We who are about to...

FEMALE CHARACTERS IN SCIENCE FICTION
REPRESENTING WOMEN'S STRUGGLE AGAINST MALE OPPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

This essay uses feminist theory to examine whether the female narrator in Joanna Russ science fiction novel *We who are about to...* can be viewed as a personification of women’s struggle against an oppressive male society. The thesis of the essay is that the female narrator’s struggle against the male oppressors in the novel represents the struggle for women’s rights in Western society. The essay will also examine if teaching feminist theory and including women science fiction writers in the classroom will promote gender equality and thus fulfil the requirements of the Swedish curriculum.

KEYWORDS:

Science fiction
Women writers
1. INTRODUCTION

During the period 1929-1959, science fiction was characterized as a male domain (Disch 115). However, female writers were never absent in science fiction and their contributions to the genre increased during the 1960s (Higgins 73). John Clute and Peter Nicholls state that the implied assumption “that most SF readers were adolescent males”, “certain imposed restrictions on subject matter and style” were imposed, which ignored women and their interests (“Women SF Writers”). The impact of feminism and the increasing presence of female writers and editors from 1960s and onwards changed how women were represented within science fiction (Higgins 74, 76; Clute and Nicholls, “Woman as Portrayed in Science Fiction”). According to Clute and Nicholls, women “are usually defined by their relationship with the male characters” (“Woman as Portrayed in Science Fiction”). Higgins states that realistic female characters were rare prior to the 1960s (76). Women were portrayed as objects to be desired, feared, rescued, or destroyed and confirm the male protagonist masculinity and heterosexuality (Higgins 76; Clute and Nicholls, “Woman as Portrayed in Science Fiction”). Disch argues that when women appeared in science fiction they were “neglected, libelled, or condescended … Typically they were damsels in distress” or “incompetent ditzes” (115; 116). Women were also represented frequently by stereotypes such as the Virgin, in need of rescue, or the sexually desirable and terrifying Amazon Queen that the male hero had to subdue (Clute and Nicholls, “Woman as Portrayed in Science Fiction”).

The women’s rights movement in the 1970s influenced female writers to see beyond the traditional conventions of science fiction and challenge social inequality by looking at the existing power relationships between men and women (Higgins 77). Higgins states that the flexibility and imagination of science fiction made it possible “to think about women in different circumstances and situations rather than creating literary settings and situations that ‘realistically’ reproduced oppressive conditions” (77). Science fiction offered opportunities for female writers to question and critique the gender inequality women in Western society struggle with daily, for example by portraying worlds where gender differences and inequality do not exist or where gender differences and inequality are still present, highlighting the need for change. The impact of the women’s right movement on the traditional conventions of science
fiction was also apparent after the 1960s, when female protagonists emerged in science fiction (Higgins 76). However, the old stereotypes are still used but altered with “a subversive twist: The Good wife is married to a lesbian star-pilot … the Amazon Queen triumphantly refuses to be tamed” (Clute and Nicholls, “Woman as Portrayed in Science Fiction”).

Joanna Russ argues that English literature, or Western literature, is based on familiar plots and myths for heroes and not heroines (“What Can a Heroine do?” 80; 81). Russ argues that there are few stories where women can figure as a protagonist, which limits women writers. The reason for this, according to Russ, is that “[t]he culture is male … that the society we live in is a patriarchy” and “both men and women in our culture conceive the culture from a single point of view—the male” (80; 81). The only available plots and myths for a female protagonist are limited to either “Devourer/Bitch or Maiden/Victims” or “the protagonist of a Love Story” (84). One option for women to overcome the male culture is to look at genres and plots that do not accept traditional gender roles; like science fiction. Russ states that science fiction “not only ignore gender roles but – at least theoretically – are not culture bound” (91). In other words, Russ means that science fiction is a genre that allows both female and male protagonists.

The women’s right movement tried to change women’s situation and campaigned on issues such as abortion rights (“Second wave”; “Women’s Movements”). In 1972, Higgins states that the “[c]ongress passed the Equal Rights Amendment” and in 1973 the case of Roe vs Wade, women gained the legal right to abortion (Higgins 77). Russ wrote We who are about to… in the 1970s and in the novel, she addresses the current issue of reproductive rights by having her female narrator criticize the old society where women do not want to be treated differently based on gender. The focus of this essay is to examine the inequality that the female protagonist of the novel struggles against as a representation of the inequality of society at large.

