

The Value of Studying Literature: A Review of the English Higher Education Curriculum in Sweden

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Abstract

The article addresses the academic study of English literature as an educational project, with special focus on knowledge mediation and its vindication. It is based on an examination of the academic curricula from all universities and university colleges that offered English studies in Sweden in 2016. The article shows that, despite local variations at the level of theme, there was a widespread consensus nationally about the goals of literary studies and largely also about the underlying conceptions of literature and of the value of its study. The latter, it concludes, relied mainly on the perceived affordances of literary reading and on the potential of literature to provide worldly knowledge.

Keywords: literary studies; educational goals; English; curriculum theory; uses of the Humanities; literature teaching and learning; academic language subject

1. Introduction

The question “why study literature” has been debated since the origins of the discipline: both the value of studying *literature*, as opposed to other artefacts, and of *studying* literature, as opposed to merely consuming it (Graff 2007:1-15; Eagleton 1996:15-46). The question remains fundamental to the discipline. Today, it is often linked to perceived pressures to account for the uses of literary studies, and of the Humanities more broadly, in the face of political utilitarianism and market-driven rationales for higher education, and in relation to the understanding of complex social problems (Eagleton 2019; Waugh 2016; Iversen, Nielsen & Alber 2011:10; Nussbaum 2010). Yet, the question retains its topicality mainly for being central to long-standing debates in the discipline, for instance over ways of reading literature, and for underlying a range of arguments about how to engage with literature in higher education (Graff 2007). The arguments include the position that literary studies can be a source of social empowerment and agency, that they can sharpen our critical skills and transform the ways in which we understand the world, and that they can foster empathetic and participatory citizenship.

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When it comes to literary studies under the auspices of academic language departments, the question has been connected closely also to the function of literature and its study. A recurring concern, for instance, has been whether literature is to be studied for its own sake or used as an instrument for reaching other educational goals, such as language learning, cultural illustration, and (inter)cultural competence (Thorson and Ekholm 2009). In recent years, idea-driven essays written by Swedish-based literary scholars in the subjects of English, German, and Spanish emphasise the potential of teaching literature as literature in language departments. Some of these have stressed the pedagogical potency of reflecting on the nature of literary narratives and on their uses of language and form, while some have put forth the significance of literature for furthering an understanding of culture, for developing self-knowledge and self-expression, and for fostering democratic citizenship (Castro 2020; Ullén 2016; Tegmark 2011; Platen 2009; Olaussen 2002). The essays often emphasise the increasing prominence of literary studies in academic language subjects, in part as a result of the increased academisation of these subjects.¹

In English departments in Sweden, literary studies are regarded as one of the two sub-disciplines of English, and in several institutions over the past decade or so they have been allotted an increasing space in the curriculum (Dodou 2020). This development, which testifies to the privileging of literature as an object of study, raises the question of the value ascribed to literary studies by the disciplinary and teaching community of the English subject. Value here is understood in terms of the rationale and objectives formulated for the study of English literature, of the subject matters, knowledge, and skills that are foregrounded in English literary studies. The question of value thus defined is at once intellectual and pedagogical.² In part, the knowledge mediated and the

¹ A different trajectory is sometimes presented by non-Swedish based scholars who suggest that literature used to be a dominant object of study in philological departments, but that the significance of literature is declining. In one such argument, the diminishing role of literature is linked to the rise of Film studies and Cultural studies, and it is indicative of “the loss of the formerly self-explanatory status of our activities” (Wolf 2011:57).

² Lutz Rühling (2006:73) maintains that the value of literary studies as an academic subject (*Fach*) would need to consider such parameters as the quality of degrees and their worth on the job market. His definition of value differs from

ways in which this knowledge is vindicated relates to the broader issue of how the Humanities view—and articulate—their own worth. In part, the content of literary studies, and by extension the function and significance attributed to it, pertain to the self-image of English in Sweden and to prevailing views on what knowledge and abilities are meaningful, and necessary, for its students.

