Superman and Wonder Woman to the rescue:

“Man of Steel” and “Wonder Woman” as pedagogical aids to discuss gender in the EFL classroom.

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Abstract
As the American superhero films continue to increase their popularity around the globe, and because of the recurrent criticism against their poor and stereotypical representation, this essay aims to analyse the two newly made productions *Man of Steel* and *Wonder Woman* from a gender perspective. The essay argues a difference in Superman and Wonder Woman’s superhero images and further discusses the opportunities as well as potential problems the superhero narratives can offer to discuss gender in the EFL classroom.

Keywords
*Man of Steel, Wonder Woman*, gender, superhero image, EFL classroom, film studies
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1 Introduction

The Hollywood film has, since its start, gained global predominance and still dominates Swedish theatres in 2018 (Filmstaden). Unfortunately, the representation of gender, race, sexuality, culture and religion in Hollywood films has often proved to fall short (Benshoff and Griffin 21-22; Kvaran 220). And, in terms of gender, the Hollywood blockbuster has for a long time favoured the male lead where comic blockbusters have presented male heroes and female damsels in distress, or in some cases, “female superheroes as part of a male-run crime fighting collective” (Benshoff and Griffin 297-8). This essay will discuss the two superhero films *Man of Steel* (2014) and *Wonder Woman* (2017) from a gender perspective as they offer us both a female and male superhero lead.

The origin of the modern comics book genre goes back to 1938 when the earliest comics superhero Superman first was introduced. It was an indisputable success which urged creators to produce new superheroes for the masses (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 6-7; Hatfield 4). One of those superheroes was Wonder Woman who was first launched in 1941. She and Superman are considered two of the most famous superhero characters and have had a substantial influence over the concept superhero, thus often compared to each other as each other’s female/male counterpart. They have both been targets for analyses concerning gender issues, with Wonder Woman’s sexualised physical appearance perhaps being one of the most recurring debates (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 91-4; Neuman and Zechowski 130-8). The same goes for Superman, who often recurs in gender studies synonymous with masculinity and the ideal for the perfect man (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 7).

Moreover, Superman and Wonder Woman, together with Batman, are the three superheroes that have been continuously written about since the genre of superheroes began (Reynolds 99; Cardo and Curtis 382). However, unlike Batman and Superman who have made several movies and TV appearances, Wonder Woman has for a long time not made any major appearances on the big nor the small screen (Hanley and Hahn 227). But, in the last decade, there has been a change in the superhero comics to address their problem of poor representation, among that their representation of gender (Cardo and Curtis 381). And, in 2017, Wonder Woman was not only going to appear in a movie, but she was also going to be the lead in Warner Bros. Pictures’ blockbuster *Wonder Woman*. However, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin claim that “[w]hile the presence of women in action-adventure films has been seen as a step forward in Hollywood gender relations
by many critics, others question the ways in which these films actually go about “equalizing” male and female roles.” (298) This essay aims to add to such debates, as it will treat the films *Man of Steel* (2014), directed by Zack Snyder, and *Wonder Woman* (2017), directed by Patty Jenkins, from a gender studies perspective.

Moreover, when moving into the classroom, the National Agency for Education states that the school should “contribute to developing the pupils’ sense of belonging, solidarity, and responsibility towards people outside the immediate group,” as well as teachers should “clarify and discuss with the pupils the basic values of Swedish society and their consequences in terms of individual actions,” and “openly communicate and discuss different values, views and problems.” (14). Approaching *Man of Steel* and *Wonder Woman* from a gender studies perspective could enable topics and discussions concerning gender equality as it is part of the Swedish school’s norms and values. As newly made Hollywood productions, the pupils would hopefully be able to, to some extent, relate to these films, as for genre, characters and language. Nevertheless, one has to recognize and problematize the movies’ lack of representation regarding gender identities, sexualities and race, which the teacher could do by enabling their pupils to acknowledge and reflect upon the Hollywood film’s problems of representation. Besides giving the students the chance to discuss norms and values and their expression in Swedish contra American society, the films could enable opportunities to develop the language skills listen in the syllabus - oral/written production, analysing skills, treat literature of different forms, argumentative skills as well as listening, to name a few.

Owing to this, this essay argues a difference in *Wonder Woman* and Superman’s superhero image due to discrepancies in the portrayal of their physical strengths and weaknesses and an imbalance in the characters’ independence. It further argues both *Man of Steel* and *Wonder Woman*’s pedagogical relevance as well as potential problems when aiming to address, discuss and exemplify gender issues in the EFL classroom.