Russ was an American writer and academic born in 1937. She published her first novel in 1968 and her stories during the 1970s dealt with feminist issues and often portrayed female protagonists (Clute and Nicholls, “Russ, Joanna”). In Russ’s science fiction novel We who are about to…, survivors from a starship crash on an unexplored alien planet that cannot sustain human life. The unnamed female narrator refuses to agree with the demands of her companions of forced breeding and
colonization.

In this essay I will use feminist theory to examine if the female narrator in Russ’s novel We who are about to… can be viewed as a personification of women's struggle against an oppressive male society. My thesis is that the female narrator’s struggle against the male oppressors in the novel represents the struggle for women’s rights in Western society.

In Russ’s novel, the female protagonist struggles against an oppressive male society that treats women as inferior based on their gender. In the Swedish curriculum for both elementary and secondary school (Lgr11) and upper secondary school (Gy11) it is stated that one of the fundamental values the school should represent and impart is equality between men and women. It is written in both of them: “equality between men and women … are the values that education should represent and impart” (Skolverket 2011). It is especially stated when it comes to an equal education: “School should actively and consciously promote women’s and men’s equal rights and opportunities” and in the curriculum for elementary and secondary school it says that “the school has a responsibility to counteract traditional gender patterns” (Skolverket 2011). This essay suggests that it is important to include feminist reading strategies and science fiction novels in the classroom in order to meet the Swedish curriculum requirements of promoting gender equality. The reason why it is important to include science fiction novels is that the genre has the possibility to create settings where gender can be critiqued and discussed and offers opportunities for female characters to be portrayed in new ways and not in traditional stereotypical images.

2. FEMINIST THEORY

A Glossary of Feminist Theory defines the term feminism to imply “the identification of women as systemically oppressed; the belief that gender relations are neither inscribed in natural differences between the sexes, nor immutable, and a political commitment to their transformation” (93). Veronica Hollinger states that “feminist theory has developed as part of a consciously political project” and in other words “feminism works to achieve social justice for women” (126). It wants to “render obsolete the patriarchal order whose hegemony has meant inequality and oppression for women as others of men” (126). Hollinger explains that “the ideological self-representations of the masculinist cultural text … traditionally offers
itself as the universal expression of homogeneous human nature” (125). She argues that “more often than not the subject of that universal human nature has been white, male and middle class” where “the women have tended to play supporting roles as the others of men” (125). As mentioned earlier, both Clute and Nicholls (“Woman as Portrayed in Science Fiction”) and Higgins argues that in science fiction, women are largely defined by their relationships with the male characters as an object and not a subject in her own right (76).

The male literary tradition consists of male images of women; what a woman is and how she thinks, acts and feels. How have female writers expressed themselves in the male literary tradition? In their work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar review the characteristic of women’s literature. They argue that for a woman to become an autonomous writer, she has to “come to terms with the images” men have given her in order to “lessen their dread of her inconstancy and by identifying her with the “eternal types” they have themselves invented to possess her more thoroughly” (17). J. A. Cuddon explains that Gilbert and Gubar’s main argument is that the women writers “express their own female anger in a series of duplicitous textual strategies whereby both the angel and the monster, the sweet heroine and the raging madwoman, are aspects of the author’s self-image, as well as elements of her treacherous anti-patriarchal strategies” (“Feminist criticism” PDLTLT). If a female writer wants to write about women and become autonomous she must overcome or “kill” the stereotypical images of angel and monster that men have created for her (Gilbert and Gubar 17). There are different roles women can take as writers but they are all variations of these two opposite images. Gilbert and Gubar mean that these two images have been so imbedded in literature by men that few female writers have killed the images. The woman writer “had to define herself as a mysterious creature who resides behind the angel or monster … image” (17). The images of angel or monster shows how the male literary tradition has oppressed women by not giving the opportunity for either female writers and female readers to experience themselves as real women.