To shed light on these matters, I turn to the higher education curriculum to examine the content and goals of current academic literature courses and programmes offered by English departments. Curriculum here refers to the sum of course syllabi (*kursplaner*) and educational syllabi (*utbildningsplaner*) that comprise the course of study in the subject: locally, at each English department and, nationally, at those departments combined. I examine these documents with the aim of making known what they reveal about the kinds of literary studies regarded as valuable for students of English nationally. The higher education curriculum, unlike the primary and secondary school curricula in Sweden, is not prescribed. The national steering documents for Swedish higher education, the *Higher Education Act* (1992:1434) and the *Higher Education Ordinance* (1993:100), whilst stipulating the division of higher education into educational cycles and specifying its scholarly foundations and the requisite scholarly skills for the completion of degrees, provide no instruction as to the content of English studies.³ Instead, it is largely up to the English departments themselves to decide the subject knowledge to be mediated, about English studies, generally, and about literary studies, specifically. This includes which disciplinary questions and what literary topics to address. Curricula are mainly developed based on the intentions of each institution, as well as the financial resources and the competencies available. Syllabi identify, more or less explicitly, the educational goals, course content, and

the one here, where the focus is on what curricular content and goal formulations divulge about the perceived nature, purposes, and significance of studies in the subject.

³ The Swedish *Higher Education Ordinance* (1993:100), for instance, stipulates that for a Degree of Bachelor the student must “demonstrate knowledge and understanding in the main field of study, including knowledge of the disciplinary foundation of the field, knowledge of applicable methodologies in the field, specialised study in some aspect of the field as well as awareness of current research issues” (Annex 2, Qualifications Ordinance).

intended learning outcomes of the education on offer at each institution. These serve as contracts between the institution, the teachers, and the students. As such, these documents are important records of the knowledge deemed as legitimate and worthwhile imparting.

The curriculum review presented below maps the main objectives linked to literary studies and also the subject matters, theoretical orientations, and conceptions of literature that are foregrounded in the curricula nationally. As the review shows, the knowledge emphasised in syllabi and the language used to describe it can divulge a great deal about the ways in which literature and its study are positioned and justified in the academic language subject. To the best of my knowledge, this mapping of English literary studies in Sweden is the first of its kind.⁴ By presenting a snapshot of these aspects nationally, the article documents a part of the academic subject's contemporary history. Moreover, it provides a basis for discussion about the future shape of English literary studies in Sweden.

2. Studying the Curriculum

My object of study lies at the intersection between the value of engaging with literature and the value of higher education. This problematic is different from, though not unrelated to, questions of literary value and of the value of research in the area of literary studies. Scholarly arguments over what works are worthy of our engagement and how those should be approached inevitably form the understanding of what should be included in the higher education curriculum. Indeed, the ideal of the close relationship between teaching and research means that the value articulated for literary studies as an area of scholarship, including the questions considered relevant to ask in relation to literature, influences conceptions about what kinds of literary study should be introduced to students of English.⁵ Yet, the projects of research and of education

⁴ For comparable investigations into the shape and purposes of literary studies in relation to the academic subjects of French, literature (*litteraturvetenskap*), and Spanish in Sweden, see Ingela Johansson (2016), Mickäelle Cedergren and Ylva Lindgren (2015), Cedergren (2015), Cecilia Alvstad and Andrea Castro (2009), and Magnus Persson (2007).