2 Gender studies and its application in the EFL context

This section of the essay will treat the theoretical background of gender as well as how it correlates to the Hollywood film. It will further try to determine any distinctive traits of the mainstream superhero character. The final part of this section provides the theoretical background on gender in the Swedish classroom from a pedagogical perspective, how the superhero film can be used to discuss gender in the classroom as well as how gender is constituted in the curriculum and syllabus.
2.1 Gender studies

Feminism as a movement has uncovered and exposed women’s oppression in patriarchy as well as studied the relations between the genders. It has over time increased its application for women of different colours and classes as the early woman right’s movements focused on the power relations between the binary opposites male and female and had by then little relevance for other than the heterosexual white woman (Ducille 29). During the 1970s, along with the second wave of feminism, feminism settled as a school of literary and cultural study and has come to include lesbians, gays, trans and transsexuals ( Connell ix; Ryan 131). Gender studies is derived from feminist theory and “attempt to denaturalize the hegemonic superiority of males, and show that masculinity and femininity are not absolute terms, but are in fact dependent on one another” (Benshoff and Griffin 257). Gender studies further pay colloquial attention to the role culture has in establishing and sustaining gender norms as it assumes that gender is as much enforced as expressed in culture (Ryan 134). Unlike feminism and women’s studies, which essentially focus on how femininity is constructed in a patriarchal culture, gender studies include equivalent studies on how masculinity is constructed in culture as well (Benshoff and Griffin 257).

The biological gender (sex) divides people into two categories: male and female. Besides the biological gender, Justin Healy argues that gender is much more complicated than that and describes it as “... the complex interrelationship between an individual’s sex (gender biology), one’s internal sense of self as male, female, both or neither (gender identity) as well as one’s outward presentations and behaviours (gender expression) related to that perception” (1). Moreover, Benshoff and Griffin describe how gender is incorporated in people’s cultural and historical associations to the male or female sex. They further argue that a person’s sex is genetically formed while a person’s gender is learned (214-15). There are individuals all around the globe who live outside the typical male/female expectations or/and identities, with some identifying themselves as non-binary. However, even if a female can identify as male or a male can act or look feminine, gender still operates a binary concept: male/female and femininity/masculinity and it is all around us all the time in practically everything we do: even if it is just about using a public toilet or dressing room (Cranny-Francis et.al 1; Healy 1). Not only does gender divide people into categories, it further privileges the male and masculinity over female and femininity and has so done for a very long time (Cranny-Francis 1-2; Benshoff and Griffin 213). Benshoff and Griffin discuss the sexist hierarchy ingrained in the traditional
gender roles and how masculinity is at the top of that hierarchy ladder. They give an example of how boys that act in traditionally associated feminine behaviour are teased while girls acting typically masculine normally climb up the gender hierarchy (215).

2.2 Gender and the Hollywood film

The interest in studying gender and how it may be understood in relation to film has emerged out of feminist film studies research and there has been an increased interest in Cultural studies to examine how we interpret masculinity and femininity and how much of gender is culturally determined (Nelmes 221). Jill Nelmes argues that “[i]t is both interesting and revealing to look at . . . what or culture portrays as being representative of masculinity and femininity, and what this tells us about our understanding of gender, sexuality and society” (221).

As for the Hollywood film, it has for a long time privileged the male and masculinity. Benshoff and Griffin claim that “...mainstream Hollywood entertainment still negotiates gender in ways that uphold and maintain patriarchal privilege.” (297). They further argue that women are objectified continuously in mainstream Hollywood media and that female characters are unable to be active in the way that male characters are. However, according to Benshoff and Griffin, the objectification of women does result in some power for the women since the little power a woman has is concerned with her ability to use her sexual appeal to arrest the narrative action: the so-called male gaze. A woman can, through the male gaze, bring a standstill to the narrative, thus possessing some power over it (240-41; 246).

While traditional female roles are typically associated with characteristics as emotional, weak, nurturing, dependent and submissive, men are associated with independence, rationality, strength, being protective and decisive. As a result, men are taught from an early age to suppress their emotions and to be tough without complaint and thus leading to men not being able to have intimate relationships, an ignorance towards mental and physical illness and a development of serious self-doubt if not living up to the standards of masculine behaviour (Benshoff and Griffin 257-258; Brinkman et al. 62-63). Although men and their gender role are privileged by the patriarchal society in which we live, some men feel the same way about their gender role as what women feel about their gender role: that it is close to impossible to sustain (Benshoff and Griffin 214;258). Recent studies suggest that the complexity surrounding the representation of both femininity and masculinity in Hollywood films is larger than previously thought.
(Nelmes 221). According to Jeffrey A. Brown, “...the masculinity of our media-generated heroes is increasingly recognized in much the same way that femininity has been understood, not as a real and unified subject position, but as a carefully orchestrated performance...” (25). This ultimately implies that male and female gender roles play the same prominent roles in maintaining a patriarchal society thus making it important not only to identify female gender roles in the Hollywood film and their consequence on its audience but male ones as well.