The male literary tradition have oppressed and limited women writers to specific images, such as angel or monster. How has this gender division been created, established and maintained? Coppélia Kahn states that the gender theories of feminist theorists Adrienne Rich and Jean Baker Miller consider motherhood as an institution for the oppression of women (826). Kahn explains how Rich argues that women have
become imprisoned in motherhood because of men’s fear of women’s childbearing powers (Kahn 829). Patriarchy has used the selflessness and purity of the maternal figure because she causes no fear or hate in men. Only as a mother is she regarded as sacred, “purged of sexual taint” (cited in Kahn 829). Women who refuse to become mothers are considered dangerous and seen as whores and witches (cited in Kahn 829). Kahn explains that Jean Baker Miller points out that the female ego itself is constructed to serve others and not her own interests (cited in Kahn 829).

3. ANALYSIS

In the novel *We who are about to...* the oppressive male power is shown when the solution to survival on the alien planet is to colonize and start a civilisation. In order to achieve and create a new civilization, the women become important as childbearers. It is addresses explicitly when one of the male survivors, John Ude, explains it to the female narrator:

“You see, “ he went on, “Nathalie’s life and yours and Lori’s and Cassie’s are too valuable to put in danger. You are childbearers. What does your religion say about that?”

“Genetic drift -“ I said.

“Civilization must be preserved,” says he.

“Civilization’s doing fine,” I said. “We just don’t happen to be where it is.” (Russ 18; 19)

The female narrator comments on the oppression of the colonization process by recording on her vocoder “You must understand that the patriarchy is coming back, has returned (in fact) in two days” (Russ 21). What the male survivors are doing is a form of male oppression. They are creating a patriarchy.¹

In his article *Joanna Russ and D.W. Griffith*, Samuel R. Delany describes the male oppression from a different view when he argues that “man as the oppressor and exploiter of women is not defined by biological sex but rather as constituted by socio-

¹ According to the English Dictionary patriarchy is “a system in which men have all or most of the power and importance in a society or group”.
economics as a power structure at work” (502). Delaney’s view of patriarchy is different because it does not solely focus on the power difference between men and women but instead how class and money creates power and in turn oppression. The Graham family, Mrs Valeria Graham and her husband Victor and daughter Lori, is an example of how wealth and class have given Mrs Valeria Graham the power to do whatever she wants. We learn that the money is all Valeria’s and she explains it to the narrator by saying:

“How much money do I have?”… “You don’t even know,” (she said amused). “Well I’ll tell you. Six mill a month. That puts me in the top one-tenth of the top one percentile, I believe. And I’m in the credit economy, too – I’m not a civilian, you know, not legally – and with a credit-level-one you can have anything you want in this world, anything at all.” (62; 63)

The narrator also learns that Valeria purchased herself a husband and a daughter, thereby, she exerts her oppressive power. It is clear that Victor has striven for this kind of life, when he tells the narrator: “I was poor,’ he said. ‘Didja know that?’ … ‘I worked on myself. Made myself good-looking … Spent a lot on surgery; no whore could have done better.’ … when I met Val I knew I had it made. Worked like hell to get her, too” (Russ 44; 45). He even took Valeria’s last name instead of his own. The male oppression is not solely based on biological sex, to uphold civilization by forced reproduction, but an economic construction of power, for example by Victor’s goal to marry and exploit Valeria because of her money.

Contrary to the female narrator’s rebellion against the male power, the three female survivors Cassie, Mrs Graham and Lori, do not struggle against the male power because they do not actively question the male survivors’ intention of colonization. The narrator explains this by saying: “I think everyone loves it here because their choices are all made for them; we were never comfortable with our fate in our own hands, were we?” (Russ 40). One of them, Cassie, appears to be no threat to the male power because she considers the idea of colonization her only chance of becoming a mother. She explains it to the narrator:

She: Ever wanted babies?
She: I do.
(Silence)
She: They don’t let you, if you’re poor. But here - (Russ 28).

Therefore, as a potential and willing mother, she poses no threat and the male survivors need not fear that she will oppose them (Rich 829). Mrs Graham is already a mother to her daughter Lori and because of her age, she is not included in the colonization process and do not have to struggle against the male survivors. Lori is still too young to inspire fear or to pose a threat because she is not yet a woman and has nothing to oppose at the moment. Despite her age she is still important for the colonization process and a possible future threat against male power when she reaches an older age. Lori’s importance is voiced by one of the male survivors, Alan, when he ask the narrator; “How old do you think Lori would have to be before she can have babies?” (Russ 27). Thereby, he confirms the male survivors’ intentions of colonization.

