic. A starting discussion could for instance focus on Rachel, and what the pupils think is the reason for her break-up with Andy. Initially, she did not believe what Melinda told her, but her actions might prove that she started doubting him. If so, it would be interesting to discuss whether she broke up with Andy because she felt sympathy for Melinda, or if she feared being raped herself.

While discussing Rachel it would also be relevant to talk about the way she treats Melinda. A question to start that discussion on could be whether Rachel is entitled to be upset with Melinda for calling the police, and if so, would it make a difference if Rachel knew what happened all along. Most likely, pupils would feel that Rachel would have been unsympathetic if she had known and still been mad at Melinda, but that brings the discussion back to the fact that Rachel is mad without knowing why Melinda acted the way she did.

When reading Speak, it is interesting to contemplate on how Jackett addressed the sexual assault. He decided to hand out an article on rape once the pupils had read and thought about why Melinda had called the police (Jackett 103). This correlates to sharing puzzles, presented by Chambers. The pupils can together try to understand what happened to Melinda, relying on their own previous knowledge to understand what happened. As Jackett explains it, if the pupils were handed the article on rape prior to reading the novel, they would have seen the signs immediately (103). Though, if a pupil in the classroom has been raped, they might realize what happened to Melinda immediately. If so, it is even more important to stress that the pupils should be discussing the topic from Melinda’s perspective, not their own.

To highlight the prevalence of the issues of sexism and sexual assault, it is as stated in the introduction relevant to incorporate The Scarlet Letter. In short, the novel is about Hester Prynne, a 17th-century woman who gives birth to the illegitimate child Pearl and has to wear a burgundy coloured ‘A’ on her chest. The ‘A’ stands for adultery and Hester is forced to wear it so that everyone can see that she made an immoral decision and was punished for it. Hester and her daughter get shunned by the inhabitants of Boston, and Hester therefore decides to move to the outskirts of town. Eventually, Hester builds an identity from her ‘A’. The letter brings her a life without marriage, but this is also what provides her with independence. She is
able to work and support her daughter. Finally, throughout the novel, Hester refuses to admit to who Pearl’s father is (Hawthorne).

Melinda is supposed to read and analyse this novel in her English class and early on Melinda relates to Hester. She draws parallels between the two of them, considering both to be outcasts, silent about their experiences.

I wonder if Hester tried to say no. She’s kind of quiet. We would get along. I can see us, living in the woods, her wearing that A, me with an S maybe, S for silent, for stupid, for scared. S for silly. For shame. (Anderson 118)

This quote suggests that even though there are several similarities between Melinda and Hester, there is still one major difference. Melinda considers herself to be several different things beginning with s, the most prominent one being shame. She does not put these labels on Hester, highlighting that she considers Hester to be braver and doing the ‘right thing’. Melinda sees the similarities in their situations, but she does not yet know how to handle the mental process of understanding that the rape was not her fault.

Even though there is a major difference between Melinda and Hester, where Melinda was raped, and Hester was not, it is still of interest to reflect on how she sees Hester as a victim and herself as something else. Technically, it is actually Hester that did not conform to the laws of society, even though these rules might be considered ridiculous in modern times. Melinda, on the other hand, was subjected to rape, an actual crime. While neither of the women should feel ashamed of what happened to them, it is still interesting to reflect on Melinda’s perspective on this.

Another interesting comparison worth discussing in class is how the female main characters in these two novels are shunned by society without hesitation, whereas explicit proof is required before the males are second-guessed. When Melinda tells Rachel that Andy raped her, she does not believe her. When Mr. Dimmesdale confesses that he is Pearl’s father, the onlooking crowd want to stop Hester from approaching as well as stop Dimmesdale from “blackening his soul” (Hawthorne 189). The way he is supposedly blackening his soul is another example of the Madonna-whore complex. As Hartmann explains it, the woman that is desired (Hester in this case) cannot be considered relationship material as well (2335). Because Dimmesdale had premarital sexual encounters with Hester, she is considered to be a whore, and it would blacken his soul to be in a relationship with the so-called whore.

These two examples of sexism can be related to Moi’s theories on femininity and the stereotypes connected to females. The patriarchal power structure that deems that females should be feminine (modest, kind, docile) is prominent when Hester and Melinda who did not
conform to these characteristics are quickly judged by those around them (Moi 123). When Melinda is not sweet and humble, she is considered unnatural (for instance when Heather ends their friendship because Melinda is “too depressed”), and when Hester has an illegitimate child she has not been modest (or Madonna-like).

