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Master's thesis

Challenging Hegemonic Masculinity Through the Use of Epic Fantasy

*Using The Way of Kings by Brandon Sanderson to
analyze hegemonic masculinity and its potential for
classroom appropriation.*



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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to argue that using the novel *The Way of Kings* by Brandon Sanderson to explore the concepts of gender roles, with masculinity and its hegemonic aspect at the forefront, through the fields of gender studies and gender pedagogy, will provide grounds for meaningful classroom discussions and activities in the Swedish upper secondary school by drawing parallels between the fictional society presented in the novel and our own. Three main traits of hegemonic masculinity are analyzed and applied to the characters Kaladin, Dalinar and Jasnah, namely physical assertiveness, egocentric individualism, and domination. The novel's potential for use within the Swedish upper secondary school, specifically in the course English 7, is analyzed. The domination trait of hegemonic masculinity was found noticeably absent in the three protagonists, while this trait could be found amongst the novel's antagonists. Potential was found in using the novel to lessen the effects of the boy crisis in the Swedish school system.

Keywords

Hegemonic Masculinity, Gender Roles, EFL, Upper Secondary School, Fantasy, Epic Fantasy, Gender Studies, Gender Pedagogy, Brandon Sanderson, *The Way of Kings*, The Boy Crisis.



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1 Introduction

“A man’s emotions are what define him, control is the hallmark of true strength. To lack feeling is to be dead, but to act on every feeling is to be a child” (Sanderson 412). This quote is from the epic fantasy novel *The Way of Kings* (2010) by Brandon Sanderson, and it is uttered by the character Dalinar Kholin, one of the novel’s main protagonists. Theories over what constitutes manliness and being a man are as plentiful in the novel as they are in our world, and this quote showcases one such thought. *The Way of Kings* is the first novel in the series *The Stormlight Archives* (2010-), highly lauded as one of the best fantasy series currently being written. Sanderson has been praised for his inclusion of varying difficult topics in a fantasy setting, such as mental health issues, class disparities and finally, gender roles. The novel focuses mainly, but not only, around male protagonists and this allows for many varying types of masculinity to be portrayed, a fact this essay intends to exploit.

The inclusion and representation of these different difficult topics in a fantasy setting can possibly provide a unique opportunity for EFL-teachers to utilize in achieving several goals specified in the Swedish curriculum for English teaching. The topic of gender roles, and by extension masculinity, is a prevalent part of the society in which *The Way of Kings* takes place, where Sanderson has created what he calls masculine and feminine arts. These arts delineate what roles men and women have in society and stepping outside of these roles is equivalent to being rendered a social pariah. Although set in a fantasy world much different from ours, the parallels that can be drawn to our society and history become obvious, and in these parallels lies the possibility of exploring these topics in a classroom setting.



Moreover, previous research within the field of fantasy literature is largely centered around fantasy in general such as Edward and Mendlesohn's *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (2012). The research that has been done on, and mentions specific novels are often of older fantasy classics such as *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) or *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1959), see for example Blomqvist (2001) and Hanésova et.al. (2019). However, studies and research on newer and more modern examples of fantasy are not as prevalent. This, combined with the fact that one of the newer trends in fantasy is the increased focus and inclusion of these previously mentioned difficult real-life topics such as mental health, race, and gender, creates a gap which this essay intends to fill.

In an effort to attempt to fill this gap, this essay intends to utilize theories of gender to explore one of these topics, namely gender roles with the focus being on masculinity, specifically hegemonic masculinity, in the novel *The Way of Kings*, and then through the field of gender pedagogy, argue for its use in the EFL-classroom. Historically, and perhaps now more than ever, gender and gender roles are and have been an intricate part of our society. Approaching the novel with the increasing emergence of students within the LGBTQ+ community in mind as a teacher could then be used to both inform and create discussions around, but not limited to gender, amongst students. Using a novel within the genre of fantasy to promote these discussions is an approach reinforced by Thomas, who in her article *Teaching Fantasy: Overcoming the Stigma of Fluff*, claims that fantasy is perfect for the classroom as students generally enjoy fantasy and it is filled



with metaphors and other ways of comparing and utilizing a completely different world for educational purposes (60). This approach is also supported by Laycock, who discusses the potential benefits of viewing our society and its many themes through the lens of a fantasy novel (76). Using this novel in this way would relate to the following aims and core contents of the Swedish curriculum for teaching English in upper secondary school: “Students should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of... societal issues and cultural features in different contexts...” and “Subject areas related to students’ education, and societal and working life; current issues, events and processes; thoughts, opinions, ideal, experiences, and feelings; relationships and ethical issues.” (Nat Agency f. Ed). Other than this, students would also naturally practice their language skills, reading skills and perhaps through discovering and continuing to read fantasy literature, become lifelong learners. Therefore, this essay will argue that using the novel *The way of Kings*, by Brandon Sanderson, to explore the concepts of gender roles, with masculinity and its hegemonic aspect at the forefront, through the fields of gender studies and gender pedagogy, will provide grounds for meaningful classroom discussions and activities in the Swedish upper secondary school by drawing parallels between the fictional society presented in the novel and our own.



2 Gender Studies and Gender Pedagogy

The following section presents both the theoretical and the pedagogical framework which will be used to analyze Sanderson's *The Way of Kings*.