2.2.1 The superhero

Since this essay will work to identify a difference in Wonder Woman and Superman’s heroic image we need to elucidate the concept of heroism and what further signifies a superhero. Selwyn W. Becker and Alice H. Eagly define heroism as actions someone takes to save or help others even though there is a risk of seriously hurting or even killing themselves. A risk-taking act on its own is not necessarily going to be considered heroic but when taking a risk to help or save others, it is considered heroism (163-164). So, what separates the hero from the superhero? The hero can be anyone in real life, it can be a nurse, soldier or a firefighter. A superhero, however, possesses supernatural powers or/and advanced technology thus does the superhero only exist in fiction. But just as the ordinary hero, the superhero needs to perform selfless acts to help or save others to be considered heroic (Kvaran 220). Romagnoli and Pagnucci further claim “[s]uperheroes represent a set of timeless values; their motivation to do good, their passion for justice and their opposition to evil are ageless” (8). In addition to that, Trina Robbins claims that superhero comics always present the readers with a love interest of the superhero to make sure that there is always someone there to rescue (56). However, for the superhero to be relatable to the reader, they need to possess characteristics that humanize them. Romagnoli and Pagnucci present a list they claim consist of characteristics found in almost every single superhero:

1. His/her origins are, in some way, informed by a tragedy.
2. He/she is obsessed with achieving his/her goals.
3. With few exceptions, he/she is a solitary figure.
4. His/her goal is unattainable.
5. He/she has a weakness. (8)

To sum up, the attributes typically associated with the comics superhero are both of supernatural character as well as there are those of human character in order to make the
superhero relatable to the readers. However, what most secures someone the superhero title is his or her desire and determination to save lives, even if it possibly involves risks for their own safety.

2.3 Gender and the Swedish classroom

According to Maria Emmeline and Ann Öhman, Sweden is one of the leading countries in gender equality policies and its discourse is strong in Swedish society. The primary goal for Swedish gender equality policy is that men and women have equivalent possibilities to shape their own lives as well as equal rights to take part in shaping the Swedish society (119). Moreover, the Swedish school has a responsibility to attain this goal as their part in fostering democratic citizens as the Swedish school should provide students with an education that “…impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which the Swedish society is based”. It should further “promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathize” (Na.Ag.f. Ed. Curriculum 4) as well as it is responsible for that no one in school should be subjected to discrimination or any other forms of degrading treatment on the grounds of gender, ethnic affiliation, religion or other belief systems, transgender identity or other gender identities, sexual orientation, age or functional impairment (Na.Ag.f. Ed. Curriculum 4). Yet, according to Joan Chrsler, “many young people who support gender equality believe that it has already been achieved; thus, there is little need to be concerned with the effect of gender on behaviour or how gender role restrictions can be harmful to individuals” (265). However, as aforesaid, gender stereotypes/roles can be harmful to individuals since they can implicitly restrict people in ways someone unfamiliar to the subject perhaps is unable to identify, but they also tend to have a more explicit negative impact on those who do not conform to them (Brinkman et al. 62).

The film as a medium to discuss gender can under the right circumstances be rewarding since, according to Brad Smilanich and Nicole Lafreniere, “…the study of film affords an opportunity to learn something new, to learn the words and techniques that structure the visuals that they watch in movies every day” (605). Moreover, Anna Sparrman argues that “[it] is important to use films as teaching aids in education, to develop [students] potential for learning as well as to learn how visuality is part of a society’s knowledge production.” (180). By using film as a tool to discuss gender, students can develop their critical thinking, as well as their understanding of that gender images on film can reinforce and maintain regressive gender roles.
Furthermore, the superhero film can specifically be an effective medium to open discussions on gender roles since it upholds very strong messages regarding masculinity. Sarah Coyne et al. suggest that even if Sweden does not value masculinity as much as many other countries, the exposure to superhero programs has the potential to induce acceptance of such norms in other cultures (Coyne et al. 418). According to Michael Ryan, modern culture forms, such as films, contribute to sustaining and upholding a patriarchal society by cultivating gender stereotypes. Ryan further argues that this is because of the fact that the film industry still is widely managed and owned by men (132). Considering the superhero film’s popularity in Sweden, with four superhero-themed films on the list over the most watched films in Swedish theatres in 2018, students could gain an important perspective on gender discourse through analysing and discussing literature familiar to them (Filmstaden). However, a major problem surrounding superhero literature is its immense lacking of representation regarding colour, gender, ethnicities, sexual orientations etc. (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 134; Kvaran 220). Just as with gender roles, students need to be provided with the tools to identify and acknowledge such issues. The curriculum suggests that the school should confront issues of intolerance with knowledge, open discussions and active measures (4). To discuss gender using film is a way to open up discussions surrounding gender issues and discrimination, as well as it can function to widen the students’ perspectives and potentially prevent or diminish degrading treatment between students. The curriculum additionally states that “[t]he school should actively and consciously [foster] equal rights and opportunities for women and men. Students should be encouraged to develop their interests without prejudice to gender differences.”(5)

Not only does using the American superhero film as an aid to discuss gender in the classroom correspond to the curriculum, but it also has a strong argument in the syllabi for English at upper secondary school. The syllabus for English at upper secondary school states that the subjects should provide students with opportunities to develop their “ability to discuss and reflect on living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Na.Ag.f.Ed). As briefly mentioned in the discussion, the Hollywood film portrays and upholds gender roles deeply rooted in the American society which could enable students with opportunities to discuss and examine how gender is incorporated in the Swedish society and further how it corresponds to the American society. Additionally, the syllabus also states that it should provide students with opportunities to treat literature and other fiction, thus including film
as well as opportunities to treat “[t]hemes, ideas, form and content in film and literature; authors and literary periods.” and “[c]ontemporary and older literature and other fiction in various genres such as drama.” (Na.Ag.f.Ed). In conclusion, this section has tried to establish some of the literature surrounding the benefits and challenges surrounding treating gender in a classroom environment as well as it revealed how both the Swedish curriculum and syllabus validate as well as encourage discussions and themes surrounding gender and gender equality.

