12 Years a Slave in upper secondary school

- Using a slave’s narrative to raise students’ awareness of racism

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Abstract

The overall aim of the study is to investigate how *12 Years a Slave* can help raise awareness among upper secondary students about racism and to inspire sympathy with the characters presented in passages regarding the cruelty and injustice of slavery.

The study is based on literary didactics methods, applied to the textual analysis of the passages, to create a hypothetical scheme for teachers that can be used to work with slave narratives in the classroom. The analysis of the passages, in conjunction with the literary didactics methods used, provides methods through which students may increase their awareness of racism and sympathize with the characters in the book by creating their own plays, reenacting the cruelty committed against slaves. Also, when dealing with the injustice of slavery, students can imagine themselves being present even though they will not be able to experience it physically. This may help students sympathize with the main character and help them understand racism from the victim’s point of view.

**Keywords:** social constructivism, collaborative learning, collectively, postcolonial, slavery, slaves, injustice, cruelty
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Introduction

Let them know the heart of the poor slave - learn his secret thoughts - thoughts he dare not utter in the hearing of the white man; let them sit by him in the silent watches of the night - converse with him in trustful confidence, of ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’, and they will find that ninety-nine out of every hundred are intelligent enough to understand their situation, and to cherish in their bosoms the love of freedom, as passionately as themselves.

- Solomon Northup

This study was inspired by the interest in slave narratives and the history of slavery. The fact that racism is still omnipresent in contemporary society makes it necessary to address discuss it in the classroom. Forms of slavery still exist in contemporary societies, for example trafficking and child labor. Also, invectives such as “nigger” are used in rap music and that affects students, making it necessary for teachers to introduce books such as 12 Years a Slave to deal with these issues.

The aim of the study is to investigate how awareness can be raised about slavery and how students can be inspired to sympathize with a former slave, Solomon Northup, who endured atrocities perpetrated by slaveholders. In order to explore this, I have selected specific passages from the book 12 Years a Slave in connection with a number of literary didactic methods. The study focuses on EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students taking the English 7 course in the Swedish upper secondary school. According to the syllabus for English “students should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket 1). A short plot summary of 12 Years a Slave will be presented below.
Solomon Northup was born a free man, but was betrayed, kidnapped and sold into slavery by two musicians. Waking up handcuffed and imprisoned, Solomon insisted upon being a free man to a white man by the name of Burch. Since he was a black man claiming to be free, Solomon was perceived as a liar and therefore several blows were inflicted upon his body due to the fact that he possessed no evidence of this. Throughout his time as an enslaved man, Solomon encounters several cruel masters who treat their slaves badly, but more importantly and frighteningly, regard them as animals. Recounting several moments of his time as a slave, Solomon describes the issue of white men as slaveholders - influenced by a system that teaches them to perceive black people as subordinates and even animals. This perception eventually transforms into a habit. To emphasize the view of inferiority, he recounts how he was not allowed to show that he could read or write because if black people displayed any level of intelligence, they were punished. Acquainting himself with a woman named Patsey, Solomon tells the story of how Patsey was horrifically punished under the pretense of her trying to escape, even though she did not attempt to. Retelling the story of what he endures on a daily basis for 12 years, Solomon addresses slavery, the behavior and destiny of the white man, as well as how some white people, in fact, viewed slaves as equals. After 12 years of enslavement, Northup finally returns home and reunites with his family.

The book is an autobiography from 1853 and based on a slave’s narrative and this should be emphasized to students during the teaching of this book and also the fact that it was written years after Solomon escaped slavery. Due to this, some of the things he mentions in the book could possibly be fictional.

It is important to note that this thesis is hypothetical and not based on empirical evidence, but rather on theories and methods of how to teach slavery in groups. In the
following section, the theories and methods upon which this study rests will be presented. In short, these include methods based on theories such as social constructivism, collaborative learning and postcolonial critique of the idea of race.

Whilst the first two form the pedagogical basis of the scheme, the latter theory is used in the textual analysis to carry out the analysis of the passages selected from the narrative. Lev Vygotsky’s view of collective knowledge permeates the study, in terms of how the book is being approached from a methodological perspective. Other theorists such as Churcher, Schrader and Deulen are a source of inspiration, pertaining to Vygotsky’s concept of social constructivism. Abdul-Jabbar, Dillenbourg, Rutherford and López-Yáñez et al. are used to present the idea of collaborative learning and how it relates to teaching. Regarding postcolonial critique of the idea of race, this study relies on Lindgren and Tosh and they are vital to the textual analysis.

Once the theoretical framework is presented, these ideas will be used, in conjunction with the narrative, to contextualize how *12 Years a Slave* can be used in a classroom with students taking the English 7 course, in relation to the Swedish syllabus for upper secondary school. Prior to introducing the methodological approach taken in this study, previous research on how to use slave narratives in a classroom, relevant to the current study, will be presented. Since this study deals with a slave narrative, previous research into this genre will serve as a source of inspiration for the construction of a teaching scheme for *12 Years a Slave*, with the intention of raising awareness about racism in the past in relation to the present. The core of the current study is the analysis of the passages - how they are interpreted and how they can be used in a classroom context.

The conclusions drawn in this study will hopefully help teachers develop further methods on how to incorporate and use slave narratives such as *12 Years a Slave* and
others to raise students’ awareness of social issues such as racism towards black people. This study, I hope, can serve as a scheme for teachers and help them raise their students’ awareness of social issues by using historical narratives in general, not only slave narratives. Through a textual analysis of the passages, ways of how to use these will be presented and hopefully help students sympathize with the characters in the text they come across and educate them about the history of slavery and its remnants in today’s society. In the end, the literary didactics methods above will be applied to the core material, that is the passages, and put into a classroom context. A discussion of the scheme will also be presented.
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Social constructivism

Kalen M. A. Churcher et al. write that, according to the father of social constructivism, Lev Vygotsky, knowledge is constructed through dialogue and interaction with others. Vygotsky argues that knowledge is co-constructed in a social environment and when interacting with each other, people use language as a tool to construct meaning. The use of language between people in an environment is vital to the learning process and the knowledge a learner acquires at one point in time, can be used at different point in time. Thus, the use of language to read and discuss about slavery, may create knowledge that is retained in similar contexts. It is important to make a distinction between knowledge and learning however. Whilst knowledge is constructed in environments with others, learning is an internal mechanism within the individual, but may nevertheless also occur through collaboration. Since learning occurs at the individual level, learning is therefore a product of knowledge creation through collaboration. Internalization of information is thus an individual, as well as a social process (Churcher et al. 34-35).