⁵ On the significance of Humboldtian ideals for Swedish-based academics, and on the tensions between those ideals and managerial practices at higher

diverge in significant ways from one another. The distinction is helpful to recall, as the value of literary studies in each project is contingent, to speak with Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1988:30-53), upon the desired effects of each project and upon the functions that literature and its study are meant to serve in each case. A pragmatic distinction might stress that literary scholarship is dedicated to the production of knowledge, whereas higher education is dedicated foremost to the transmission of knowledge (Shumway 1994:7). The distinction between the two may also be understood as paradigmatic. Literary scholarship, Bruce Fleming (2000:459-469) maintains, has for some time subscribed to the view that any literary work or aspect of literature is worthy of scholarly study by virtue of existing. The teaching of literature, on the other hand, has largely remained influenced by the idea that certain works and topic selections are preferable over others for what they can help to teach. Education, for Fleming, entails a restriction of the manifold material that might be an object of scholarly study. In this sense, literature curricula reflect educational judgements, and a logic of practice, regarding what is deemed as meaningful and possible to teach undergraduate and MA students of English in Sweden. The choices depend upon a number of considerations, including the relation between the professional identity of English literary scholars and the institutional premises for teaching literature in an academic language department.

Fundamental to the present study is theory within scholarship on subject-specific teaching and learning (*ämnesdidaktik*) that underscores the close relation between subject conceptions—that is, the definition of the nature, value, and purposes of studying literature, in this case as part of academic language studies in English—and the knowledge that is mediated (Sjøberg 1998:14). Curricular development, from this perspective, involves strategic decisions about what specific knowledge to impart, decisions that depend upon unspoken or articulated assumptions about how the question “why study literature” should be answered. In Sweden, syllabi are often the product of collective work within the collegiate (especially for undergraduate English courses) and they are remitted through several bodies, at departmental and faculty level. It is therefore reasonable to expect that they reflect shared

education institutions in Sweden, see, for instance, Lars Geschwind and Anders Broström (2015).

valuations of literary study, at least within their specific department. Even though these documents cannot reveal how teachers understand the stipulations in syllabi and cannot attest to what happens in the classroom, their contractual nature means that syllabi record educational priorities for English literary studies. In studying English curricula nationally, I assume that they divulge dominant attitudes within the scholarly and teaching community about the affordances of literature and its study, and about the approaches to literature that are worthwhile, for the respective institution to sponsor and for students of English to pursue.

To be sure, curricula and the syllabi that comprise them are not merely declarations of scholarly and educational intent, as Ronald Barnett and Kelly Coate's (2005:27-40) theorisation of the higher education curriculum points out. Curricula, they stress, are conceptualised in different ways by various stakeholders in higher education and they serve multiple purposes. Moreover, they are shaped within certain social and institutional contexts and they adapt to those in various ways (Barnett & Coate 2005:39-40). In the Swedish context, these documents are *inter alia* subject to national and local policies and to quality assurance audits. These may affect whether certain aspects of literary studies are foregrounded and how literary studies may be legitimised in syllabi—to reflect the expertise at the department, to be approved by faculty boards, to attract students, to align the courses on offer with the profile and intentions of the institution, or to comply with requirements placed upon the department in an audit. Nevertheless, Barnett and Coate maintain, curricula also delimit the academic subject and its objects of study, and they indicate what knowledge and skills the disciplinary and teaching community perceives as useful and valid, for matters relevant both inside and outside the academy (2005:27-37). It is with this latter aspect that I am mainly concerned here: the knowledge within the area of literary studies that the curricula express a desire to mediate, and what this divulges about the value attached to literary studies.

The material for the study comprises the full portfolio of academic-track courses and programmes, which included, or focused on, literary studies in 2016. The year marks almost a decade from the 2007 Swedish Higher Education Reform, which implemented the Bologna Agreement and introduced educational cycles in Swedish higher education. It also marks almost five years since the 2012 national evaluation of English

conducted by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education. In this evaluation, English received scathing criticism for what the expert committee deemed as insufficient knowledge of method displayed in many undergraduate and MA theses (*Högskoleverket* 2012:5).⁶ As such, the material allows for a review of curricular priorities following an unsettling period for the English subject. The examination of English curricula nationally affords an opportunity to consider the state of English literary studies in Sweden at this time. By making known the kinds of subject knowledge foregrounded in syllabi, the review helps to recognise to what extent there existed a consensus nationally about the core and value of literary studies within the English subject and whether departments differed significantly in the subject knowledge that they sought to impart.