3 *Man of Steel* and *Wonder Woman* from a gender perspective

In this section of the essay, an analysis will be presented on *Man of Steel* and *Wonder Woman*. As mentioned previously, there have been numerous analyses on the physical appearance of Wonder Woman, as there have been on Superman as well. However, the focus of this essay’s analysis will not be on the characters’ physical appearance. Instead, this analysis will focus on analysing how Wonder Woman and Superman’s physical and mental strengths and weaknesses, activity and heroic actions and characteristics affect their superhero image as it will analyse if and how the characters accommodate the characteristics found in section 2.2.1 to conform to stereotypical gender roles discussed in section 2.2 and how that may affect their superhero image.

3.1 Can somebody save me?

One of the most prominent characteristics one has to possess to be recognised not only a superhero but a hero is the will to risk their own safety in order to save others. The superhero further accumulates in their heroic image since they possess supernatural powers that they if wanting to, could use to cause great damage but choose to do good with (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 11-12). Both Wonder Woman and Superman are considered superheroes and they share several powers: super strength, invulnerability, flight and healing factor (DCComics). To sum it up: on paper, they are very equal in strength and ability. Nevertheless, one very distinct difference between the films *Man of Steel* and *Wonder Woman* is their number of rescues. While Superman is found to save people twelve times in the film *Man of Steel*, Wonder Woman saves people five times in *Wonder Woman*. Additionally, there was a distinction between the characters’ number of
times they themselves were rescued where Wonder Woman was saved more times than Superman.

Moreover, if analysing the nature of the characters’ rescues, one can make distinctions as well. Superman’s first rescue appears 20.20 minutes into *Man of Steel*. As Superman is working on a boat, the crew receive an urgent call from an oil rig that has caught fire and requires assistance. In the next scene, Superman is seen working his way up an oil rig before getting the crew to the top of it where he helps them into a helicopter. Superman declines to get onboard the helicopter himself and instead stops a large piece of metal falling on to the helicopter. After the helicopter has left, Superman falls exhausted and hurt into the water. Thus, Superman saves several people who are in great danger and he also places himself at risk. Although he does not place himself in a major risk of his own life in a physical sense, he does risk to expose his identity which potentially could make him a vulnerable target. Superman also goes against his father’s wishes of not using his superpowers which has a strong emotional effect on him rather than a physical one. The second time Superman rescues someone is in a moment of analepsis where he saves his school peers from drowning after their bus drove off a bridge into the water (25:32). Superman hoists the entire bus out of the water and goes back for a boy who fell out of the bus. What makes the second save even more honourable than normally is the fact that the last boy who fell out of the bus harassed Superman earlier on the bus. Not only does Superman comply with the characteristic of being noble as well as tremendously strong, but he also demonstrates opposition to evil when saving the last boy even when he had treated Superman badly. For the remaining times Superman saves someone, he demonstrates prodigious power and strength and he further saves people in immediate danger.

In comparison, Wonder Woman’s first rescue appears 15.45 minutes into *Wonder Woman* when she saves the soldier Steve from drowning. Wonder Woman observes Steve’s plane crashing into the ocean whereupon she jumps off a cliff into the ocean to release Steve who is stuck in his seat underwater. She swims with him to the shore where he wakes up. On the contrary to Superman’s first save, Wonder Woman does not demonstrate any tremendous powers or strength, she instead employs very human abilities to save Steve. For Wonder Woman’s second save she once again save Steve when she releases him from the Amazons’ capture to make him take her with him to

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1 Time stamps for all of Superman’s rescues: 39:00; 01:23:12; 01:25:50; 01:29:17; 01:31:40; 01:33:20; 01:49:00; 01:52:00; 01:54:40; 02:02:12
London (34:05). I included this as one of her saves since she per se saves him from being captured, but I do not consider this to be a save of a heroic nature. She does not risk her own life by doing it since the Amazons are her own people and family nor is Steve in any genuine danger. For Wonder Woman’s third, fourth and fifth save she stops bullets with her wrist bracelets and physically fights off gunmen as well as saving the world by killing Ares (51:01; 01:01:08; 02:00:46). Although Wonder Woman demonstrates fighting skills and use of technical gadgets (wrist bracelets and the Amazons’ lasso of truth), Wonder Woman does not demonstrate as tremendous power or strength compared to Superman, nor are her saves as explosive and dramatic as his. Benshoff and Griffin claim that female characters are not able to be active to in the same extent that male ones can which possibly could relate to why Wonder Woman is not able to take on as an explosive and active role as Superman does (246). Furthermore, stereotypical gender roles typically assign men strength and women weakness. In relation to the real world, the man is at an advantage in terms of physical strength due to human anatomy. However, theoretically, Wonder Woman could very well be both stronger and bigger than Superman since they do not comply with human anatomy. Nevertheless, even if Wonder Woman in Wonder Woman definitely is not weak, without an equal amount of displays of strength and use of superpowers between the two, the audience might create the perception of that she is physically weaker than Superman, potentially causing the audience to value Superman more as a superhero than Wonder Woman since the physical strength and superpowers are deeply rooted in the superhero definition.