The female survivors become a threat to the male survivors colonization plans if they are not subdued into submission. One of the female survivors, Nathalie, is described by the female narrator as “[a] dark young woman” (Russ 3), “[b]lack body-suited” and “perpetually angry” (Russ 4). This description portrays her as a sexually desirable but terrifying Amazon Queen. She thereby becomes an object to be feared and destroyed. Contrary to the other survivors, she is a government trainee with knowledge of tools and thereby she is an independent woman who makes her own decisions and takes initiative in order to survive. When she confronts Alan, one of the male survivors, for wasting their water supplies, he strikes Nathalie, knocking her down on the ground. She does not strike back. Alan’s reaction can be perceived as an action against women who threatens and challenges the male oppression. According to Higgins, Nathalie challenges the old discriminative sexist description where one option for the male was to destroy the woman (76). Nathalie has the potential of being a threat to the patriarchal system; she is tough and independent and was not planning on becoming a mother. Therefore, she needs to be subdued into submission through violence because she is becoming a potential threat to the civilization plans. The possible reason of why she does not fight back can be interpreted as her seeking refuge in the patriarchal system by obliging to the colonization plans with John Ude. She says to the female narrator “‘Well, I wasn’t going to dig latrines. Or bear babies.”
Or plant crops . . . I was going,’ she said, ‘to school” (Russ 49-50), and there she points out, she would have learnt to fight and make explosives so that none of them could have touched her, with the implicit result that she would have been able to fight the oppression.

Unlike Nathalie, the unnamed female narrator has the ability and power to struggle against the male survivors because of her political background. The reader learns that she has been a political activist back on Earth and it may be an explanation for her ability to speak out and struggle against re-establishing a civilization that will not last on an alien planet. For example, she describes her political background; “I got into the Populahs at about age twenty-six and spent about a year talking to University groups and various funded groups (these are the most vulnerable because the most parasitic)” (Russ 79). She also describes how important their actions were; “If somebody tried to bust us up, we must’ve been going in the right direction … We all knew, really. If the media ignored something as big as the Pops … it wasn’t because we were dull; it’s because we were dangerous” (Russ 81; 84). The fact that the female narrator has been a political activist is a contributing factor that allows her to oppose the male survivors and their colonization plans.

The unnamed female narrator also has the ability and power to struggle against the male survivors because of her role as a narrator. What is written in the novel are the narrator’s thoughts recorded on a pocket vocoder she carries with her. The readers share her point of view of the situation. This gives her the role of a protagonist who leads the plot forward. Jeanne Cortiel argues that in this novel, “the … act of narration itself becomes a fundamental factor of empowerment” (220). The readers no longer “conceive the culture from a male point of view” (“What Can a Heroine do?” Russ 81). It is the female narrator’s thoughts and objections of colonizing the planet that is perceived as right and sensible for the reader. The use of the vocoder becomes a way for the female narrator to elude the male point of view when it comes to colonization. For example, John Ude asks the female narrator what they think they should do when she thinks they have no chance of survival. She comments: “All right, so you think you have the chance of a snowball in hell. Maybe you do. But I think that some kinds of survival are damned idiotic. Do you want your children to live in Old Stone Age? Do you want them to forget how to read?” (Russ 14). The female narrator’s comments or their situation becomes a contrasting view to John Ude and the other survivors’ colonization plans. She clearly points out how
wrong the other survivors are and why their plans will not last.

Another explanation to why the female narrator can oppose the male survivors is that she gains power by opposing them. Lucie Armit reviews Cortiel’s book *Demand My Writing: Joanna Russ, Feminism, Science Fiction*; an analysis of Russ’s work. Armit reviews that one of the recurring themes that Cortiel identifies in Russ’s writing is androicide, which is a systematic killing of men. According to Armit, Cortiel means that this is crucial in order for women to gain agency. Androicide is a narrative device that allows female characters to act independently (213). I partially agree with Cortiel’s thoughts because before the female narrator starts killing, she already acts independently when she voices her objections against the other survivors. It is only when they do not listen to her that her only choice is to kill them in order to maintain her agency and independence. It is relevant to analyze the female narrator in order to understand how she gains power against the male survivors’ oppression when the aim of this study is to see if the female narrator is a personification of women's struggle against an oppressive male society.