The novel will be analyzed from both a literary and a pedagogical perspective, with the field of gender studies being applied to the former, and gender pedagogy being applied to the latter. Within the field of gender studies, the concept of gender roles will be explored by mainly utilizing the concept of masculinity, with the natural caveat that such a concept is not only present in biological males. As such, this thesis will not limit itself to only analyzing biological males in the novel, or rather, fictional male characters of a secondary world written as if within the realm of our society's understanding of a biological male. As previously mentioned, masculinity studies will be at the forefront of this essay, specifically with regards to hegemonic masculinity. Lastly, this section will be concluded by exploring the field of gender pedagogy.

Furthermore, since Sanderson's *The Way of Kings* is set in a world completely different to our own, this has allowed for the representation of a society in which gender roles differ greatly from those existing in our world. Therein lies the possibility of exploring this society and its gender roles, analyzing them, comparing them to our own, and subsequently learning things while doing so. Therefore, this essay intends to use the aforementioned concepts of gender roles, masculinity, and femininity, to



analyze the characters and society of the novel from within the literary field of gender studies.

Moreover, the scope of this essay will be limited to the concepts of gender roles and gender pedagogy, and will not focus on other concepts, themes, or points of interest within the novel. The concepts of masculinity and femininity are believed to be tightly interwoven with the concept of gender roles and will therefore be utilized to better explore and analyze this concept, with masculinity studies being at the forefront.

Additionally, three key concepts which will be used in both the literary analysis and the pedagogical implications are hegemonic masculinity, epic fantasy, and secondary world. According to Rolf Romøren and John Stephens, hegemonic masculinity "... is used to refer to the version of masculinity which is considered normative within a particular society's expressions of masculinity" (233). In this essay, the term hegemonic masculinity will refer to our own society's expressions of masculinity unless otherwise stated, as to avoid confusing it with the hegemonic masculinity of the society in the secondary world we encounter in the novel. It is after all a possibility that our own society's expressions of masculinity are different from those on Roshar, the planet from *The Way of Kings*, despite being conceived of and written by Brandon Sanderson, a member of our society. In our society, the traits connected with hegemonic masculinity which are made prevalent through mainstream media are domination, physical assertiveness,



and egocentric individualism (Romøren and Stephens 217). To clarify, when using the term “our society” it is generally the western society of our world that is being referred to. The reasons for nominating western society as “our society” should not be seen as some sort of statement that it is in any way superior to other societies of our world, but rather that it is the society most prevalent in mainstream western media, to which comparisons can more easily be made. The concept of hegemonic masculinity will be addressed further in a later section of this chapter, as it is believed to be heavily intertwined with the concepts of masculinity, gender roles, and central to the analysis of this thesis.

Moreover, the concepts of epic fantasy and secondary world are tightly interwoven. By epic fantasy, sometimes referred to as high fantasy, we generally mean fantasy which does not take place in our world, our universe or in our reality. Take for example the novel *Twilight* (2005) by Stephenie Meyers, many would consider this a fantasy story, but as it is set on earth and very much in our reality, it would not be considered epic fantasy, but rather what is called low fantasy. On the other hand, a story such as *Lord of the Rings* would very much be considered epic fantasy, in fact, J. R. R. Tolkien's work is considered by many to be the inception of epic fantasy. Another way to phrase what separates fantasy and high fantasy, is the term secondary world. This term encompasses the aforementioned distinctions of a world different from our own and was even coined by



Tolkien himself. In the case of *The Way of Kings*, the secondary world would be the world of Roshar, or even the Cosmere in general, which is the universe in which the planet Roshar exists. This means that the novel falls under the category of epic fantasy.

2.1 Gender Roles

The theories behind why gender roles are the way they are right now, and why they have been the way they have been over the course of modern history, are plentiful. It stands to reason that the origin of gender roles is of interest to this essay, as the completely different origins of a fantasy world would allow for completely different gender roles. The same could be said about the way in which masculinity is perceived in a society, and which attributes are considered masculine and feminine. According to Alberto Alesina et. al., modern gender roles might stem from agricultural practices of the past. They suggest that since men's superior strength was needed to pull the plow and thereby provide food, it fell upon women to tend to chores inside the home. They also suggest a natural inclination for women to be the primary tender of children and were therefore only able to do tasks that were easy to put down and would not endanger the children (II). It should be noted that this could potentially be considered a simple explanation for a complex subject and that naturally more factors have been present in defining masculinity and femininity throughout history. As previously stated, the



secondary world of an epic fantasy story such as *The Way of Kings* does not share the history of our world, and therefore does not have to share its presentations of masculinity and femininity. Naturally, the author of a novel such as this is very much a part of our society and might subconsciously conform to many of our gender roles anyway. It is after all a world made up by a single person's mind and not billions of years of evolution.

2.1.1 Masculinity and Femininity

Merriam Webster defines masculinity and femininity as “the quality or nature of the male/female sex: the quality, state, or degree of being masculine/feminine or manly/womanly”. This definition hints at the fact that an individual can be more or less masculine or feminine regardless of their gender, which would suggest that neither of the concepts is strictly tied to a specific gender; this is a notion which will be explored further in the analysis section of this essay. Furthermore, it then becomes relevant, perhaps prudent, to mention that this essay will analyze masculinity and femininity based on what John Stephens in his book *Ways of Being Male (2013)* refers to as “... notions of gender as binary categories constructed through language and hierarchically placed in relation to each other” (133). As such, this essay does not exclude the existence of more genders than male or female, but simply bases its theory in these aforementioned preconceived notions.