In 2016, English literary studies were offered at twenty-one institutions, as illustrated in Table 1.⁷ The study includes approximately 190 syllabi, some 90 at undergraduate level and about 100 at advanced level. Program syllabi comprise the BA in English at Kristianstad (2012:HGEN1) and Malmö (2016:HGENS), the one-year MA in English at Dalarna (2013:HENEA), Mid Sweden (2015:HENGA), and Södertörn (2012:P1325), the MA course packages at Linköping (2015:711A03, 2015:763A52) as well as the two-year MA programmes at Lund (2012:HALKM), Stockholm (2015:HPLVO, 2016:HCREO), and Uppsala (2015:HEN2M).⁸ The remaining syllabi are course packages of 15 or 30 ECTS credits (henceforth called credits) and freestanding courses, usually of 7.5 or 15 credits.

⁶ The controversial quality assurance system for higher education in place in 2012 was result oriented and focused on BA and MA theses as evidence for the relation between expected learning outcomes and actual learning outcomes (Lindberg-Sand 2011). The upshot of the evaluation was that a third of the universities' undergraduate (7/20) and half of their MA (7/13) degrees in English were deemed to be of insufficiently high quality (*Högskoleverket* 2012). As I note elsewhere, the 2012 evaluation and subsequent curricular changes at departments across the country indicates a desire to further emphasise the scholarly nature of English literary studies (Dodou 2020).

⁷ The table is based on university catalogues online, accessed mainly between April and December 2016, and subsequently corroborated by the director of studies, or equivalent, at these institutions.

⁸ The Uppsala programme (2015:HEN2M) included two specialisations in literature, one in English literature and one in American literature and culture.

Table 1. Location of literature syllabi per English department and level in 2016.

Institution	Undergraduate level courses			Advanced level courses (English IV, 1-year MA, and 2-year MA)	Programmes (BA or MA)
	English I	English II	English III		
Dalarna University	x	x	x	x	x
Halmstad University	x	x	x	x	--
Jönköping University	x	x	--	--	--
Karlstad University	x	x	x	x	--
Kristianstad University	x	x	x	--	x
Linköping University	x	x	x	x	x
Linnaeus University	x	x	x	x	--
Luleå University of Technology	x	x	x	--	--
Lund University	x	x	x	x	x
Mälardalen University	x	x	x	x	--
Malmö University	x	x	x	--	x
Mid Sweden University	x	x	x	x	x
Örebro University	x	--	x	--	--
Södertörn University	x	x	x	x	x
Stockholm University	x	x	x	x	x
Umeå University	x	x	x	x	--
University of Gävle	x	x	x	--	--
University of Gothenburg	x	x	x	x	--
University of Skövde	x	--	--	--	--
University West	x	x	x	--	--
Uppsala University	x	x	x	x	x

I have read these documents with particular focus on course aims, content descriptions, and intended learning outcomes. I have done so with the aim of identifying the goals articulated for literary studies as well as the thematised subject matters, theoretical approaches, and scholarly practices that are foregrounded in the documents. I have examined the findings per syllabus and compared individual syllabi to the curriculum at their respective institution and also to the curricula nationally per level, at undergraduate and advanced respectively. Via these comparisons I have sought to discover discernable commonalities and differences, regarding for instance the disciplinary questions, theoretical investments, and conceptions of literature that are communicated in syllabi. In the course of this descriptive and

comparative analysis I have identified four main overarching clusters of objectives for literary studies. Within each, I have been able to discern certain trends, as well as deviations from those. To enable an overview that accounts for the findings across different institutions and levels and that is relatively easy to navigate, I present results related to each of the four overarching goals in separate subsections. In these, I offer specific examples from the documents studied, in order to illustrate the nature of curricular formulations and to indicate how I have read the documents. I also quantify the frequency with which certain findings recur to establish the extent to which they can be regarded as a trend. I then proceed to comment on the findings and to raise a few questions about conceptions and vindications of English literary studies and about the subject knowledge mediated.