The narrator’s struggles can also be interpreted as a critique against capitalism and difference in social class. Both John Ude and Mrs Valeria Graham are symbols of wealth and high social class. It is made clear by the description of Valeria and her family wearing blue clothes or body-paint, a colour that can be interpreted as representing upper-class. The fact that Valeria is extremely wealthy and has purchased herself a husband and a child only confirms her higher status in relation to the other survivors. John Ude is described as a professor at first, but later in the book, the narrator learns that he is a bureaucrat. By appointing himself as leader, he re-establishes a difference in class and status between himself and the other survivors, as he had back on earth by working as a bureaucrat for the government. Another example of the difference in wealth and social class between the survivors is made when the female narrator comments:

“All Cassie … you’ll find her waiting, tables in any restaurant or nude bar on any world. She looks like an earlier stage in the life-cycle of Mrs. Graham, but that’s an illusion; nothing but a convulsion of nature could let either of these two rise or fall to the other’s level. (Hydrogen fusion, which provided unlimited power and should’ve made us all rich, but of course didn’t).” (Russ 3)
The narrator understands that re-establishing a civilization that promotes social difference is wrong and this is one reason why she struggles against it. The other survivors, for example Alan and Cassie, do not oppose it because they each gain something they did not have back on earth. Cassie gains the opportunity to become a mother and Alan gains an authoritative position if he sides with John Ude, as the narrator explains; he is “anxious enough to flatter whoever he thinks can help him” (Russ 4). By re-establishing civilization, John Ude and Valeria can be seen as wanting to regain their higher status they had back on earth.

The female narrator’s ability to oppose the male and female survivors’ demands can be seen as displays of masculine power and characteristics. Cortiel explains that there are recurring character types throughout Russ’ later work, including this novel. One of them is the “unmarried, independent, sexually assertive adult woman” (230). She analyses the adult independent woman as taking a position in the narrative that is normally connected with “maleness and prohibited for women”. Cortiel argues, “because masculinity is usually associated with power … female masculinity may serve as a one way to claim positions of power for female characters” (230). The female narrator displays this by deciding that the only option she has is to oppose them and to kill them. She actively shows masculine characteristics when she resists oppression by striking out at one of the male survivors with a screwdriver and slashes his hand. By doing this, she confirms that she has the power to act and not succumb to oppression.

The female narrator’s display of masculine power and characteristics underlines that there exists an opposition between what characterizes as male and female, that power is something connected to men and not women. According to Cortiel, the narrator’s display of power is from a perspective of female masculinity. Judith Butler (1999) argues that there is a distinction between sex and gender, that gender is culturally constructed, thereby being neither as fixed as sex nor a result of sex (9-10). When the construction of gender is theorized as independent of sex, gender itself becomes free-floating with the result that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male, and woman and feminine a male body just as easily as a female one (10). There is no connection between the facts that masculinity only has to be connected to the male sex. According to Butler, male characteristics as being able to for example fight, is not fixed to one gender and the female narrator can therefore be interpreted as masculine.
The female narrator in *We who are about to...* cannot be interpreted on the basis of the most frequently used stereotypes and roles for women in science fiction and traditional literature. As the narrator and protagonist, she is not portrayed as an object to be desired, as the Amazon Queen, or rescued as the Virgin. Her existence is also not to confirm the male protagonists masculinity and heterosexuality (Higgins 76; Clute and Nicholls, “Women as Portrayed in Science Fiction”). She is not desired other than as a walking womb that can be used to re-establish civilization. She also cannot be perceived as an angel due to her refusal to become a selfless and sacred mother. Neither can she be perceived as a monster even though she displays monstrous characteristics of physical aggression when she acts against oppression by killing the other survivors. At first, she opposes the other survivors only by arguing with them and not by physical aggression. A few of them react by pushing and striking her. Later in the novel, when she flees the group and they find her again, she is forced to react more physically. It is not aggressive as the stereotype of the monster, but more of a calm, detached necessity. She reacts to Alan hitting his head in the cave roof; “before he could get up, I hit him down and down again, just above the ear. Concussion, at best” (Russ 56). In the end it is Cassie who kills Alan with a rock. Another example is when Valeria Graham tries to kill the narrator and they struggle over the gun:

She gets on the knees … and points the gun a hand’s-width from my face, happily ready to shoot me. I grabbed the barrel and snapped it around so the gun was pointing at Mrs. Graham’s white shirt … and either the motion pulled the trigger or she pulled the trigger or something pulled the trigger or at any rate the little machine went off.” (Russ 64)

Because the narrator cannot be interpreted on the basis of the most frequently used stereotypes for women, her character becomes more fluent and not fixed, thereby creating the possibility for new creations and interpretations of female characters in science fiction.