Additionally, within the field of masculinity, the term inclusive masculinity has started to gain traction within gender research. According to



Anderson and McCormack, "... many young straight men: reject homophobia; include gay peers in friendship networks; are more emotionally intimate with friends;... recognize bisexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation; embrace activities and artefacts once coded feminine; and eschew violence and bullying" (548), which has led to a more inclusive environment for men to exist within. The effect of a concept such as inclusive masculinity on hegemonic masculinity is a thing of interest to this study and will be analyzed in the literary analysis section.

Moreover, several studies have been made on the connection between things such as media and literature, with current views on masculinity and femininity. In an article analyzing toxic masculinity in season one of HBO's television show, *True Detective*, Michael Albrecht remarks upon the complex portrayals of masculinity in the show and showcases arguments which suggest that this subsequently meant the show had a very un-complex and dull portrayal of femininity (12-16). Albrecht makes the argument that "Complex portrayals of masculinity also rely upon simplistic portrayals of women, as hegemonic masculinity relies upon a set of relations that positions women in a subordinate relationship to men" (16), which would suggest that complex forms of masculinity and femininity cannot coexist in literature or film. However, in this study, the piece of literature used as the main source is within the genre of fantasy, and therefore possibly does not share these set of preconceived relations between



femininity and masculinity and as such might not abide by the same rules of cancellation.

2.1.2 Hegemonic Masculinity

How should a man act in order to be considered a man? Earlier in this section the concept of hegemonic masculinity was introduced as the stereotypical way in which manliness has presented itself historically in our society. Thus, when considering the question above, many people's initial response would quite possibly be behaviors and traits along the lines of domination, physical assertiveness, and egocentric individualism (Romøren and Stephens 217). Thankfully, our society has in general become much more accepting of different forms of gender expressions than we have been in the past, but there is still a long way to go.

Historically, what we consider hegemonic masculinity has taken many different forms depending on many factors such as culture, fashion, and scientific advancements. According to Griffin, the concept of hegemonic masculinity was developed as a field of historical inquiry in the mid-1990s, and even in that relatively short amount of time the norms associated with manliness have evolved and fluctuated greatly (377). What has not changed, however, is the fact that throughout history in the Anglophone world discourses regarding masculinity have often denied its diversity, Griffin explains this peculiarity by stating that:

Those seeking to exalt one conception of masculinity above others
have rarely done so by accepting that their favored model is one among



many but have more usually insisted that deviation from their preferred form is ‘unmanly’ or effeminate. In this trope there is only one true form of masculinity; as one approaches it one becomes more ‘manly’, while moving away from it entails the loss of ‘manliness’ or ‘manhood’. (Griffin 377)

As such, historically, society has had issues acknowledging the fact that people might have different understandings of what it means to be manly. There is a possibility then, that this has greatly influenced many people over the years, perhaps especially young men, leading them to believe that to be a man is something to strive towards, and to be a man you have to act in one specific way. This possibility will be discussed further in both the literary analysis and the pedagogical implication. It is after all no stretch to assume that students at the Swedish upper secondary school have experienced something similar, nor is it something that lacks the potential for analysis within the novel itself.

The continued study of and discussions surrounding hegemonic masculinity has become a debated topic. Voices are calling the concept nothing but a new age invention designed to undermine men and to further make people doubt their sexuality or gender (Connell and Messerschmidt 830). It has become a term used in political debates, online forums, and news articles to promote varying, often political, agendas. The concept has also been criticized because “It imposes a false unity on a fluid and contradictory



reality” (Connell and Messerschmidt 830), meaning that it tries to simplify something that is anything but simple. The current controversy surrounding hegemonic masculinity makes for an excellent justification of why it is such a large and central part of this thesis, the concept clearly needs more light shed upon it.

2.2 Gender pedagogy

Being aware of the different learning needs of girls and boys, whether they are cisgender or LGBTQ+, is a necessary skill for any in-service teacher. Gender pedagogy is an approach that allows teachers to provide a more nuanced way of teaching. It is a pedagogy that is by design intended to be inclusive in nature, allowing any individual to receive an education suited to their needs. Some people might argue that if we stop talking about genders it will cease being a problem. People will start seeing each other as individuals instead of individuals attached to a certain pronoun, with every stereotype that comes with it. This would mean that an increased focus on research such as gender pedagogy is more harmful in the long run as it brings attention to an issue which need not be an issue.

However, something that becomes paramount to add to this discussion is the fact that children are attuned to gender from an early age (Shutts et al. 1-2). In fact, children at an early age are not only aware of genders but also use this knowledge to guide their actions and inferences



about others (2). Being able to tell the difference between a man and a woman seems to be biologically rooted in us from a very young age, meaning that gender pedagogy will always have a crucial role to play in any school system. To contrast this, Davies discusses how “the male-female binary is held in place because we come to see it as the way the world is and therefore ought to be—what is constructed as truth becomes an (apparently) absolute unconstructed truth” (qtd. in Stephens 133-34), which seems to insinuate that teaching people to look past the male-female binary will eventually deny it as an absolute truth in our society.