A few matters should be observed regarding the account below. First, the genre of syllabi, whilst uniform in some ways, allows for considerable flexibility in terms of the amount and type of information provided. Some curricula included enough information to provide a clear picture of the subject matter and perspectives treated in courses; others divulged little about the chosen content and approach to the study of literature. Where findings are partially representative, this is indicated in the text. Second, most undergraduate syllabi were course packages, which included one or more literature course(s), whereas most MA syllabi designated a single course of 7.5 or 15 credits. Moreover, about a dozen undergraduate courses in 30-credit course packages, which were also offered as freestanding courses, count as distinctive syllabi in the account below. Frequency accounts of various goals at undergraduate and MA level need to be understood with these distinctions in mind. Third, the size of the curricula at each institution varied. I have tried to quote syllabi as much as possible in proportion to the size of local curricula. Fourth, not all syllabi were available in an English translation; in some cases, the Swedish and English versions of syllabi included different amounts of information. This accounts for instances where Swedish syllabi versions are referenced. Finally, just over half of the curricula (12/21) included one, or sometimes more, course(s) that made known their use of broad textual definitions—and so, for instance, stated that they attended to non-fictional as well as fictional narratives, or taught comics, film, and on occasion TV-programmes. However, as a rule, the curricula nationally delimited their object of study as “literary

texts.” The account below uses curricular definitions of literature; it does not map the kinds of works taught or discuss the demarcations of literary studies vis-à-vis cultural study.

3. The Organisation of Literary Studies

To understand the subject knowledge prioritised, it is important to know how English studies in Sweden were organised during the period in focus.⁹ As regards the “progression” of literary studies, the core undergraduate syllabi (90 credits) displayed a great degree of consensus nationally. In the first term departments offered introductions to literary studies, which usually aspired to cover modern and contemporary literature from different parts of the English-speaking world. In the second term, they tended to teach survey courses in literary history. These normally focused on literature from the British Isles and North America and, with few exceptions, they covered literature from the Renaissance through the early-to-mid 20th century. In the third term, the norm was to teach introductory theory courses. These were combined with BA thesis courses and occasionally with one more (often narrowly specialised thematic) course in literature. In total, at most institutions (12/18) English students had the opportunity, if they chose a literary specialisation, to study 50-60 literature credits in the core-course packages English I-III. Besides this core, some departments offered freestanding (*fristående*) elective literature courses. These tended to be thematic and narrowly specialised.

The advanced level curriculum, which spanned one term to two years, aimed for disciplinary specialisation.¹⁰ Most university curricula (11/13) offered courses amounting to a one- and/or a two-year course of

⁹ For a more detailed account of how literary studies were organised, which also includes a historical perspective, see Dodou (2020).

¹⁰ According to the Swedish *Higher Education Ordinance* (1993:100), a one-year MA Degree can be awarded “after the student has completed the courses required to gain 60 credits with a defined specialisation [...] of which at least 30 credits are for specialised study in the principal field” and at advanced level. This means that one term of English studies at advanced level can lead to an MA degree in English, when combined with other courses, whereof at least 15 credits are at advanced level (e-mail correspondence with Ylva Sundmark, Graduation Officer at Dalarna University, 8 October, 2018).

study in English, with specialisation in literature. While this often meant that MA studies included both literature and linguistics, a handful of institutions offered degrees exclusively treating literature (usually alongside degrees in English linguistics). In 2016, English departments offered between 22.5 and 172.5 literature credits, though in most (8/13) departments the number of literature credits at advanced level was 60-90. Most universities had at least one introductory theory course and some form of academic writing course geared toward literary scholarship at advanced level. Thematic literature courses treated aspects of literary history, theory, and criticism and were usually narrowly specialised. Generally, research-oriented universities painted a broader canvas of subject matters, compared with most regional university colleges, and they also offered more thematic literature courses.