The ability to learn through dialogues and interactions with others is central to knowledge generation. Since each student, in group discussions for example, brings a unique set of experiences to the classroom, they combine to become active participants in knowledge-creation. In this process it is crucial for the teacher to act as a mediator, ensuring that discussions stay relevant and do not derail. Consequently the group takes ownership over the knowledge that is being constructed, while at the same time working within the framework of the teacher’s main objectives. By engaging in conversations that stay relevant, but produce knowledge beyond the
primary objectives, students may generate knowledge that far exceeds the objectives. Based on the specific topic that has been selected, students can either flourish in conversations with each other or completely fail to produce anything of value (35-36). This is due to the fact some students might be too shy to contribute to the conversations because they feel that they do not have anything valuable to say.

Similarly, Dawn. E. Schrader states that social constructivism focuses on the social and cultural environment and engagement with peers and, importantly, with experts to explain both how meaning making takes place and how learning occurs. The motivation for learning and constructing/reconstructing knowledge is intrinsic to the learner. Compared to Churcher, Schrader emphasizes the importance of the cultural environment, following Vygotsky’s belief that learning is influenced by both the culture in which the individual lives as well as the social process that shapes an individual’s concrete experience. That particular concrete experience helps the individual contribute to the knowledge-creation process by engaging in interaction with others. To Vygotsky, learning was not development, but a process that results in development. According to social constructivism, culture is viewed as the prime determinant of individual learning and development because the culture that surrounds us, provides us with the processes or means of human thought (Schrader 24; Deulen 91).

In his article “Critical Argument and Writer Identity: Social Constructivism as a Theoretical Framework for EFL Academic Writing”, J. McKinley discusses how social constructivism is valuable source of theoretical knowledge because it emphasizes how meanings and understandings grow out of a learner’s social interactions. Learning occurs in an interaction between texts and people and knowledge comes to exist. Thus, the topics discussed and the quality of the
interactions can reveal EFL students’ critical prowess. These interactions of sharing one’s experiences are what establish a learning community where students come to understand the basis for their social and cultural identities. By sharing the different experiences people possess, their behavior is shaped by constituting their interests and identity as members in an established community. Communications change the way we perceive objects and help us acquire new potential meanings that we eventually embody (McKinley 194; Shaughan et al. 192).

2.2 Collaborative learning

According to Wisam Kh. Abdul-Jabbar collaborative learning engages students in small groups that work together to analyze, discuss and acquire new understandings and knowledge about the text at hand. These small groups are defined as ‘consensus groups’, in which students work collaboratively on limited but open-ended tasks, negotiating in their groups what they think and know in order to reach some kind of consensus or agreement. Consensus groups can be very productive if students are discussing postcolonial issues in the sense that they force students to be more vocal about their initial views in comparison to other topics. In collaborative learning environments, students are able to formulate certain conceptions about postcolonial realities prior to reading postcolonial texts, for example slave narratives, and later on acquire new understandings of cross-cultural experiences (Abdul-Jabbar 227-228).

The first and intuitive criterion of collaborative learning is that the collaborative situation should be interactive. Interactions are not defined by the frequency of interactions that occur between the students, but by the extent that the interactions influence the students’ cognitive processes. To make sure this is happening, the teacher needs to be present during the conversations to observe the ongoing progress.
The second criterion is that students actually work together and these interactions are negotiable. The individuals partaking in the interactions do not impose their views on one another, but rather argue for their standpoint by justifying and negotiating their view in hope of convincing their peers and reaching an agreement. A benefit with collaborative learning is that it enables cognitive development, since it stimulates social interaction and learning among the individuals of a group. From an academic perspective, it promotes critical thinking skills by putting students in a situation where they are actively involved. Furthermore, it can help them reduce anxiety and encourages students to seek help amongst each other. It creates an environment where students are and feel involved as well as an environment where they are able to explore other individuals’ views and experiences. It also helps weaker as well as strong students develop problem-solving techniques, especially weak students when they engage in group discussions or debates with higher achieving students (Dillenbourg 11-13; López-Yáñez et al. 939).

In essence, collaborative learning is based on consensus building that occurs when members of a group cooperate to arrive at an agreement. Together individuals improve their thinking skills and motivate each other for further learning and develop as co-learners. Apart from enhancing academic achievement, student retention and the attitudes of students, collaborative learning provides a natural environment favorable to enhancing interpersonal skills. The value of engaging in these kinds of groups lies in the construction of the collective knowledge and cognitive processing of students. However, if power inequality exists within groups, it can reduce trust and psychological safety among group members and some students might be reluctant to contribute, feeling that they have nothing to contribute to the discussions (Rutherford 129-130). On the other hand, to form groups with only low-achieving students could
help the students be more open and feel comfortable since they do not feel the pressure they would feel in the presence of high-achieving student.

2.3 Postcolonial critique of the idea of race

A sociological perspective on ethnicity needs to be applied, due to the fact that it permeates all aspects of popular culture, an important factor in many students’ lives. By including ethnicity, it enables us to acquire knowledge about how stereotypes, prejudices and ideologies about “them”, that is other races, arise. Postcolonial theory focuses on the fact that colonialism highly affects and shapes contemporary global society and its legacy is of great importance to how cultural identities came about in multicultural societies in the Western World (Lindgren 175-177).

This theory deals with a myriad of terms, but the most common one is probably the concept of race, a term coined during the era of imperialism. By ascribing attributes and qualities to different cultures and ethnicities, based on ancestry, the term race was created. Compared to other races, Caucasians were viewed, and viewed themselves, as the superior race in the established racial hierarchy. This position in the hierarchy was exploited by Caucasians to degrade other races and legitimize imperialism and its marginalization of other cultures. Postcolonial theorists question this premise and instead imply that our differences depend on our cultural adaption (Tosh 184-185).