2.2.1 The “Boy Crisis”

Boys perform worse than girls in every single subject except for physical education. This statement is not simply a statement but also a reality in the Swedish school system, this is what is known as the boy crisis (Ingvar 7). Scholars have debated over whether the boy crisis has to do mostly with genetic differences between men and women, or socioeconomic differences (Ingvar 7-8, Kimmel 13-14). Something that most scholars on this topic agree on, is that there exists a prevalent problem in schools, not just among students but also among teachers and faculty, a mindset that boys will be boys. Boys will be boys is a very detrimental mindset to have in general, within schools it becomes an excuse, an excuse for why boys perform worse and are allowed to behave a certain way (Ingvar 9). Throughout history, there



have often been calls for boys and men to toughen up, do their part for their country and do things like join the military (Buchbinder 7). Although some may argue that these calls were made out of necessity at the time, it is quite possible that it has helped shape a certain view of how a boy should aspire to act and what a boy should aspire to make of himself. What role does a concept like hegemonic masculinity play in furthering or affecting the boy crisis? Is the very nature of boys will be boys, simply a call to how we expect boys to conform to our preconceived notions about how a boy should act, to our notions of hegemonic masculinity? The pedagogical implications section of this thesis will revolve around potential ways to link masculinity to this crisis.

2.2.2 Why *The Way of Kings*?

Enter any fantasy forum online and pose the question, what fantasy series currently being written will be considered a classic in the future? *The Stormlight Archives* by Brandon Sanderson will undoubtedly be one of the answers you are given. *The Way of Kings*, which is the first book in this series, currently sits at an average score of 4.61/5 from over 370 thousand users on Goodreads, scoring higher than other epics of the genre such as *Lord of the Rings* (4.5/5) and *Game of Thrones* (4.44/5) (Goodreads.com). Choosing any text for classroom consumption is an arduous process and can require a great deal of work from the teacher if it is to be done correctly



(Chambers 151-60). The great critical acclaim of the novel and its appeal amongst people of a similar age to the students at the Swedish upper secondary school could potentially help in this regard

Further, *The Way of Kings* is written by a male author and includes a majority of male protagonists in Kaladin, Dalinar and Adolin, which together constitute 74 of the novels non-interlude chapters, compared to the female protagonist Shallan who accounts for 15 of them. According to Stephens, much of the literature often used in a high school setting is written by male authors and features predominantly male protagonists. Despite this, however, issues of masculinity are not often discussed in tandem with these pieces of literature and students are rarely given the opportunity to analyze notions about the male gender (133). The question arises of whether this has anything to do with the authors', and by extent the readers', notions about hegemonic masculinity being the norm and this norm not including a very inclusive view of masculinity. In *The Way of Kings*, however, issues of masculinity are very much a central part of the male protagonists. Despite following many of the common heroic tropes of fantasy the characters are also shown to struggle with mental health issues, such as when Kaladin contemplates suicide due in large part to his depression and survivor's guilt. An opportunity then arises to discuss the forms of masculinity present in the book in contrast to hegemonic masculinity. Through these discussions,



difficult topics such as mental health issues and gender portrayals could then potentially be broached in tandem with reading the novel.



3 The Portrayal of Masculinity in *The Way of Kings*

This section will contain a literary analysis of the portrayal of masculinity in the novel *The Way of Kings*. To achieve this, the primary focus of the analysis will be on the characters of Kaladin, Dalinar, and Jasnah, however, examples or excerpts from other characters might be brought in to provide contrast or nuance to the current discussion. That being said, more general features of masculinity presented in the novel will also be analyzed and therefore the analysis will not solely be tied to the characters. In a similar way, this analysis will not solely discuss and analyze masculinity, as doing so would possibly provide a flat view of the concept and the characters. Rather, the idea is that the concepts of femininity and gender roles will contribute, contextualize, and add to the analysis of masculinity and its portrayal. Something which needs to be kept in mind while doing this analysis is that the main characters of the novel are all multidimensional, and different aspects of their personalities and quirks are created through many varying forms of characterization. Being aware of this fact will hopefully mean that the analysis of the characters becomes less one-dimensional and that a complex subject such as gender roles is given its proper nuance.

Furthermore, the concept of hegemonic masculinity will be analyzed throughout this section, with parallels being drawn between our society and that of the secondary world present in *The Way of Kings*. In order to achieve this, the different characters will be analyzed according to which traits of



hegemonic masculinity they possess or do not possess, namely domination, physical assertiveness, and egocentric individualism (Romøren and Stephens 217). Aspects such as whether this comes across as a positive or a negative thing within the secondary world or if the reader through inference can discern such, will be of great interest.

3.1 Masculinity Amongst the Main Characters Kaladin, Dalinar and Jasnah

“Life before death, he whispered. Strength before weakness. Journey before destination.” (Sanderson 841). This quote from the novel is from the character Kaladin when he for the first time speaks the first ideal of the Knights Radiant, which is an ideal that this novel heavily implies is an honorable and positive thing. It is both inferred and explicitly stated in the novel that being a Knights Radiant is something to strive towards, and that means swearing to this ideal and all its implications. Life before death and journey before destination are by no stretch of the imagination controversial in their implication, but what about strength before weakness. Is it better to be strong rather than weak? Is it bad to show any sort of weakness? What is weakness and how can this be related to masculinity? These are all potentially relevant questions to pose when analyzing this novel. As such, this thesis will argue that the way these questions and themes are handled



throughout the novel allows for ample opportunities when it comes to both literary analysis and pedagogical implications.