Not only does Wonder Woman fail to demonstrate as much power as Superman does, but she is also not as independent as Superman is. Both Wonder Woman and Superman have a love interest: Steve and Lois. Trina Robbins claims that the love interest is obligatory in the superhero narrative and further suggests that “[Steve] is the Lois Lane to Wonder Woman’s Superman” (56). However, I would argue the contrary concerning the films in the current inquiry. Since Lois does have the role of the typical superhero love interest, she is not in any way essential to the narrative. She is there for Superman to save and protect, as he does. For instance, Superman urges her to keep away when danger is imminent “They’re coming, you should leave now.”(01:10:35). Also, when he is about to use his power and fly away he turns to Louis and says “You might wanna step back a little bit.”(01:46:56). Steve, however, has a very important role for the narrative in Wonder Woman and is highly active and present throughout. He is also decisive and protective over Wonder Woman several times and there are multiple moments where
Steve takes Wonder Woman’s hand to save, lead or to guide her. For instance, when they end up in a battle, he takes her hand and says “Come on!” (18:15) and shortly after he tells her “Stay there!” when he himself goes to fight. He further physically leads her again at 45:00 and at 50:20. In addition to that, Steve saves Wonder Woman three times compared to Lois who arguably saves Superman once when she helps change the atmosphere to an earthly one on the ship Superman is trapped in order for him to regain his powers. However, since she is told and guided by Superman’s father throughout one could argue that it is his father that actually saves him (01:20:00). It is further valid to discuss whether Lois saves Superman after he killed his nemesis Zod. After Superman kills Zod, Lois comforts him which could be argued as a rescue of a more emotional nature since Superman perhaps would have ended up ending his own life unable to live with his actions.

On the contrary, while Superman is saved once, arguably two, (Superman saved as an infant not included since an infant’s incapacity to protect itself is not considered a weakness), Wonder Woman is saved a total of four times (20:45; 20:50; 01:09:46; 01:15:55). Nevertheless, the first two times Wonder Woman gets saved is before she has fought for real and not in training, as well as she is emotionally distraught by the death of her aunt Hippolyta why they might not be considered as incidents that might hurt Wonder Woman’s superhero image. Also, when Steve saves Wonder Woman at 01:15:55 it could be seen as them working together as a team and why one might argue it as perfect teamwork instead of that Steve saves Wonder Woman. However, once again, the imbalance between Superman and Wonder Woman’s number of times they get saved might be problematic if it may cause the general public to view Wonder Woman as less capable than Superman.

Moving on, while Superman mainly operates on his own, Wonder Woman mostly operates together with Steve and is many times highly dependent on him, thus both Superman and Wonder Woman comply with our society’s stereotypical gender roles: men are independent and women are dependent. Even if Steve is supposed to be what Lois is to Superman, he is a man and thus conforms to the male stereotype. However, according to Hanley and Hahn, that is not the usual case in the comics, where Steve normally is portrayed as the typical love interest and who always ends up requiring Wonder Woman to save him (30). But as a Hollywood production, Wonder Woman’s and Steve’s relationship dynamics have been altered to, consciously or unconsciously, accommodate to stereotypical gender roles where Steve has been made a much more capable man and
Wonder Woman much more dependent. Pete Jones found that not only was Steve very much essential to the narrative, he also found when analysing the dialogues in *Wonder Woman* that Steve spoke more lines than Wonder Woman (2: 6-7). Jones further discuss how, compared to *Wonder Woman*, dialogue examples from both *Thor* (male lead film) and *The Hunger Games* (female lead film) reveal protagonists Thor and Katniss as eminent central characters hence *Wonder Woman* as a female lead film could be discussed and perhaps reconsidered (8-12).

Nevertheless, both Superman and Wonder Woman end up saving the world and they both use their tremendous strength and power to do so. Superman utilises his strength and ability to fly to destroy the “world engine” in order to prevent it from destroying the earth and the film reaches its climax at 01:49:50. Just after saving the world, Superman further rescues Louis from falling off an aeroplane and when back on the ground, they embrace each other in a kiss (01:55:00). In addition, Superman kills the antagonist Zod at 02:02:20 and is afterwards hugged and comforted by Lois. Similarly, Wonder Woman saves the world by killing the antagonists General Erich Ludendorff and the evil god Ares. She kills both of them without any help and uses her strength and abilities to fight. The film reaches its climax when Wonder Woman manages to break free from Ares restraints and where I would argue is the first time Wonder Woman demonstrates an equally, if not more, powerful display of decisiveness, strength and power as Superman (01:56:15).