As discussed by Snider, bringing the theme of sexism into a modern setting makes the theme easier to grasp for pupils. Though, comparing the modern example with the older one provides another character’s point of view to consider, giving pupils another perspective of sexism. As Alsup states, by understanding the feelings and experiences of fictional characters, pupils are given the opportunity to become critical feelers. By providing examples from different characters and eras, it is also possible that pupils find character traits or issues that they can relate to. The theme of sexism is prevalent in both novels, but *Speak* portrays a girl who is bullied and depressed and *The Scarlet Letter* portrays how life is like for a ‘whore’. Some pupils might relate to the silent Melinda, and some might relate to Hester. This furthermore connects to the curriculum, where one major goal is that pupils will become empathetic and open-minded (‘Curriculum’ 4).

When comparing the two novels, it is illuminating to use Chambers’ ideas about the three sharings. Even though sharing enthusiasms is a good starting point, the sharing of puzzles and especially connections are what is most interesting when discussing *Speak* and *The Scarlet Letter*. When making connections between the two novels, pupils may most likely realise that even though the settings are very different, the sexism and general structures in society are rather alike. A puzzle might be why Hester had to wear her red letter, because that is not something that a jury would force upon a woman in modern times. That puzzle could then, in turn, result in a discussion of how premarital pregnancies are considered in modern times.

It might be painful for pupils to realize how similar the patriarchal structures are between modern times and those of Puritan Boston, but as Pereira argues it is a necessity to be uncomfortable when discussing feminist matters. It is difficult to discuss sexism, but it is also important when trying to prevent future pupils being subjected to sexual assault. As Jackett highlights, it is central to make sure that the boys in class do not feel targeted when discussing sexism. Therefore, while discussing difficult matters it is vital to be able to revert to the novels and the fictive characters if a discussion becomes too personal.
5 Conclusion

The analysis has been trying to stress the importance and relevance of raising awareness about sexism and sexual assault. Something that is, and has been, very common in women’s everyday lives. By discussing these themes from different perspectives and with different angles, it is possible to decrease the stigma surrounding them. An attempt to educate pupils about patriarchal oppression could result in more empathetic and considerate pupils, who are comfortable when discussing difficult matters.

There are several clear examples in Speak of how the women are treated as inferior because they are women. It is also important to note that the sexual assault Melinda was subjected to affect her life in a very traumatic way. Melinda became bitter, cynical, and depressed; those feelings manifest as muteness and an attitude problem. By presenting these examples to pupils it is possible to provide them with information and tools to develop an understanding for victims of sexism and sexual assault. Furthermore, by understanding the power structures that are part of the issue, the pupils are able to become responsible citizens that are aware of the consequences of their own actions as well as the actions of others.

By bringing these difficult matters into the classroom, the goal is that the pupils will become aware of the dangers surrounding them and subsequently also prevent possible assaults from taking place. Even though it is difficult to talk about rape it is still important to do so when trying to remove the stigma surrounding rape victims, and victims of sexual assault. The importance lies in not putting blame on boys in a classroom, but rather highlighting that sexism is something that many women deal with daily.

By connecting the examples from the novel to pedagogical approaches to teaching, it is possible to provide some pointers as to how a teacher could work with Speak. Dividing the class into smaller groups is a valid way of making sure all pupils get the opportunity to comment and discuss the topics from the characters’ points of view. This makes sure no pupil has to share their own feelings and experiences. Because there might be a victim of sexual assault in the classroom, it is important to make sure that the pupils feel comfortable when starting the reading project. The hypothetical pupil might suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and it is therefore crucial that they feel comfortable when the discussion is initiated.

When The Scarlet Letter is combined with Speak it provides the opportunity to show how sexism has been prevalent in history and what similarities are still existent. By understanding how power structures have worked in the past, and is still working now, it is possible to become aware of issues in the society we live in. As Pereira claims, it needs to be difficult to talk about sexual assault and sexism, because then you reflect on what society looks like.
When reading about sexism and sexual assault, the pupils may be better at spotting these things outside of the classroom as well, becoming well-adjusted citizens that are aware of the struggles others might suffer from.

Finally, both the curriculum and the syllabus for English 5 highlights the importance of being able to understand the living situation of others, both in their present and in the past. By using literature to enable the pupils to develop their abilities to empathize, the novel becomes an important tool. What has been stressed throughout this essay is the focus on reading *Speak* with the focus on Melinda’s feelings and her experience, because the novel is written in a first-person perspective. This enables us as readers to not only understand sexism and sexual assault from an outsider’s point of view, but the feelings and emotions of someone working through their trauma.
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