The following section will contain an analysis of the portrayal of masculinity in the novel with regards to some of the main characters. The characters that will be the focus of this analysis are Kaladin, Dalinar and Jasnah. Important to note here is that two of these characters are written as male characters with the pronoun “he”, while Jasnah is written as a female character with the pronoun “she”, and as such, these are the pronouns which will be used when analyzing these characters. Furthermore, the reason for adding a female character to the list when analyzing masculinity, is in an effort to provide a more nuanced approach to the analysis. After all, women can be more or less masculine, and showcase masculine traits and features, the same way a cis-gender man or any non-binary person can.

3.1.1 Mental Health and Inclusive Masculinity

A young and inexperienced 15-year-old boy named Cenn is about to partake in his first ever battle. He is terrified and certain that he is going to die. When a grizzled old veteran named Dallet tells him that he will be fine, Cenn asks the man how he can be so sure. Dallet responds, “Because lad. You’re in Kaladin Stormblessed’s squad.” (Sanderson 26). This is the first time the reader hears the name of Kaladin, accompanied by his heroic peer-proclaimed epithet Stormblessed, and from the eyes and ears of a scared boy we are shown that Kaladin inhabits many of the stereotypical heroic and



masculine traits of a fantasy male character. We are shown that Kaladin, despite his youth, is well respected by the men under his command as they speak of him with respect and instantly salute him as he shows up (27), we are also both told and shown that he cares for the men in his division and even goes so far as to pay other squad leaders to get young, inexperienced boys like Cenn away from them so as to avoid them being needlessly killed (26-28). In typical fantasy fashion, we are also shown that Kaladin can fight, “And then *he* was there. Squad Leader. Stormblessed. Kaladin’s spear came as if out of nowhere, narrowly deflecting the blow that was to have killed Cenn. Kaladin set himself in front of Cenn, alone, facing down six spearmen. He didn't flinch. He *charged*” (33). So far, Kaladin is shown to embody one and perhaps even two of the three main features of hegemonic masculinity, namely that of physical assertiveness and potentially the egocentric individualism, while the domination feature is very much absent. The reason why Kaladin’s actions can potentially showcase signs of egocentric individualism is that he very often feels as if only he can save his friends. This is perhaps not something the reader is told outright, but rather something that Sanderson showcases repeatedly, both through Kaladin's point of view and from the reactions of those around him. This way of instigating characterization of characters through repetition, repeatedly showing something to the reader, oftentimes instead of outright saying it, is a common fixture of characterization done well (Bal 126). In fact, one of the



main flaws in Kaladin's character that is present throughout not just *The Way of Kings* but in subsequent novels as well is that he cannot stop taking responsibility for the bad things that happen to his men, he always feels as if he could have done better. There is an argument to be made that the physical assertiveness feature, not necessarily the absence of the other two, is a common feature in male protagonists of epic fantasy, see for example Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tau in *The Rage of Dragons* (2017), or Rand al 'Thor from *The Wheel of Time* (1990-2013).

However, for Kaladin, things take a turn. 133 pages after the reader sees him heroically saving Cenn's life and showcasing his incredible physical prowess in combat, Kaladin stands on the precipice of a large chasm, on the verge of committing suicide. Kaladin is struggling with depression, survivor's guilt, and realizing the futility of war and warfare (166-68). This character, who the reader was first shown to embody the characteristics of a fantasy hero, and showcased traits of hegemonic masculinity, is now shown to be dealing with serious mental health issues. The hero facing hardship is not uncommon in and of itself as many protagonists in all types of stories often go through trials of endurance and bravery in order to emerge stronger on the other side. However, Sanderson aims for a more realistic approach to topics such as mental health issues, as even though Kaladin decides to give his life another chance and try to help people once again, he is still not rid of his depression or his guilt. Kaladin



continues to struggle with mental health issues not just for the rest of the novel, but also for the rest of the series, or at least as far as it is written up until this point. In a previous section, the topic of strength before weakness, as an ideal to aspire towards in this secondary world was introduced.

Sanderson show that, despite Kaladin's struggles with mental health issues and suicidal thoughts, he is still worthy of being a Knights Radiant, meaning that in this secondary world, having mental health issues does not mean an individual is weak. This begs the question, can a character still be considered masculine and/or heroic, while still dealing with serious mental health issues, and *The Way of Kings* certainly seem to imply that this is the case. This would suggest that male protagonists in fantasy do not have to all be Aragorn's to be liked by the reader, it suggests a more inclusive kind of masculinity, where we are not just looking at heroes, but at humans. The focus on mental health issues in particular, is something that has garnered a great deal of attention on different fantasy related forums such as r/fantasy and r/Cosmere on reddit. Over several years, these forums have been filled with both praise and critique for Sanderson's inclusion of mental health issues as well as characters on the autism spectrum. It is evident that Sanderson has made a conscious decision to include these things and many other fantasy authors are doing the same, the effects and possibilities of this is something which will be discussed further in the pedagogical implications section of this essay.



The concept of inclusive masculinity has to do with changing dynamics of male group culture towards a more inclusive group dynamic, where any man regardless of sexual preference or other historically unmanly attributes is becoming more and more included and accepted (Anderson and McCormack 547-48). Inclusive masculinity is also a central part of Kaladin's character throughout the novel and this thesis will argue that this is perhaps the main reason why Kaladin does not embody the domination trait associated with hegemonic masculinity. In the novel, Kaladin is part of what is called a bridge crew, a group of men from all corners of the secondary world, men of different cultures, different personalities, different traits and looks. In this bridge crew, called bridge four, evidence of inclusive masculinity can be seen everywhere. This is a downtrodden group of people, sentenced to run bridges into war until they die, and through Kaladin, they somehow find a home and fellowship amongst each other. Kaladin accepts anyone into his crew, even a one-armed man named Lopen, or a battle-shocked man turned mute because of trauma and even a man who claims to prefer the sleeping company of other men. None of this is frowned upon by Kaladin, he seeks to aid the individual, no matter who they are. According to Howson, hegemonic masculinity becomes exclusionary only when the trait of domination is at the forefront (60). This could then potentially mean that inclusive masculinity and hegemonic masculinity can coexist if one of the three traits of hegemonic masculinity, namely domination, is absent. Of



course, this would mean that it is not a true form of hegemonic masculinity being presented, as it lacks one of its core parts, but an interesting observation nevertheless.