However, on the contrary, Wonder Woman’s love interest Steve is very much involved in rescuing the world as well as he ends up the definition of a hero himself. Steve decides to fly off with very poisonous bombs to prevent them from exploding on the ground and in the air he fires off a bullet into the bombs which ultimately lead to his death (01:55:40). Steve sacrificed his own life in order to save the lives of multiple other, thus making him a hero. Furthermore, it was when Wonder Woman saw Steve’s plane explode as she was able to break free and kill Ares due to the anger, sadness and love caused by it, which according to Jones makes him part of her ability to succeed, although not in a physical manner (Jones 13).

3.2 American values incorporated in the superhero

The comics superhero is profoundly reliant on American values and ideas, thus making the typical superhero’s traits those valued in American society. According to Sarah M. Coyne et al., America is a country which highly values and remunerates masculinity hence the superhero film takes part in sustaining such values by
communicating very strong masculine images (418). The immense success of Superman was, according to Romagnoli and Pagnucci, because of that he represented the ultimate American ideal for the perfect man: he was super strong, attractive, noble and desired by women (7). Superman continues to conform to those characteristics in *Man of Steel*. He comes across as ultra-masculine as he repeatedly demonstrates strength, independence and nobility: traits valued in the superhero. Superman is further able to attract women, as Louis clearly is attracted to him, although in a subtle manner. In a more unsubtle manner, a female soldier comments on Superman’s appearance: “I just think he’s kind of hot” (02:04:44). Moreover, even if Wonder Woman does not communicate as strong masculine messages, she does apply some typically male associated behaviour: she is strong, brave, noble and uses physical violence. Coyne et al. discuss how female superheroes have been found to apply stereotypical male behaviour, such as being aggressive, brave and assertive (417). Benshoff and Griffin discuss the problem with how the superhero films many times are recognised as equalizing men and women by making women act like men since it ultimately strengthens the values of masculinity and a patriarchal society where female is subordinate to male (299). The biggest problem is perhaps not the portrayal of Wonder Woman as less capable and dependent than Superman, but the portrayal of Superman as capable and independent as he is. It is perhaps *Man of Steel* and the characterization of Superman that needs to be changed and for him to apply feminine behaviour in order to stop the strengthening of masculine behaviour being valued more than feminine ones.

Moreover, both Wonder Woman and Superman show a tremendous will to do good, they want to sustain justice and they both fight evil embodied in the antagonists. Both Wonder Woman and Superman demonstrate resistance against evil when being tempted to use their superpowers to take over the world. The antagonist Zod, former general on Crypton, tries to convince Superman that they should rebuild Crypton on earth. However, when Superman realises that it would mean the end for the human race he refuses to take part (01:16:18). Similarly, Wonder Woman is tempted by the antagonist Ares, a god who previously lived on the island nation of Themyscira. Ares tries to convince Wonder Woman to take over the world together, that the human race does not deserve their help, but Wonder Woman refuses as well (01:48:19) and remarks “it is not about deserve, it’s about what you believe, and I believe in love” (01:59:55). Both Wonder Woman and Superman show allegiance to the human race as well as they prove their will to obtain justice. They further depict patriotic values, which is most evident in
their costumes, which both have the colours of the American flag. Both Superman and Wonder Woman were launched in an uncertain period during the unfolding of the Second World War which caused their stories and many other superhero stories, to communicate strong messages about loyalty and resistance towards evil (Hanley and Hahn 9; Romagnoli and Pagnucci 144; Reynolds 107). Wonder Woman killed Ares, who actually is the god of war, and thus killing the idea of war itself which very much relates to the times in which she was created. Moreover, according to Gloria Steinem, Wonder Woman was also a way of establishing that women could be as equally involved in protecting and serving their country as men could (206).

To sum up, both Superman and Wonder Woman strongly manifest superhero values and they both prove their loyalty to mankind and their families and an endless urge for peace and justice. They both embody those values most important to superheroes: courage, sacrifice and a tremendous will to use their power to do good and fight evil and I would, therefore, argue that they both manage to represent a strong classical image of the comics superhero. Nevertheless, I would argue that when comparing Wonder Woman and Superman in these films, Wonder Woman does fail to represent as typical superhero image as Superman because of her being far less independent and assertive than him. As mentioned previously, the superhero image is much related to strong masculinity values and since Wonder Woman does not demonstrate as much stereotypical masculine behaviour as Superman does, she will ultimately fail to represent as solid superhero image as Superman, which is very much problematic.