4. The Main Aims of Literary Studies

The comparative analysis of learning outcomes and content formulations points to four overarching, and interwoven, clusters of aims for literary studies. The first concerns knowledge about literature—its genres, themes, and development—and its relation to circumstances of its production. The second main aim concerns disciplinary knowledge, especially ways of engaging with literary texts and related cultural expressions that are typical for literary studies. The third cluster regards contextual knowledge about culture, broadly defined as socio-historical events, phenomena and attitudes, and its significance for the study of literature. The fourth involves knowledge about modes of thinking typical of scholarly communities. Other learning outcomes include language proficiency, which I comment on briefly below, and occasionally they concern students' abilities to meet deadlines and to cooperate with others. At least two matters are in question here. One is what the disciplinary and teaching community perceived that students needed to know about English-speaking literature and the area of literary studies, and what competences they should develop regarding literary reading and scholarship. The second matter concerns what students could learn by way of literary studies, for instance gaining awareness of global conditions or developing contextual thinking. While these matters are distinct, the curricula point to a considerable degree of overlap between them.

4.1 Knowledge about literature

The review of course profiles and subject matters thematised indicates that literature was principally studied in its own right. Main concerns centred on literary themes and compositional strategies and on ways in which literature responds to various socio-cultural circumstances.

4.1.1 Course profiles

Course names and content descriptions in syllabi made it clear that most English curricula (16/21) privileged modern and contemporary literature. MA curricula spanned, roughly, the late eighteenth to the twenty-first century. Notable exceptions nationally were two courses on Shakespeare (Umeå 2016:1EN056; Uppsala 2008:5EN417), and a couple of survey courses, including *American literature 1620-1919* (Karlstad 2012:ENADL5). Local variations were found. For instance, the MA curriculum at Dalarna mainly focused on twentieth and twenty-first century literature, whereas the one at Lund emphasised the history of literature up to 1945. The same modern and contemporary profile appeared to apply to the undergraduate English curricula, with the obvious exception of survey courses in literary history, which normally reached back to the Renaissance, and excluding the occasional elective (e.g. Gothenburg 2011:EZ1C16, Linnaeus 2013:1EN121). Even as syllabi formulations alone can offer little information about the literary repertoires made available to English students, they suggest the following. As regards the core knowledge on English literary history imparted to students, attention was paid primarily to the literary conventions and representational concerns of realism, modernism, and postmodernism—with additional perspectives on Renaissance and Romantic literature.¹¹ A third of the curricula (7/21) included thematic courses specifically on postcolonial literatures, usually African, sometimes Caribbean, Indian, or even on world literature. Usually, however, when syllabi announced that literature from specific geographical areas was studied, the focus was Anglo-American. A fourth of the curricula (5/21) also included courses on genre fiction, such as, at undergraduate level, children's literature (Dalarna 2011:EN1076) and

¹¹ Most (8/13) MA curricula included elective or obligatory courses specifically treating one or more of the first three: realism, modernism and postmodernism.

crime fiction (Skövde 2014:EN127G), and, at MA level, gothic literature (Umeå 2013:1EN064) and speculative fiction (Gothenburg 2016:EN2111).

4.1.2 Subject matters thematised

Syllabi frequently made explicit pronouncements in learning outcomes and in content descriptions of thematised matters and aspects of literature explored. While these point to the thematic orientation of specific courses, the pronouncements, taken together, also reveal recurring topics across institutions and educational levels. Table 2 presents an overview of the most frequently stated subject matters. It is based on keywords in syllabi that indicated topics and aspects of literature studied. The table does not account for keywords on specific literary genres, historical periods, theoretical approaches, scholarly skills, or modes of reading foregrounded (e.g. “close reading” or “critical analysis”). Those aspects are treated separately (4.1.1, 4.2.1, 4.2.2, and 4.4). In total, the table is based on some 700 distinct keywords and keyword variants identified and subsequently clustered into keyword areas.¹² A comprehensive account of the subject matters addressed could not be made. About 40 syllabi—for, or including, introductions to literature, survey courses, and thematic courses—only referred to the period or geographical areas addressed, without reference to the issues explored in relation to the literary works. To these, another 20 syllabi for academic writing courses and thesis courses (mainly at advanced level) can be added, as those did not, by nature, reference specific subject matters.