3.1.2 Challenging the Domination Trait of Hegemonic Masculinity

At face value, Dalinar Kholin might seem to be the perfect example of a male character inhabiting all three main traits of hegemonic masculinity. He is the highprince of the most powerful principality in the most powerful nation on Roshar, he is uncle to the king, and we are told of how he and his brother forged the nation of Alethkar through years of war and blood. This would seemingly align his character with Romøren and Stephens previously discussed traits associated with hegemonic masculinity, which are domination, physical assertiveness, and egocentric individualism (217). However, through Sanderson's writing, we are shown that Dalinar is so much more than just a battle-hardened warlord. Yes, he is an excellent fighter, a brilliant strategist and is repeatedly shown to not be afraid to put himself in mortal danger to save others; which means that he exhibits the trait of physical assertiveness. Yes, he believes that he has been given a mission from The Almighty, the secondary world's version of God, and is repeatedly shown to stubbornly believe that he is the one man who can save his people; which means that he exhibits the trait of egocentric individualism. Sanderson once again, just like with Kaladin, efficiently uses the narrative



tool of repetition to characterize his characters and show us what type of characters they are (Bal 126).

However, the trait of domination, just like with Kaladin, is more so challenged than established, in the characterization of Dalinar. One of the major focal points around Dalinar throughout the novel is his internal struggle in coming to terms with the fact that the war his nation has been fighting for the past ten years is only leading to further strife and widen the gaps between his people, and now Dalinar contemplates pursuing peace with the ones responsible for murdering his brother to, in his mind, save his nation. Dalinar is often talked about as having been a monster on the battlefield in his youth, throughout the novel however, we are shown him being disgusted in the midst of the battlefield, struggling to find the will to fight and not being very dominating at all. This is all even though as previously mentioned, he is fighting the ones responsible for murdering his brother the king, and these creatures, the Parshendi, are not even what one would consider human in this secondary world. In many other stories, the reader is told to root for the person striving towards vengeance and this can allow for the characters to commit some truly despicable acts while still maintaining the readers' sympathy and understanding. Some examples of this include Tau in *Rage of Dragons* (2017), Monza Murcatto in *Best Served Cold* (2009) and Edmond Dantés in *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1846). Dalinar is showcased to have all the typical motives that would allow him



sympathy while committing acts in the name of vengeance, yet he hesitates, he doubts, and he wants to pursue things differently. This causes an outrage amongst the other highprinces of his nation, as he diverts from acting the way he is expected to act, and rumors start to circulate that he has lost his touch and should abdicate. This phenomenon is similar to that observed by Howson regarding hegemonic masculinity, where failure to adhere to the principles of hegemonic masculinity challenges social order (4). Howson continues by explaining that it has historically been “...imperative of hegemonic masculinity to protect its principles against challenge, which in turn ensures that its justice is always already a system of closure that sits antithetically to social justice.” (4), and the possibility for drawing parallels between our world and the secondary world of Roshar becomes ever more apparent.

Thus, it becomes evident that Sanderson has strayed from characterizing his main protagonists with the domination trait of hegemonic masculinity. But what about the antagonists of the novel? One would assume that the main antagonistic force in the novel would be the Parshendi, the creatures that our main protagonists are at war with. Although they are an antagonistic force, this thesis would argue that the main antagonists of the novel are in fact members of Alethkar, the nation of which the majority of our main protagonists belong to. Take for instance highprince Sadeas and brightlord Amaram. These two characters, much like Kaladin and Dalinar,



are shown to inhabit the hegemonic masculinity traits of physical assertiveness and egocentric individualism, but where they differ from our protagonist is in the fact that they very much also showcase the third and final trait, namely that of domination, as they ruthlessly sacrifice innocent lives for what they believe is a righteous cause. It could then be argued that out of the three traits that Romøren and Stephens prescribe to hegemonic masculinity, it is specifically the domination trait that separates characters that the readers can and cannot sympathize with (217).

3.1.3 Tackling Gender Roles in a Secondary World

“I say that there is no role for women - there is, instead, a role for each woman, and she must make it for herself.” (Sanderson 933). This quote is from the fantasy novel *Words of Radiance* (2014) by Brandon Sanderson, and it illustrates the opinions of Jasnah Kholin, a renowned scholar, and niece of Dalinar Kholin, within this fantasy world who opposes the gender constructs prevalent in her society. *Words of Radiance* is the second novel in the fantasy series *The Stormlight Archives*, sequel to *The Way of Kings* which of course is the literary work that this thesis is based around. The topic of gender roles, the roles that masculinity and femininity play in a society is a hotly debated one, not just in our world but also in the secondary world of the novel, as is evident by the quote above. As previously mentioned, Alesina et al. provides a proposed historical background to the gender roles prevalent in our society by referencing agricultural practices of the past (II). They also discuss how in children of immigrants, a heritage of these agricultural practices still contribute to more unequal gender attitudes to this day (525-30). It then follows that if certain