Michael Schubert writes that during the Enlightenment people had a desire to systematize the world, to solidify the views of Caucasians as the superior race. In the second half of the nineteenth century this led to social Darwinian racist theories. Social Darwinism understood superiority as the power of the ‘stronger’, and as being inscribed in each person’s blood. The ‘races of less worth’ were not allowed any
possibility of development, other than within the boundaries of their own kind (Schubert 404).

In 1619, because of the chronic labor shortage in North America, Dutch traders brought the first black people to Virginia as prisoners. However, the use of slaves expanded drastically in the early 18\textsuperscript{th} century due to the expansion of tobacco plantations. Black slaves poured in during this century into the Southern colonies and slavery became an integral part of the Southern states’ economy. During this time white men feared that black people would revolt, legislatures established laws that gave white men the right to own black people. Racist arguments of blacks’ supposed inferiority were used to justify slavery. Since slavery was an important part of the economy in the South, people refused to abolish it. The two combatant factions during this time were the Union and the Confederacy. The ensuing Civil War lasted between 1861-1865 and ended with Union emerging victorious and more importantly for this study, the Emancipation Proclamation was issued by Abraham Lincoln, ensuring the legal freedom of several million slaves in 1863. This was the beginning of a process that would eventually end slavery in North America (McKay et al. 827-830). This book must be viewed from the perspective of the Southern states’ reliance on slavery as an integral part of their economy. This will help students understand the book in its historical context.

2.4 Previous research

Regarding the question of how to use slave narratives in classrooms, Milton Polsky suggests that a class could read, recount or enact favorite passages from one particular narrative, contrasting the different modes of escape and the other forms of resistance. For example, he writes that a teacher could assign groups in a class the topic of
slavery, each group presenting the viewpoint of a special historical group - slaves, slaveholders and so forth. Debates and discussions can be set up in which students discuss the similarities and differences between how slaveholders treated slaves in different states in the United States. Depending on the students’ age, spirituals and works songs could be incorporated in lessons where students are required to analyze and present how they interpret them. When reading slave narratives, students could imagine themselves being present during the brutalities perpetrated by slaveholders and present a particular passage by drawing it, thus displaying a level of creativity and understanding. What is more, he addresses how selected texts could be assigned to groups and the members of the group would be asked to create plays in which they reenact the scene described in, for example, a passage. By using their imagination and reenacting a scene described in a passage, students would hopefully achieve a deeper understanding of what it was like being present from two perspectives - from the vantage point of slaves and slaveholders, respectively (Polsky 176-178).

When slave narratives are used in classrooms, students are introduced to unique perspectives on American slavery as told from the vantage point of the victim, who creates himself as a speaking subject, thereby reversing the role of victim. Moreover, hopefully they can resonate with characters and situations that resemble some aspects of their own life experience and a deeper understanding of the life and thoughts of slaves may be achieved. Thus, slave narratives offer a true picture of slavery to people by answering questions pertaining to various aspects of a slave’s daily life. All slave narratives are united by one common purpose, presenting the evils of slavery and combatting the notion of inferiority based on race (167-168).
Susan Arpajian Jolley writes about how she used slave narratives to educate her high school students about American history, as well as introduce them to the reasons behind many of the ongoing issues in the United States, including race (Jolley 33).

By letting her students read *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, they were provided with profound and detailed accounts of slavery’s tribulations, as well as the history that is of importance to them as American citizens. What is more, during a different project, Jolley gave her students the freedom of researching narratives on their own and writing literary analyses based on the narratives of their choice. As a result, she was pleased and moved by the students’ insights (35-36).

One of Jolley’s students wrote about the recurring pattern of the whip in the narratives he read. He investigated the whip’s relationship to slavery as a whole, stating that “the whip’s only application was slavery, and slavery’s only method of containment was the whip” (38).

The student’s remarks what the student read are stereotypical since the student mentions that black people expressed natural intelligence. Subliminally the student is saying that black people do not possess intelligence. In her mission to teach about slavery, Jolley fails since her student is being stereotypical and somewhat judgmental.

Another student’s response to the narratives he read was that,

“During this time intelligent, strong-willed men not only broke free from their physical and mental bondage, they succeeded in life. They did not have any formal education, yet they expressed natural intelligence. These men either skillfully escaped from their masters, or they won their freedom some other way. They wrote their accounts of life as slaves, not as a reflection on their terrible past, but as an account of their triumphs over atrocious hardships. All of these stories have an
element of pride, in which the author delivers his story as a proud free man who overcame the mental and physical shackles of slavery” (38).

In her concluding remarks Jolley writes that slave narratives can be used in cooperative activities, debates and speeches and it is important that teachers do not shy away from the controversial issues that arise when we read about and discuss slavery and its aftermath. Reading these painful, yet dignified narratives, helps us put a human face on an inhuman social system that was present not many generations ago and obtain a greater understanding of ourselves, each other and the omnipresence of racism in societies today, concerning the new forms of slavery in societies, such as trafficking and child labor (38).

When discussing about antebellum slavery, Susan O’Donovan writes the importance of introducing it to students due to the fact that it is fundamentally a human story. If we introduce students to stories told by former slaves and force the to view history from the vantage point of former slaves such as Solomon Northup and others, we are teaching them how to think and read critically, how to tease out meaning, identify assumptions, weigh evidence and reach their own conclusions. Most of all, by asking our students to view slavery from the vantage point of a former slave, we teach them how to understand the past on its own terms, not filtered through their own contemporary beliefs and values (O’Donovan 9).