4 Wonder Woman and Superman in the EFL classroom

When moving into the EFL classroom, how can the Hollywood film and specifically Wonder Woman and Man of Steel be utilized as a pedagogical aid? The syllabus for English at upper secondary school states that “[k]nowledge of English increases the individual's opportunities to participate in different social and cultural contexts, as well as in global studies and working life” and further that “[k]nowledge of English can also provide new perspectives on the surrounding world” (1). By studying how the English language and society partially are constructed through different media forms e.g. film, the students get the opportunity to gain perspectives that enable them to discuss how the society in which they live are affected by different media. Anna Sparrman further discusses how “the world is constituted both through language (the linguistic turn) and through visuality (the pictorial turn)” (168). By using film in the EFL classroom as a
teaching aid, students can have the opportunity to both gain knowledge of the English language as well as of how language and pictures reflect the world and society in which we live in. This section aims to discuss how one can use utilize Wonder Woman and Man of Steel in the EFL classroom as well as their potential problems.

4.1 Using superhero films to discuss gender amongst adolescents

The Swedish school has a responsibility to foster the values and norms on which the Swedish society is based, including fostering gender equality and actively working to prevent any form of discrimination based on gender, sex or sexual orientation (Natl.Ag.f.Ed). According to W.J.T Mitchell, visuality is as structured by society as the society is of the visual (179) and Henry A. Giroux argues that “film produces images, ideas, and ideologies that shape both individual and national identities” (587). Sparrman suggests that if treating visuality as a strong influential force in the construction of society it becomes possible to reflect upon how visuality is taking part in affecting both the society but also the individual (168). To use film as a critical pedagogical tool to identify patterns and behaviours rooted in our society could provide students with a greater understanding of people outside their immediate group as well as it could develop the students’ critical thinking and thus work to prevent students from unconsciously adapting and conform to harmful behaviour or stereotypes. The Hollywood film could be a helpful tool to show how visuality is taking part in constructing the society and the people living in it because of its frequent depictions of stereotypes and stereotypical behaviour manifested in narrative. That is if using it as a critical tool.

Moreover, both Man of Steel and Wonder Woman are newly made productions within the superhero film genre in popular culture. Although some might argue the historical value and knowledge production of studying pop culture, its pedagogical value should not be underestimated. According to Filmstaden, Hollywood films covered the top ten over Swedish theatres most watched films and four of them were within the superhero genre. Man of Steel and Wonder Woman, therefore, represent the type of films Swedes actually watch. It could therefore both be rewarding as well as it could be revealing to challenge the students’ perspectives and help them gather the tools needed to develop their critical thinking regarding gender and gender issues. As the analysis could reveal, the two films present gender stereotypes and gender issues as well as they reveal American values concerning masculinity. However, themes of gender and equality are rarely seamless and can cause controversial opinions to be shared by students, as well as
it may cause male students to express reluctance towards the subject if experiencing they are being attacked. There is also the possibility of students expressing no concern over gender identities, students who do not consider gender stereotypes as an issue and who consider it as something rather natural (Chrisler 265). Nevertheless, the classroom should be a place where students are allowed and feel safe to express their own opinions and values, even if controversial or placing themselves outside the norm. Having a classroom where students feel like their opinions and values are acknowledged and respected by the teacher is valuable if wanting to create rewarding learning situations where students are able to listen and discuss with those who share or do not share their opinions. Even so, the teacher should not allow students to express or imply opinions and values that inadvertently hurt or violates individuals present in the classroom. The teacher’s role in controversial and stigmatised discussion situations is of a delicate matter and at the same time of great importance in order to develop a safe and healthy classroom environment, which is perhaps one of the teacher’s biggest challenges.

Moreover, according to Coyne, research done in media has tended to focus on female stereotypes. She further claims that boys are as well influenced by the media they consume and research has suggested that media contribute to males’ construction of masculinity (417). The films *Man of Steel* and *Wonder Woman* could be used in the EFL classroom to discuss masculinity and the students’ perception of it. What is masculinity? Moreover, where have their ideas of masculinity originated from? The films can be helpful in showing how masculinity is constructed in films and how masculine traits are preferable to feminine traits. The films could also enable an opportunity to discuss how masculine and feminine stereotypes and expectations can be harmful on both a social level and a personal level. John L. Oliffe et al. discuss the connection between masculinity, mental illness and high suicidal rates amongst men and how research suggests reluctance amongst men towards seeking help when experiencing mental illness since masculine ideals contribute to the perception of seeking help as a weakness (897). By incorporating this in discussions surrounding gender with the students, they can get an understanding of how the masculinity ideal not only contributes to a patriarchal society where women are subordinated to men and masculinity but also how masculinity can have a negative impact on men as a group as well. The films discussed in the analysis reveals gender stereotypes common in the superhero genre as well as they reveal differences between a male and female superhero portrayal. For instance, Superman mainly operates on his own while Wonder Woman works together with Steven: What would the students
say is preferable? The masculine ideal would perhaps urge the general person to view independence as more honourable than dependence. The questions that could be asked to students is if that is just a perception caused and sustained by media and culture? Is independence something people should strive for or does it contribute to larger issues, such as mental illness due to such ideals resulting in seeking help as shameful and weak? According to Pete Jones, “[Wonder Woman’s] dependence on Steve is normalised” and he further discusses how the audience does not even notice how she is pulled back as a central character in the film (13). It could be interesting for the students to question if they would notice it if it was the other way around, if Superman was highly dependent. I am quite sure that the audience would have some sort of reaction if Lois led Superman by holding his hand.