aspects of the origin of gender roles can be traced far back through our history, the gender roles of a secondary world do not have to abide by these historical boundaries, as the history of Roshar is vastly different from that of our own. The same argument can be made for any epic fantasy novel, the fact the secondary world exists outside of our history means we can analyze a topic such as gender roles from a plethora of different perspectives. It being a fantasy novel is not necessarily a detriment in terms of appliance to real life issues, as the distance that stepping into a secondary world provides might be just what is needed to get a non-biased perspective on the topic (Laycock 76). However, it should be noted that no matter how different the history of the secondary world may be to our own, it is still a piece of literature that is written by a member of our society, and who might subconsciously adhere to the historical influences of our society when creating this world.

In an earlier section, the words of Michael Albrecht regarding the existence of complex and nuanced masculine characters in mainstream media were brought forth. Albrecht made the argument that complex portrayals of masculinity rely upon simplistic portrayals of women and femininity (12-16). Although this thesis cannot argue that this statement is false when it comes to media that does not have the benefit of a secondary world, it will argue that Jasnah Kholin showcases a complex portrayal of a woman within a novel filled with complex portrayals of masculinity. Jasnah is an enigma, she is renowned for doing things her own way and letting nothing stop her from achieving her goals. In fact, much like Kaladin and Dalinar, Jasnah is shown to possess the hegemonic masculinity traits of physical assertiveness and egocentric individualism, but not that of domination. It becomes clear that Sanderson utilizes what Romøren and Stephens call metonymic



configuration, where “Patterns of gendered behaviors are built up through the simple fictive practice of developing conflict and/or thematic implication through interactions amongst diverse and contrasting characters.” (220), where once again the narrative tool of repetition is at the forefront (Bal 126). Jasnah is shown to repeatedly possess certain traits through her interactions with other, at times more static characters and thus the reader learns what type of character Jasnah is. A critique of the novel in terms of its portrayal of women and femininity, could then potentially be that although Jasnah is a complex female character, perhaps she is not a complex feminine character. An argument can be made that throughout the novel, what makes for a complex female character might be complex traits of masculinity rather than femininity.

Another interesting point brought forth by Albrecht is that in season one of HBO’s *True Detective*, the piece of mainstream media his article revolves around, the bland portrayal of women in contrast to nuanced portrayal allowed for debates on the topic to arise in mainstream media (21). These debates then led to issues about toxic masculinity and bland portrayals of femininity being brought to light in front of a wider audience. Although this thesis does not argue that *The Way of Kings* has a bland portrayal of masculinity or femininity, it is evident that increased discussion on this topic will have an effect in terms of how many people are aware of concepts such as hegemonic masculinity. This increase in awareness could lead to more thoughtfulness and inclusivity regarding these nuanced and sometimes difficult topics, and that is something this thesis argues the benefit of.



4 Pedagogical Implications for *The Way of Kings*

Lord of the Flies (1954) by William Golding, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë, *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley; these are all excellent examples of literary classics that are often used in education to this day. This essay does not intend to argue that the inclusion of older works such as these have no place in education, but rather that teachers must be aware of the fact that these works often represent social conventions that are centuries old, and predominantly white-oriented (Stephens 134). A way to circumvent this issue, could possibly be to use a more recently published novel, as its social conventions and possible themes for analysis should be more relevant to our society today. Another way of going about it, is to do what this thesis revolves around, namely using an epic fantasy novel, where the social conventions of the secondary world could be completely different to our own. For some students, and perhaps even teachers, this might seem an odd choice. If the goal is to tackle real life issues and have meaningful discussions about societal problems and fulfil the core contents of the Curriculum for teaching English in the Swedish upper secondary school, “Students should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of... societal issues and cultural features in different contexts...” and “Subject areas related to students’ education, and societal and working life; current issues, events and processes; thoughts, opinions, ideal, experiences, and feelings; relationships and ethical issues.” (Nat Agency f. Ed), then why not



use a novel that takes place in our society and not in a secondary world?

According to Laycock, the act of stepping into another world has the potential to allow us to look back at our own from a new perspective. The act of stepping into a world completely different to our own might provide for many a necessary distance to the often complicated and tough subject material (76). This distance could potentially allow for students who would otherwise find the topics tough to discuss because of personal experiences, more easily accessible because it is after all not real. However, just because it is real, does not mean we cannot utilize it to discuss real things.

Additionally, when it comes to using the novel *The Way of Kings* in the classroom, a few things need to be considered. First of all, *The Way of Kings* is 1007 pages long, and although it features no sexual content, potentially triggering themes such as violence and war are featured prominently. This is not a book suitable for every student at the Swedish upper secondary school, not just because of its length but also due to the unfortunate unwillingness of some individuals to consume fantasy due to it carrying with it a certain stigma (Thomas 60). As such, this thesis will argue that using the novel in the course English 7 and not having it be the only option to choose from would be wise. The length and complexity of the book means that it might not be as well received in English 5 or in English 6, as some students might struggle with finding pedagogical value in a literary work such as this when they are overcome with the enormity of simply getting through it. Another



option to circumvent this could be to work with excerpts from the book, or to simply read part one of the novel, as certain publishers have made the decision to split the novel in two in order to make it more accessible. Not having the novel be the only option for your students could be a good idea in this regard as well. Selecting a text that will have the desired effect for a specific student is an intricate process and some students will simply not be able to achieve the learning that is sought after by the teacher if they are forced to read a certain book and not allowed to choose between a few (Chambers 151-60). Finally, the novel should not only be considered a way of teaching and discussing the themes that have been presented in this thesis such as hegemonic masculinity and gender roles, as the potential of a novel of this scope and complexity is virtually endless.