In one study, regarding antebellum slavery, Carl R. Weinberg writes a promising program that was carried out in the hope of teaching people what slavery was like by reenacting a scenario. In this scenario you are supposed to act as a Kentucky slave, brought into the state of Indiana by your master. Invectives such as “nigger” and “wench” are not employed. Instead you use the terms “buck and “breeder”. Somehow, you manage to escape and along the journey you meet several characters, both kind-
hearted and evil. According to Weinberg, during the acting students found themselves getting progressively angrier at the thought of being enslaved by slaveholders, but reminded themselves that slaves contained anger in the presence of white people as a survival tactic. In spite of this, students learned both about the experience of powerlessness, but also the unexpected understanding of the resiliency of people who had to endure slavery. However, as any teacher who has conducted a historical simulation in a classroom knows, it can be difficult to balance the need for intensity with the need for students to feel safe. Despite the program receiving a lot of critique, teachers have indeed begun to use historical simulations, in a sensitive and thoughtful way to teach about the Holocaust, slavery in America and more (Weinberg 62-64).
Method and material

3.1 Method

To conduct this study, 9 passages from Solomon Northup’s book 12 Years a Slave are analyzed to see how these can raise students’ awareness of racism towards black people in the past, in relation to the present. The passages were chosen based on the theme of the passages, that is, the cruelty (physical) or injustice (psychological) of slavery. All passages that were chosen are thematically related to each other in some way to create a broader context. This material has the potential of enabling students to sympathize with the trials and tribulations of Solomon Northup. It is important to remember that this study is based on theoretical foundations and interpretations of the material, which means that the actual material is purely theoretical and no practical investigation was carried out. By using postcolonial critique of the idea of race, this thesis will present how the author interprets each passage and how these can be used with the help of theoretical methods to fulfill the objective of raising students’ awareness regarding racism towards black people.

It is important to keep in mind that if this study was to be carried out by someone else, the result might not be identical due to the fact that individuals interpret passages differently depending on their literary prowess.

By categorizing the passages thematically, some are merged and analyzed together to create broader contexts. Once the methods are applied, a discussion takes place. In conjunction with the theories used, the study demonstrates a number of ways on how to use the passages to achieve the primary goals of raising awareness and enabling students to sympathize with characters.
3.2 Material
This thesis is based on several passages that were selected from *12 Years a Slave* when reading it and the reason behind choosing these particular passages is that they depict the cruelty and injustice of slavery. Not only do they tell us the life of a former slave, but also how it affected other enslaved people around him through a corrupt system in the South, permeated by, in this case, iniquity during the 19th century. In addition, this material has great potential of evoking positive and negative emotions and enabling students to resonate with characters in the book.

3.3 Scope and limitations
An analysis of the selected passages is carried out to see how they may raise students’ awareness of racism towards black people and affect student emotionally when they analyze them.

This study covers aspects of the cruelty and injustice of slavery by using excerpts from the book in conjunction with methods regarding collaborative knowledge and learning. However, it excludes the aspect of, for instance, gender roles, explaining the differences between male slaves and female ones, in terms of how they were treated, what type of jobs they were assigned and the value of each gender to a slaveholder.
Textual analysis

In this part of the thesis, the passages will be presented, analyzed and put into a classroom context regarding students in English 7. First, the passages pertaining to the cruelty of slavery will be presented and secondly, the ones regarding the injustice of slavery.

4.1 The cruelty of slavery

In regards to the cruelty of slavery, Solomon Northup mentions several instances of horrific punishment and in the beginning of his story as an enslaved man, he explicitly describes the way he receives several strikes upon his body. This specific instance of being punished is addressed in this manner:

> With the paddle, Burch commenced beating me. Blow after blow was inflicted upon my naked body. When his unrelenting arm grew tired, he stopped and asked if I still insisted I was a free man. I did insist upon it, and then the blows were renewed, faster and more energetically, if possible, than before. When again tired, he would repeat the same question, and receiving the same answer, continue his cruel labor. All this time, the incarnate devil was uttering most fiendish oaths.

Solomon Northup recounts the time he was beaten in prison because he insisted upon being a free man to prison chief Burch. As Solomon continued to insist, Burch continued to beat him with the paddle, insisting Solomon was a liar. According to Solomon, during the beating Burch was disguised as a devil, uttering invectives in the hope of degrading and oppressing Solomon as a human being. Despite his unrelenting arm growing tired, Burch kept beating Solomon due to the hatred he carried for black people. Positioning himself as superior to Solomon, Burch exploited the situation,
being a white man, in possession of a black man, helpless and without papers to produce that could prove that Solomon, in fact, was a free man (Tosh 184-185).

In a similar situation, the author tells us about an occasion where he saw a woman, Patsey, receive several strikes upon her naked body by Master Epps, after being accused of trying to escape the plantations. After the punishment, Solomon depicts the aftermath of the whipping by describing that:

The painful cries and shrieks of the tortured Patsey, mingling with the loud and angry curses of Epps, loaded the air. She was terribly lacerated - I may say, without exaggeration, literally flayed. The lash was wet with blood, which flowed down her sides and dropped upon the ground. (Northup 158)

Here the author elaborately describes the state of Patsey’s lacerated body and how people, present during the whipping, could hear her painful cries and shrieks and the angry curses of Master Epps. Treating her as if she was of no value as a human being, Epps continued beating her until her back was covered in blood. On the other hand, Patsey was of value to Epps as his property, the most diligent of all workers that belonged to Epps and if she managed to escape, it would severely hurt his workforce.

In connection with this incident, Solomon presents a quote representing the emotional state of Patsey, attempting to depict her state of mind, as it pertains to her outlook on life as a slave:

\[
I \textit{ask no paradise on high}, \\
\textit{With cares on earth oppressed}, \\
\textit{The only heaven for which I sigh}, \\
\textit{Is rest, eternal rest}. \ (\text{Northup 159})
\]

Patsey essentially does not seek for a paradise once she is dead and reaches
heaven. Instead she longs for the day she passes away, the beginning of her eternal
rest, where she does not have to be oppressed. On earth it is not allowed to care about
black people and therefore she sighs for a heaven where she can rest peacefully - a
heaven where pain and suffering does not exist. In comparison to Solomon’s
perception of Patsey’s feelings, Solomon presents his thoughts on slaveholders as
perpetrators of cruelty.

It is not the fault of the slaveholder that he is cruel, so much as it is the
fault of the system under which he lives. He cannot withstand the
influence of habit and associations that surround him. Taught from
earliest childhood, by all that he sees and hears, that the rod is for the
slave's back, he will not be apt to change his opinions in maturer years.
(Northup 125)

In this passage Solomon addresses the fact that it is the system, under which
slaveholders live, which is at fault for the acts of atrocity perpetrated and not the fault
of the individual slaveholders. The influence slaveholders have been exposed to is
something they cannot resist without great difficulty, as they succumb to the pressure
of the system in the south of the United States. From their earliest childhood, white
people were told that black people should be perceived as animals and that whipping
is the correct way of dealing with individuals of darker complexion. For this reason,
slaveholders will not be apt to change once they mature because of the longevity of
hatred they have developed and, as a result, carried towards black people. People had
a desire to solidify the views of Caucasians as the superior race and by creating a
system that saw power as being inscribed in a person’s blood, the races of less worth
were not allowed any possibilities of development. Instead Caucasians exploited the
system to degrade other races and legitimize imperialism, thus ensuring their position
in the established racial hierarchy (Tosh 184-185; Schubert 404).