One possible reason why the female narrator does not want the other survivors to colonize and rebuild a civilization is because it oppresses women into motherhood by forced breeding. Rich and Baker Miller call motherhood an oppressive institution (cited in Kahn 826), and the female narrator struggles against the oppression of
having to become a mother because of her sex. Nathalie points out to the female narrator that she has to agree with their demands, otherwise the probability of a successful colonization will be very small because there are so few women. Nathalie describes this by saying that it will only be “three women and two men...which puts the numbers considerably lower, doesn’t it?” (Russ 14). At the end of the novel, the narrator defends her actions of killing the other survivors by explaining: “I mean running into the brush yelling Colonize, Colonize, and all that. They were going to force me to have babies. I was going to be tied to a tree and raped, for goodness’ sake. It was a mass-delusional system” (Russ 104). The female narrator’s explanation serves to illustrate how the other survivors believed in that the only solution is to colonize the planet, even if they have to do it by force. In the process, they are agreeing with forced breeding and in turn oppression against women. Even though the readers only share the female narrator’s point of view, the quote can serve to emphasize how the female narrator is the voice of reason because she is the only one who sees how wrong it is. Thereby, she is justifying her reason for killing them as the only solution to escape the oppression of motherhood. I have chosen this interpretation because I believe it to be the most valid one. The narrator makes a reasonable analysis of the situation that colonisation and forced breeding is oppressive from a feminist point of view. However, there are several ways of reading the story and one way is that the narrator’s reasons and actions for killing can be interpreted as unreliable if the reader chooses to view her as either mentally disturbed or a psychopath. In this case, that the female narrator’s struggle can be viewed as insane when the survivors colonization plans is a form of survival when all other hope of rescue is lost.

It is the premise of this study that the novel’s female narrator and protagonist can be seen as a personification of women’s struggle for rights in Western society. In the novel, the female narrator is threatened to become a mother against her will in order to colonize the planet. It can symbolize the social inequality that existed during the 1970’s where women did not have to same rights as men, it was a division based on gender where the general conception was for women to reproduce. Robin Silbergleid (2001) discusses a possible reason for this perception. She explains that the romance plot has served as a predominant mode of narrative since the eighteenth century. Silbergleid means that it is not a coincidence that this narrative model emerged at the same time as the rise of industrialist capitalism and liberal citizenship,
where the narrative fosters and emphasises sexual difference and a gendered division of labor. These stories serve to shape and perpetuate a vision of gendered citizenship. The structure of the romance novel propels the reader to the ideological correct ending of marriage and reproduction (156). Silbergleid states that during the second wave of feminism, feminist utopian novels emerged to criticise liberal citizenship by showing how patriarchy are intertwined with industrial capitalism and open a space of feminist constructions of citizenship (160). Russ’ novel can serve as a critique of how society and reproduction construct the social inequality of women as second-class citizens to men. In the novel, the male survivors’ insistence on reproduction in order to preserve civilization follows the romance narrative of gendered citizenship and division of labor. The narrator’s struggle against it can be considered from what Edward James calls “critical utopias” where the authors “used their novels to criticize not only the society within which they wrote, but also the possible utopian alternatives” (225). Higgins explains it as a dystopian decay of Western culture in order to critique the social and political conditions of their time (74).