4.1 Hegemonic Masculinity and The Boy Crisis

Consider the manly man, would you say the manly man is masculine? Would you say the manly man is something all men should strive towards? Many would most likely answer yes to the first question, yet no to the second. This would then suggest that being masculine, is not something that people should strive towards. When we think of masculinity, we must once again return to the concept of hegemonic masculinity, the generalized pre-conceived notions of what traits are associated with masculinity, or perhaps rather masculine domination, in our society, physical assertiveness, egocentric individualism,



and domination (Romøren & Stephens 217). An interesting observation to make when contrasting these three traits with the boy crisis, which states that in the Swedish school system, girls perform better than boys in every single subject except physical education, is that mental assertiveness is not a trait of hegemonic masculinity, only physical assertiveness (Ingvar 7-8). The fact that boys do outperform girls in physical education could then potentially be related to the fact that they view physical education to attain physical assertiveness, a masculine trait that will make them seem more manly. It could then be argued that if the hegemonic masculinity traits present in our society are altered towards mental assertiveness being a desired trait, the severity of the boy crisis might lessen drastically. Naturally, changing a concept such as hegemonic masculinity is no small process as it is so deeply rooted in our history (Buchbinder 7, Alesina 525-30). This being the case, the kids of today are still the adults of tomorrow, and through education steps can be made to work towards this change.

4.2 The Duality of Reading to Escape and Reading to Learn

You are Leo Dan Brock, the young lion, lord governor of Angland and you are about to step into the circle to fight Stour Nightfall, your nemesis, the one they call the young wolf. You are Fitzchivalry Farseer, bastard son of the late prince Chivalry Farseer, navigating the deadly politics of a castle and nation to which you owe nothing yet demands everything. You are on a sinking



ship, you are in outer space, you are navigating a lush jungle, you are investigating a crime scene, you are anywhere but in your bed at 8pm on a school night with homework due tomorrow that you have not started and a math test on Monday that you have yet to begin to study for. You are not trying to balance your job, your relationship, your kids, maintaining a healthy diet and exercising every now and then while your back and your knees are loudly protesting every step of the way. You have escaped. This thesis will allow itself a final short section on the duality of reading to escape and reading to learn something. As is the case with any reading that takes place involuntarily, there is always a chance that the amount of learning taking place is minimal. Allow then, for the possibility of escapism to happen. Simply existing within our society is not always an easy thing and escaping for an hour or two to a galaxy far far away, or simply a place without obligations or stress, might not be the worst side-effect in the world.



5 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to argue that using the epic fantasy novel *The Way of Kings* by Brandon Sanderson, to explore concepts such as gender roles, with masculinity and its hegemonic aspect being the primary focus, through the fields of gender studies and gender pedagogy would provide an opportunity for meaningful learning to take place in the Swedish upper secondary school. To achieve this, the thesis analyzed the historical origins of concepts such as hegemonic masculinity in our society and discussed how the completely different historical origins of a secondary world present in an epic fantasy novel allows for reimaginings of these concepts within the novel. Three characters from the novel were chosen to mainly analyze with regards to how much they exhibited the three main traits of hegemonic masculinity, physical assertiveness, egocentric individualism, and domination. All three characters were found to exhibit the first and the second traits mentioned, while the domination trait was summarily absent from these protagonists of the novel. Interestingly enough, the same could not be said for the novel's main antagonists who were shown to possess all three of these traits. It was also noted that although rich in portrayals of complex masculinities, male characters and female characters, complex femininities were found lacking. Although, this could naturally have been because the main focus of the thesis was to analyze masculinity. The thesis then argued for the novel's value in the Swedish upper secondary school,



stating that it might best be used in the course English 7 and as one of many pieces of literature to choose from. Finally, the potential of lessening the effects of the boy crisis in the Swedish school system was found using themes in the novel that warrant classroom discussions, mainly hegemonic masculinity. The thesis concluded with a short note on the duality of reading to escape and reading for learning, stating that a teacher should perhaps not be too disappointed if use of the novel does not have the desired pedagogical effects for every student, as reading for escapism is not the worst alternative in the world.

Finally, the potential for future research on this novel is vast. The possibility of delving deeper into themes such as gender roles, mental health, reincarnation, hero complex, the nature of war and much more is tantalizing. Additionally, this thesis only focused on one culture presented in the novel, the Alethi; there are many more cultures available to analyze and contrast with each other within the secondary world. There are also a plethora of characters in the novel and series that due to the limited scope of the essay were left untouched, most prominently the characters Shallan and Adolin who together with Kaladin and Dalinar could be considered the four main protagonists of the novel.

At last, the joy of, and benefits of reading cannot be understated, and any teacher anywhere should consider it a success of no small proportion if but a single student becomes interested in reading because of their teaching



and not take things too harshly if the desired learning goal is not fully reached. Who knows, instead of learning about hegemonic masculinities, you might create a lifelong book reader. A lifelong book reader is a lifelong learner, and thus learning will have taken place, which is, after all, what teaching is all about.



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