These passages would all be used together during a lesson to create a broader context. First, a short introduction of slavery would take place and thereafter students would be given 10 minutes to discuss the first passage and then read the second one and compare it, in terms of how it is narrated (Solomon’s/Patsey’s incident), the different emotions that arise and the level of brutality. After reading the second passage, they would read the third passage since it is connected to the second, and compare their emotions to the emotions of Patsey in the aftermath of the beating. To sum up the exercise, students would discuss the last passage to experience how Solomon felt about the brutality perpetrated by slaveholders and compare it to their own opinions of slaveholders and brutality presented in the previous passages. Performing a short reenactment of Solomon and Patsey’s scenes is one way of showing that the understand the passages from two different perspectives.

When reading these passages, students may understand how the stereotypes, prejudices and ideologies about black people in today’s society have come about and how the highly affect societies (Lindgren 175-177). An example of this is how the invective “nigger” is used in rap music today and that influences people who listen to it to possibly think it is ok to use the term as a substitute for “black (man)”. Therefore it is important to introduce passages and books such as these to show why it is not ok from a historical point of view.

By applying social constructivism and collaborative learning in the classroom, we enable students to discuss these passages and acquire knowledge through collaboration, preferably in groups of 4-5 students. The teacher should act as a mediator to help students’ progress in the ongoing discussions by asking questions. These groups would be in the form of consensus groups, where students discuss a
passage and try to arrive at an agreement about how the passage can be interpreted. Forming groups such as these is a very productive way of dealing with postcolonial issues because it encourages students to engage in discussions in which they voice their opinions. Through their own experiences similar to the issues at hand, students are able to collectively, through collaboration, formulate certain conceptions about the postcolonial reality they encounter in the passage and thus gain a new understanding of the cross-cultural experience (Abdul-Jabbar 227-228).

It is important to remember that the teacher should act as a mediator by ensuring that the ongoing discussions stay relevant to the topic at hand. In other words, the teacher should not intervene by presenting his/her interpretation of the passages. Instead, students should collectively construct knowledge and this knowledge may, as Churcher points out, exceed the teacher’s main objectives of interpreting the text and thereafter explaining how the group feels about what is being described in the text. As suggested by Polsky, every group can be assigned one of these passages and present it to the rest of the class, first presenting how they have interpreted the passage and secondly, describing what thoughts arise when they read that specific passage. This way, students work with the narrative, dealing with different characters (Churcher et al. 34-36; Polsky 176-178).

The purpose of using passages from a slave narrative and letting students discuss about them is that this offers a true picture of slavery to students and raises their awareness of racism and its mechanisms (Polsky 167). It is important to note that this book was written several years after Solomon’s enslavement and the traumatic experiences he experienced might have affected his memory, making the story of his enslavement less trustworthy. Also, the fact that his book has been interpreted and revised numerous times could potentially make the story less like the initial story.
This should be mentioned to the students to make them aware of the potential problem with autobiographies of this nature. These narratives all have one common purpose, presenting the evils of slavery and by enabling our students to be exposed to these passages, we let them experience indirectly the evils of slavery and by discussing it, they combat the notion of black inferiority, the current stereotypes and prejudices of black people and form their own opinions about the passages. Slave narratives such as this one are good to use because they offer authenticity and introduce students to unique perspectives on American slavery as told from the vantage point of the victim.

Another reason for using slave narratives in the classroom is that students may identify with the characters by sympathizing with Solomon Northup and Patsey and the pain they endured. Also, they could acquire a deeper understanding of the life and thoughts of Solomon Northup by working with passages from his memoir (168). Using these particular passages offers students two perspectives on how brutality was perpetrated against Solomon and Patsey. Moreover, by interacting with the text, they also encounter the characters’ opinions of slavery and thus may develop their own opinions of the atrocities depicted in the passages. Through the application of social constructivism, the main objective is to enable students to gain knowledge collectively through collaboration by putting them in an environment where they deal with the experience of slavery through a slave narrative.

Another way of dealing with these passages in consensus groups is to ask the students to first interpret and then to enact one of first two passages dealing with the brutality of slavery. As they read the passage they have chosen, students should imagine themselves being present during the beating of Solomon or Patsey and thus are forced to display a level of understanding, as well as creativity by creating and structuring their own play based on how they interpret the scene described in the
passage. Reenacting a passage can enable students to achieve a deeper understanding of how it was being present during the punishments. Even though these plays would be imaginative, students can sympathize with the pain of the characters without fully being able to experience the brutality. Plays are initially used to help students understand situations and resonate with characters by reenacting the scenes depicted in, for example, slave narratives. Exposing students to slave narratives helps them understand and evaluate the brutality present many generations ago and as a result form their opinions through their current values pertaining to human values. Also, they acquire a greater understanding of themselves, their peers and the omnipresence of racism in their surroundings (Polsky 167-168; Jolley 38).

Even though plays can help students understand situations they reenact, the teacher needs to ensure that the plays do not become too intense, because that could result in the situation becoming rambunctious and out of hand. It is important to inform the students that the play is merely fictional and a simulation that could help them understand the aspect of powerlessness and how resilient slaves were despite the cruelty experienced. Also, the personality of students is important to consider, because some students might be more emotional than others or have a tendency to easily become angry. If the above is disregarded, someone could end up hurt, mentally and/or physically. In spite of this, Weinberg writes that teachers have begun to use historical simulations in a sensitive and thoughtful way to teach students about historical events (Weinberg 62-64). If these plays are to be implemented in a teaching scheme, the historical context is of importance; the background of how slavery was in the South and the way slaveholders brutally beat their slaves.