The setting adds to the critique of Western society because despite the modern technology and tools they have, it cannot help them to survive or start a civilization. The female narrator explains to the survivors why they have no chance of survival or starting a civilization:

“That a tagged planet is not colonizable but means only bearable gravity, a decent temperature range, and air that won’t kill you…That a breech birth could kill. That a three-days’ labor and no dilation could kill. That septicemia could kill. That heart failure could kill. That each of us carried five to eight lethal genes, and that even without them, humanity had not exactly been breeding for survival for the past hundred years.” (Russ 12-13)

By commenting on the impossibilities of colonization, the female narrator’s critique can be understood in turn as a critique of society, that even with all our technology and advancement we do not always live in a better world. Technology is not always the answer to our problems. The female narrator comments on this fact: “Our equipment isn’t good enough to test whether the life here is edible” (Russ 6). The group of survivors form a mini society, showing how it is impossible to survive without technology as well as the shortcomings of society. In other words, that
humans cannot survive or function as a society without technology and that we all are dependent upon it.

The novel *We who are about to…* can be interpreted as a representation of Russ’s struggle and anger against the stereotypical images of women created by men. The female narrator personifies Russ’s freedom from the male literary tradition because she does not comply with the images of angel or monster. According to Russ, science fiction itself allowed women writers to ignore gender roles (“What Can a Heroine do?” 90; 91). Science fiction therefore gave women writers the opportunity to overcome and kill the stereotypical images created for women by men because the genre allowed women writers to portray women in new and different ways. This serves as a possible explanation of how the genre allowed Russ to break free from the male literary tradition by depicting the female narrator in new ways.

4. TEACHING GENDER EQUALITY IN THE CLASSROOM

In *The Ethics of Feminism in the Literature Classroom: A Delicate Balance*, Karen J. Ray argues that teachers have the obligation to teach students to think, reflect, challenge and question received values of gender (54). Working with literature in the classroom can help students to question the values of how women have been and are portrayed. In *Genuspedagogik: En tanke – och handlingsbok för arbete med barn och unga*, Kajsa Svalerud argues that by engaging students in an educational environment to think of how gender is socially constructed can make the patterns that creates them visible. So when students identify the stereotypic images of what is male and female, they can see how they are constructed, thereby showing the inequality that exists between the images in literature (14; 15). Ray argues that introducing feminist reading strategies can help students to rethink and re-examine the literary canon when it comes values because both Ray and Gilbert and Gubar review the history of literature as mainly written by and for men. In order to think and reflect on the received values of the male-dominated literature, the students need to re-vision the canon. When re-visioning, students analyze the stereotypical images of how women have been portrayed. Ray argues that when the students re-vision the canon, they free the female characters from the stereotypes, look at the effects the patriarchal structures have in the novels they read and examine the influence genre has on how women are portrayed (54; 57). Allowing students to re-vision and to work with it in the
classroom, the students will not only reveal how one-sided literature has been when it comes to gender values, but also reveals the implicit influence that culture and society have on what we consider masculine and feminine.

Science fiction as a genre, especially written by woman writers, can teach students to be critical and to question gender values in our society. Jane Donawerth in *Teaching Science Fiction by Women* argues that if you include female science fiction writers in the classroom, they will “highlight issues that otherwise would not be available for discussion” because “[w]omen’s experiences in our culture naturally produce different emphases in their writing…the awareness of important contemporary issues, such as changes in gender roles” (41). In other words, women who write science fiction can highlight the inequalities women face in society. Science fiction gave women writers the opportunity to discuss, question and examine different issues gender inequality in society because of the genre’s imaginative settings, for example by creating worlds where sexual differences and alternative relationships are acceptable (81).

Science fiction can also correct and deal with potential gender inequity that exists in science because it often portrays women as scientists. Donawerth argues that teaching science fiction can convey how women are equally successful as men in the field of science, thereby offer another alternative than the male dominance within the subject. Janice Koch states that science is a subject more associated with males than females (205) and that teachers can overcome the stereotype of male scientists by introducing earlier unknown women scientists to the students, “[e]xploring the hidden history of women in science empowers all students to see themselves as potentially connected to a scientific figure” (208). By allowing the students to read science fiction, they will be introduced to worlds where women, as well as men, frequently figure as scientists who explore new worlds and invent groundbreaking discoveries.