To sum up, the students would hopefully be able to reflect over how their ideas of gender have been constructed and how gender expectations can be hurtful both to people who wish to not follow them and to those who feel pressured to live up to them. Using the films *Man of Steel* and *Wonder Woman* to address and discuss such issues in the classroom would hopefully encourage students to reflect over gender as something more fluid and not determined and further help develop an acceptance when someone breaks out of gender expectations. Since there is more stigma surrounding men applying stereotypically feminine behaviour (Benshoff and Griffin 215), I would argue a value in having open debates and discussions surrounding masculinity and its effect on not only women, but for men and binary as well.

### 4.2 Pedagogical considerations for using film in the EFL classroom

Apart from that *Man of Steel* and *Wonder Woman* could generate opportunities for the students to participate and contribute to discussions surrounding gender, it could also be a valuable tool in developing the students’ English. Not only do the films allow students to hear spoken English, but they can further enhance students’ language learning. Subtitles in the target language benefit the students’ language skills and listening comprehension since research suggests seeing and hearing a language concomitantly transpires effective learning language (Harmer 345; Hayati and Mohmedi 189).

Furthermore, using the films *Man of Steel* and *Wonder Woman* would hopefully inspire or motivate students who are reluctant towards or are struggling to read. These are films that are familiar to the students and which are of a popular genre amongst adolescents. According to Brad Smilanich and Nicole Lafreniere, films can be helpful to
use with reluctant or struggling readers since it can provide the students with the ability to identify how scenes are constructed to symbolise or to convey messages. They further suggest that students then can apply that ability to literary texts, now possibly being able to analyse them on a deeper level (604-606). *Man of Steel* and *Wonder Woman* can provide students with the ability to identify symbolism and messages in films, and in this particular case: gender constructions. In no way should film replace literature and written texts, but some students might benefit from approaching something familiar in order to be able to use that perspective on other texts. The teacher could introduce the theme of gender by using a medium familiar to the students to later discuss the same themes in different literary texts. For instance, there are multiple classical works where themes of gender are eminent: *Hamlet*, *Don Quijote*, *Medea*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Madame Bovary* to name a few. The students would hopefully benefit in their discussions of such literary works if they have previous discussions to refer and relate to.

5 Conclusion

This essay has tried to delineate the concept of gender and how it is enacted in films, specifically the Hollywood superhero blockbuster. The analysis of *Man of Steel* and *Wonder Woman* revealed two powerful characters who convey strong superhero images. However, as discussed in section 2, Hollywood media tends to reinforce harmful gender roles and the analysis concludes an imbalance in Superman’s and Wonder Woman’s independence, where Superman mainly operates on his own and Wonder Woman together with Steve. Even so, the analysis and pedagogical implications suggest that Woman should not necessarily be considered a weak character nor should any associated female behaviour, since their subordinate position to typically male associated behaviour is the result of a patriarchal society. It is rather the imbalance in the films’ portrayals of Wonder Woman and Superman’s dependence and activity that might contribute to harmful gender roles. *Wonder Woman* and *Man of Steel* display stereotypical gender roles where women are dependent and men independent, thus taking part in sustaining potentially harmful gender expectations that e.g. induces men not wanting to ask for help or resistance to expressing emotions.

The pedagogical implications aimed to discuss how the portrayal of Superman and Wonder Woman can be used in an EFL context to discuss gender and their expectations and specifically those expectations and values amongst men and masculinity which are not only harmful for men themselves, but for women as well. The films can be valueable...
tools to challenge students to reflect over their own ideas of gender and could enable students to identify what part media, in this case films, has in shaping the society’s perception of gender and how media can reinforce and sustain harmful gender expectations. Although gender and stereotypes are complex subjects, which many times can provoke conventional and/or controversial opinions to be expressed, having discussions surrounding those subjects in the classroom would hopefully help developing acceptance amongst students when someone breaks out of gender expectations. Additionally, students who might suffer from questioning their own gender identity and/or sexual orientation would perhaps find trust and comfort if teachers normalise different ways to perform gender by openly and respectfully speaking about it.

The pedagogical implications further argued the benefits of using popular culture films as an entrance to treat the more classical works in literature. It concluded that popular culture and film should neither replace the classical works nor literature but could instead be utilised to introduce literary analysing tools. This method was suggested specifically useful for reluctant readers who hopefully would be able to analyse literary texts on deeper levels if having current examples to refer to.

Finally, for future research, it would be interesting to study the audience’s response to these films by using Queer theory as the choice of research perspective to investigate how these films are received by adolescents depending on gender and sexual orientation. Does Wonder Woman speak to those who identify as male and can those identifying as females relate to Superman? Additionally, can someone who identify as gender fluid or non-binary relate to these films? The essay briefly touched upon the films’ lack of representation and I believe further research about how the negative trend of inadequate representation in superhero films impact adolescents could be of great value if wanting to change that trend.

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