Once they have performed their plays in front of the class, the teacher can ask them to present their opinions of what they have read and acted out in comparison to
the opinions’ of Solomon and Patsey and hopefully arrive at an agreement or consensus. Since the third passage is poetic, students will have to analyze it in hope of understanding the feelings of Patsey pertaining to slavery and its cruelty.

Due to the fact that they engage in consensus groups and acquire knowledge collectively, students develop their critical thinking when they scrutinize the passages, especially the third one, because it puts students in a situation where they are actively involved by discussing about the meanings in the passages. As a result, diversity understanding may be built among students and through collaboration anxiety is reduced since students seek help amongst each other to deal with the interpretation of a passage.

Mixing consensus groups with high and low achieving students is a way of helping both develop problem-solving techniques, especially the weaker students since they have a tendency of not contributing as well because of their lack of confidence. Nevertheless, consensus groups could help weaker students develop critical thinking because they are put in a situation where they must all communicate, they may feel involved. What is more, they have the opportunity to engage in an environment where they are able to explore their peers’ views and experiences and thus they create and acquire knowledge collectively (Dillenbourg 11-13; López-Yáñez et al. 939). However, forming groups with students that are at the same level is another way of possibly making students more engaged in the discussions since they are at the same level. The teacher has to intervene at times to help students make progress in the discussions by asking follow-up questions to ensure that progress occurs.

When students discuss and negotiate, in hope of reaching an agreement, the teacher should not focus on to what extent the students are interacting with each other,
but rather on the knowledge that the students acquire collectively. During these interactions students should negotiate and ensure that they do not impose their opinions on one another. Instead, students should argue for their standpoint by explaining to their peers how they have interpreted a passage, providing peers with examples to clarify their point. Through interactions and deliberations, we can teach students to view slavery from the vantage point of Solomon Northup and understand the past on its own terms and not on the students’ contemporary beliefs and values. Thus, students may understand the conditions under which slaves lived (O’Donovan 9; Dillenbourg 11-13).

According to the English 7 syllabus, students must use the English language in order to develop all-round communicative ability and become versatile. In other words, they are required to interact with others in English by adapting their language in different situations, depending on whom they are interacting with. In interactions with each other, students are asked to engage in discussions in which they treat different topics. When taking a stance, students voice their opinions and argue their points, negotiating with their peers to arrive at consensus after exploring different perspectives on the matter at hand.

Students must be given the opportunity to develop their knowledge about questions pertaining to societies and cultural phenomena in parts of the world where English is used. By incorporating slave narratives in a classroom, teachers develop their students’ knowledge of cultural phenomena by introducing, in this case, a part of American history to them and thus fulfill the criterion stated in the English 7 syllabus for upper secondary school. Forming consensus groups is a way of fulfilling the criterion regarding students’ interactions with other peers, since they discuss and reach agreements by negotiating collectively (Skolverket 1, 9).
4.2 The injustice of slavery

In his book, Solomon Northup recounts the times he experienced injustice and in one passage, he writes about how he carried disdain for his master, John Tibeats. He was my master, entitled by law to my flesh and blood, and to exercise over me such tyrannical control as his mean nature prompted; but there was no law that could prevent my looking upon him with intense contempt. (Northup 65)

As in the previous section, regarding the influence of a cruel system on slaveholders, Solomon writes about how Tibeats perpetrated violence because of his personality, his mean nature. This mean nature was the influence of a cruel system, teaching white people that black people were to be perceived merely as subordinates, races of lower value. White people on the other hand saw themselves as superior to and stronger than any other race and believed that these traits were inscribed in their blood (Tosh 184-185; Schubert 404). Even though Tibeats was entitled to Solomon’s flesh and blood by law, no law could prevent Solomon from looking upon his master with unlimited contempt. Being able to exercise over a human being with tyrannical control is where the injustice lays, enabled by a corrupt system.

As another example of injustice, Solomon mentions the time he was purchased and had to live under the iniquitous rules of a new master, Epps. In this passage Solomon describes his first encounter with Master Epps:

Soon after he purchased me, Epps asked me if I could write and read, and on being informed that I had received some instruction in those branches of education, he assured me, with emphasis, if he ever caught me with a book, or with pen and ink, he would give me a hundred lashes. (Northup 140)
If any of Epps’ slaves displayed any level of intelligence, they were to receive punishment because slaveholders wanted to maintain racial disparity. As soon as Epps found out that Solomon was educated to some extent, he felt threatened and thus ascertained that if this was true, and he caught Solomon reading a book, he would give Solomon a hundred lashes. Feeling threatened, the only way of maintaining his superiority was to threaten his slave, thus ensuring his prominent position.

As Schubert writes, races of less worth were not allowed any possibility of development, other than within the boundaries of their own kind, and the above is a great example of how a slaveholder threatens one of his slaves to ensure that the slave does not develop any literary skills (Schubert 404).

Following the incident presented above, the author recounts the time Epps found out that Solomon was trying to send a letter back home with the help of a white man, Armsby, residing at the plantations. Unfortunately Armsby told Epps about Solomon’s plan to escape and one night Epps confronted Solomon:

‘Well,’ he continued, ‘Armsby told me today the devil was among my niggers; that I had one that needed close watching or he would run away; and when I axed him why, he said you come over to Shaw’s, and waked him up in the night, and wanted him to carry a letter to Marksville. What have you got to say to that, ha?’ (Northup 142)

During the confrontation Epps mentions that the devil was present among his niggers, trying to deceive him by escaping his plantations. In other words, Solomon was allegedly possessed by the devil and wanted to ensure his freedom by confiding in Armsby. Luckily Solomon’s response to Epps saves him from being punished, depicting Armsby as a liar and an alcoholic who is trying to gain Epps’ trust, hoping that Epps would make him the overseer of the plantations (Northup 143).
Again Epps feels threatened, this time by the news of Solomon laying a scheme to escape by seeking help from one of Epps’ people to send a letter to Marksville. The news of Solomon allegedly writing a letter, in hope of escaping, terrifies Epps and similar to the first encounter between the two, Epps confronts him about the knowledge of Solomon being able to, in this situation, write.