It also helps that science fiction itself is didactic (“Towards an Aesthetic”, Russ 5), because it explains the science of for example teleportation and space travel to its readers. In this case, didactics is not to be considered instructional as it explains the exact science of how, for example, teleportation works because it has not been scientifically invented yet. Russ explains that science fiction writers with regards to science do not just make things up but instead “[s]cience fiction must not offend against what is known. Only in areas where nothing is known—or knowledge is uncertain—is it permissible to just ‘make it up.’ (Even then, what is made up must be
systematic, plausible, rigorously logical, and must avoid offending against what is known to be known.)” (“Towards an Aesthetic”, Russ 6). However, even if it is known, it does not necessarily make it true. Instead, it makes the reader aware of the scientific possibilities that exist. Thereby, the didactic context for students is that explaining the science, even though it is not invented in the real world, this kind of literature might entice both male and female readers to read more and become interested in the subject of science. In other words, the students learn that both women and men can practice science. The subject of science will hopefully no longer be seen as a male-dominated world but instead science fiction will be able to change perceptions and open the readers’ eyes to a world of science in which both sexes participate in an equal way and engage female students interest in science.

5. CONCLUSION

In this study, I have used feminist theory to examine whether the female narrator in Joanna Russ novel We who are about to... struggles against male oppression and can be said to represent a personification of women's struggle against an oppressive male society. At the time this novel was written, feminism had a huge impact on science fiction. Feminism identifies women as systemically oppressed and opposes the hegemony of patriarchy where women are oppressed and not treated as equal to men.

The whole novel is a critique of society and asks itself: why rebuild and preserve that which oppressed women when there is an opportunity to change women’s situation, both in the novel and in real life? The male survivors in the novel are oppressive because they force the female survivors to become mothers in order to implement their colonization plans. The female narrator struggles for freedom from the male oppression of having to become a mother. It is also a struggle for women’s rights and female writers’ freedom from the male literary tradition.

As a narrator and with a background as a political activist, the female narrator has the ability to speak out and struggle against the male survivors. It symbolizes that women can react and gain agency and independence from men if women speak out and react.

The female narrator becomes a personification of both women writers’
struggle against how male writers have portrayed women in science fiction and the social inequalities women face in Western society. Science fiction gave women writers the opportunity to overcome the stereotypical images and portray women in new ways and situations. The female narrator highlights women writers’ struggle against the stereotypical images because she is characterized as a strong female protagonist. Women writers also started to debate issues of inequality that existed within Western society at that time. The female narrator’s struggle against colonization and establishing patriarchy can be interpreted to reflect Western society during the 1970s in the light of the women’s rights movement that debated issues of equal rights, abortion and reproduction. Even though other genres were capable of debating these issues, science fiction was one of the most suitable genres for female writers to debate these issues. They could use their imagination and create worlds where strong female protagonists struggled against these issues of inequality, in order to highlight the need for change. Higgins states this when he explains that the women’s rights movement in the 1970s influenced female science fiction writers to challenge social inequality between men and women (77). For example, by creating an all-female world which flourishes in the absence of men or promoting equal rights by featuring women equally capable as men to be heroic and save the day.

The history of literature has mainly been written by and for men. In order to fulfil the Swedish curriculum of promoting gender equality when teaching literature, it is important that students analyze literature in order to question the values of how women have been and are portrayed. Instead of only rereading values influenced by men, it is crucial that students learn how to re-vision literature. Not only is science fiction a genre where women writers, but also male writers, have the possibility to portray both male and female characters in new and non-stereotypical ways. Science fiction also opens up a venue to discuss the gender inequalities occurring both in literature and in society.

In the science classroom, science fiction can overcome the general perception that science is a subject for men and deal with gender inequality. The reason for this is that it portrays women as scientists, inventors and explorers of distant worlds. The genre’s didactic nature to include science and feature strong female protagonists who take part in scientific discoveries and travel, can encourage students, both girls and boys, to read, study and pursue future careers in science.

This study has examined only one novel by one female science fiction writer.
For future research, it might be interesting to include more books, either from the same writer or other women writers within the genre over a period of time. Then, the researcher could examine whether the issues of gender inequality and the portrayal of women have changed or if they still feature the same characteristics. To broaden the investigation, it may be helpful to include male authors because they may have different opinions and views that might broaden the perspective and understanding of the subject. When teaching gender equality, the teacher can in turn teach how views on gender have evolved in science fiction and Western society over time by including the historical aspect of science fiction and the debate of gender. It is important that students see and understand how stereotypical images of gender in literature have influenced and created a pattern of how we see men and women differently.
6. WORKS CITED

Primary Source:

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Den här författaren har läst lärarutbildningen, med inriktning mot engelska och historia.