In comparison to the passages above, Solomon recounts the time he meets a white man by the name of Bass, who believes that all people are equal and that there is no justice in slavery. In the presence of Solomon, Bass describes his view on slavery to Master Epps, addressing the injustice of slavery.

I would say that slavery was an iniquity, and ought to be abolished. I would say there was no reason nor justice in the law, or the constitution that allows one man to hold another man in bondage. (Northup 165)

Presenting his view on slavery, Bass brings up valid points, such as the injustice of slavery, since in the Declaration of Independence (US 1776) it is stated that all men are created equal and endowed with certain unalienable rights, and that among these are “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”(US 1776). In spite of this, white people exploited their position in the racial hierarchy to degrade other races and legitimize imperialism. Slaveholders saw slaves as animals and not as human beings, therefore disregarding the fact that every man was created equal and had the same rights. The passage above is one example of how unjust slavery in fact was and how power was used by a superior race to undermine another race. (Tosh 184-185; Schubert 404; Schubert 404).

To deal with the injustice of slavery in the classroom, these passages may be used together in the order presented, because they raise the issue of injustice of slavery through the use of several, yet different examples. Firstly, one passage is about the
superiority of a master and secondly other passages deal with the problem of not being allowed to read or write and if one was caught doing it, he or she would receive punishment. Finally, one passage addresses how unjust slavery in fact was, and by using all of these passages, students will be provided with several point of views dealing with the injustice of slavery in different ways.

As an ending to the theme dealing with the injustice of slavery, Solomon’s last passage in his book will be presented to conclude his life as a slave. In the last passage Solomon writes:

My narrative is at an end. I have no comments to make upon the subject of Slavery. Those who read this book may form their own opinions of the "peculiar institution." What it may be in other States, I do not profess to know; what it is in the region of Red River, is truly and faithfully delineated in these pages. This is no fiction, no exaggeration. If I have failed in anything, it has been in presenting to the reader too prominently the bright side of the picture. I doubt not hundreds have been as unfortunate as myself; that hundreds of free citizens have been kidnapped and sold into slavery, and are at this moment wearing out their lives on plantations in Texas and Louisiana.

(Northup 196)

As Solomon mentions, people who read his book may form their own opinions and that is the incentive of this thesis. As previously mentioned, due to the traumatic experience, Solomon might have forgotten or added parts to the story that are not true, making the story less reliable. It is important to point out to the students that this might be the case. Letting students read and interpret these passages together and acquire knowledge about the injustice of slavery from Solomon’s point of view
through collaboration, will hopefully help them create their own perception of the iniquity of slavery and thus raise students’ awareness of racism. The passages would be dealt with during one lesson, where students read the different passages, except the last one, and discuss the different injustices presented. Thereafter, students compare the passages, why one passage might be worse than the other. Finally, they read the last passage and in groups write their interpretation and opinions of the injustice of slavery. In consensus groups, students would voice their opinions on the matter and try to arrive at consensus regarding how they feel about the passages above. From their own experiences of injustice in their lives, students can be able to formulate certain conceptions about the iniquity of slavery and as a result acquire a new understanding of the cross-cultural experience in these passages. The thing that is being compared is the level of emotions that arose during their lives compared to the ones arising after reading the passages. This is a very productive way of dealing with a postcolonial issue such as this one, since it forces students to engage in discussions regarding topics that may be relevant to their lives (Abdul-Jabbar 227-228).

Using these specific passages from *12 Years a Slave* is a great way of depicting how unjust slavery was, due to the fact that it offers a description of an authentic experience. However, as Solomon mentions, he does not know how slaves were treated in other states, but assures that he has delineated the story of his life as a slave to the best of his abilities (Northup 196). These passages may raise students’ awareness of racism and injustice in Solomon’s life. All narratives have one thing in common: to present the evils of slavery. Therefore, when reading these passages, students can resist the notions of black inferiority, as well as current prejudices and stereotypes and thus form their own opinions about the injustice of slavery and of racial differences in contemporary society. Solomon’s narrative offers authenticity.
since it is based on his own life and provides students with a unique perspective on American slavery. The purpose of using slave narratives is that students may identify themselves in some way, resonate and sympathize with victims of injustice (Polsky 167-168). These passages can be compared to forms of slavery in contemporary society, such as trafficking or child labor to show students that the use of people as workforce still exists today.

Students could compare the injustice described in the passages to the injustice they have experienced in their lives. Also, they could imagine themselves being present during these situations in the first three passages. This would allow the students to be creative, explaining how they would feel and act if they had lived the life of Solomon. In a sense they would reenact the situations in the passages and achieve a deeper understanding of how injustice may have been during Solomon’s time as a slave, by embodying his story. Despite them imaging being present during the injustices described in the passages, students can sympathize with Solomon without being able to experience it physically (Polsky 167-168; Jolley 38).

Providing students with the opportunity of imaging the life of a slave, by using slave narratives, helps them with their creativity and understanding of situations pertaining to the iniquity of slavery, as well as examples of racism and injustice in contemporary society, such as child labor. Connecting the iniquity of slavery to their own lives may help them acquire a deeper understanding of themselves, their peers and the injustice and racism in the past and present (Polsky 167-168; Jolley 38). Comparing the injustice in their lives to Solomon’s would occur in groups and afterwards they would present it to the rest of the class, sharing their experiences of injustice compared to the injustice Solomon experienced. The last passage would be used to emphasize the authenticity of the situations presented in the passages to show
that this occurred (Dillenbourg 11-13; López-Yáñez et al. 939).

During these discussions, the teacher should act as spectator by listening to the students, yet ensuring that the discussions are relevant. He or she should not intervene by presenting his or her interpretation of the passages. The teacher should instead focus on making sure that students acquire knowledge collectively by observing if all students contribute to the conversations. If that is not the case, the teacher should encourage them to contribute by asking questions. The teacher should not focus on the frequency of interactions. Even though students will be dealing with the same characters, each group may have different things to say regarding the passages, especially when they compare the injustice presented in each passage to, perhaps, the injustice of their lives (Churcher et al. 34-36; Polsky 176-178).

Through group discussions, students could become actively involved, acquire knowledge collectively and develop their critical thinking. Consequently, anxiety may be reduced since students help each other to deal with the primary objectives of interpreting passages delineating injustice and comparing them to the injustice they have experienced. Mixing these groups with high and low achieving students is a good way of helping weaker students perform and gain confidence, but in overall it may help all students develop their problem-solving techniques. Everyone could feel involved due to the fact that they are put in a situation where they can all communicate and thus contribute. Together they explore each other’s views and share experiences and acquire knowledge. However, the above may not occur if only one or two students contribute to the discussions and the rest do not. It is the teacher’s job to ensure that every student contributes to the discussions to some extent, because if they do not, they cannot develop their critical thinking individually and gain knowledge collectively (Dillenbourg 11-13; López-Yáñez et al. 939).
It is important to make sure that students present their own opinions and views on things and do not impose their opinions or views on others. Instead students should explain how they interpret a passage by providing their peers with examples to justify their standpoints. The teacher could help the students elaborate their answers and develop their critical prowess by asking questions that may create further discussions. In the end, the group arrives at consensus by choosing the view they agree upon.

Exposing our students to slave narratives helps them understand and view slavery from the vantage points of Solomon Northup and realize his past on his terms and not on theirs. In this case, they may also understand how slaves were prohibiting from reading and writing and if slaveholders found out that their slaves could do either, the slaveholders would punish their slaves. (O’Donovan 9; Dillenbourg 11-13; Schubert 404).

It is of great importance that students use the English language to develop their communicative ability when engaging in these discussions. Depending on whom they are interacting with, they adapt their language to different situations. When students take a stance, interpret something or voice their opinions, they need to argue for what they have presented and negotiate with their peers in hope of arriving at consensus.

Students must also be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural phenomena in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used (Skolverket 1).

When a slave narrative such as *12 Years a Slave* is incorporated in a teaching situation, teachers develop their students’ knowledge of cultural phenomena by introducing them to the injustice of slavery Solomon experienced. As a result, the criterion dealing with cultural phenomena in the English 7 syllabus is fulfilled, since slavery is part of Western history and culture. Also, having group discussions is vital
due to the fact that it is emphasized in the syllabus that students should interact with other peers (Skolverket 9).
Conclusion

5.1 Concluding remarks

It is safe to say that Solomon Northup has provided readers with a depiction of his life, a slave for 12 years, by recounting incidents delineating the cruelties and injustices of slavery.

In the selected passages regarding the cruelty of slavery, the analysis indicates that students would - through consensus groups - deal with the postcolonial issue portrayed in the passages in a productive way. What is more, students are able to formulate conceptions about the cruelty perpetrated by slaveholders and gain awareness of the racism experienced by a former slave.

One way of raising students’ awareness of racism, as it pertains to the cruelty of slavery, is to let students interpret the passages and then reenact them in front of the class. This could help students, through imagination, to achieve a deeper understanding of what it was like being present during the punishments. As a result, they may sympathize with the pain the characters endured, albeit without fully being able to experiencing the brutality. Moreover, it can also help students acquire a greater understanding of themselves, their peers and the omnipresence of racism in their surroundings.

Pertaining to the injustice of slavery, the selected passages can offer students a true picture of how unjust slavery was and raise students’ awareness of racism and the injustice Solomon experienced. By reading these passages, we let students experience the injustice and combat the notions of black inferiority, current stereotypes and prejudices about black people. Consequently students can form their own opinions about the injustice of slavery.
Asking students to imagine themselves as being present during the injustice Solomon experienced, is a way of enabling students to be creative by letting them explain how they would feel in an unjust situation. Imagining themselves being present would help students achieve a deeper understanding of the unjust life of Solomon Northup.

In general 12 Years a Slave is a great narrative to use since it may raise students’ awareness of two perspectives regarding slavery - the cruelty and injustice of slavery from Solomon Northup’s vantage point. In his concluding remarks, Solomon emphasizes that his story might not resemble the stories of other slaves, but that it is an authentic autobiography nonetheless and not fiction. He writes that people who read his book may form their own opinions and this is the study’s incentive. Students should interpret the passages individually and collectively help each other to acquire knowledge collectively that can help them combat racism. In other words, a teacher should not intervene during discussions by presenting his/her own opinion, but merely serve as a spectator, focusing on making sure that students acquire knowledge collectively and that the discussions stay relevant.

It is important to point out to students that the knowledge they acquire is only based on one individual’s story. Nonetheless, this slave narrative offers our students an authentic perspective on American slavery.

Dealing with a slave narrative through group discussions, helps students build knowledge collectively due to the fact that they help each other interpret passages. They become actively involved in discussions and develop their critical thinking by scrutinizing the selected passages. What is more, if the classroom atmosphere is friendly, anxiety is reduced since students help each other interpret the excerpts and thus reach conclusions through collaboration.
Mixing groups with high and low achieving students is a good way of helping weaker students gain confidence and perform better in the future when they deal with similar assignments. It has the potential of helping all students develop their problem-solving techniques since everyone is contributing, even though some might contribute more than others and that is definitely an issue. That is why a teacher should be present to ensure that all students are involved and contribute to some extent. As a result, all students will have the chance to feel involved and together they can explore each other’s views, interpretations and opinions and share their own experiences in order for the group to acquire knowledge.

The teacher should ensure that students present their own opinions and views on the matter at hand and that they do not impose their opinions or views on others. Instead they should explain how they interpret a passage to the group and in the end hopefully arrive at consensus, so that they can present their answer to the rest of the class.

Using 12 Years a Slave in the English 7 course at upper secondary school, is one way of dealing with racism in the past to raise students’ awareness of present-time racism and help them sympathize with characters who have endured the cruelties and injustices of slavery. Nevertheless, this book can help students understand the past on its own terms and not through the lens of their own values.

It is undoubtedly a cautionary tale that can help students understand the current stereotypes, beliefs and prejudices about black people. It can also help them develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used.
5.2 Further research

It would be interesting to carry out this study in the classroom to see to what extent students’ awareness of racism is raised and how students sympathize with characters presented in the passages. Also, comparing this slave narrative to another would be one way of validating the authenticity of Solomon Northup’s story to ensure that the material teachers use resembles real events. Finally, one could investigate how the passages in the book *12 Years a Slave* raise students’ awareness of racism and help them sympathize with important characters compared to working with scenes selected from the movie.
References

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