¹² The number of keywords per curriculum varied, sometimes considerably. For example, Dalarna included some 100 keywords in 20 syllabi and Uppsala some 155 in 21 syllabi, whereas Luleå included a handful of keywords in 3 syllabi, and Skövde some 30 keywords in 4 syllabi. Related keywords were clustered into keyword areas, so that, for example, “nation,” “nation state,” “nationality,” “nationhood,” “national boundaries,” “national collectives,” “national identity,” “nationalist perspectives,” “national self-perception” and also “transnationality” and “postnationalism” were considered together. Variants within keyword areas often featured in the same syllabus. Some 45 clustered keywords featured in three, or more, syllabi.

Table 2. List of the subject matters most frequently stated in syllabi.

Keyword areas	Number of syllabi			Number of institutions
	Total	Under-graduate	MA	
1. Genre	47	29	18	15
2. Literary history, epochs & movements	36	21	15	19
3. Social/cultural issues & perspectives	31	22	9	16
4. Gender & women's rights	25	14	11	13
5. Language	19	6	13	8
6. Form	18	8	10	9
7. Narrative	18	10	8	9
8. Aesthetic aspects/ premises/experimentation	13	2	11	6
9. Colonialism/ postcolonialism	13	2	11	7
10. Ethnicity	13	7	6	10
11. Identity (personal, collective, cultural, political)	12	2	10	4
12. Nationhood	12	1	11	4
13. Ideology	9	4	5	5
14. Race	9	5	4	5
15. Style	9	4	5	5
16. Cultural diversity/ multicultural aspects	8	7	1	5
17. Power	8	4	4	7
18. Class	6	4	2	5
19. Globalisation/ global perspectives	6	1	5	4
20. Literary aspects/ devices	5	4	1	5

As regards representativity, Table 2 reflects mainly 17 curricula.¹³ It shows the subject matters that were common across institutions, and so does not account for the full extent of the thematic differentiation made known in syllabi nationally.¹⁴ With respect to how it should be read, with

¹³ At Linköping, Luleå, Mälardalen, Mid Sweden and Örebro, the majority of the syllabi provided very little or no information about the topics thematised.

¹⁴ For instance, the table does not show that the MA curriculum at Stockholm recurrently, and as a national exception, included such keywords as “fictionality,” “literariness,” “mimesis,” and “referentiality.”

the possible exception of “genre,” the table lists explicitly stated areas of thematic interest.¹⁵ For example, “language” refers to the thematisation of literary language and the relation between language, literature, and culture, and not to goals regarding students’ communicative abilities. Similarly, a keyword area like “colonialism/postcolonialism” includes only instances when these were thematised or when a “postcolonial perspective” was foregrounded, and not when syllabi stated that postcolonial theory was studied. For the latter, see Table 3 (4.2.2). “Social/cultural issues & perspectives” reflects the vocabulary of the syllabi; it indicates instances when such phrases occurred and does not involve my interpretation of whether specific topics are cultural issues. It is worth noting that, besides the 31 instances of this keyword area listed, about 40 additional syllabi from 14 institutions made known the desire to study literary works in relation to social-cultural-historical contexts.¹⁶ The choice to separate such thematic areas of interest as ethnicity, gender, and race, which sometimes featured together in syllabi, serves to make visible the occasionally remarkable recurrence of certain matters. The decision to cluster keywords on literary-textual elements based on their coalescence around such keywords as “aesthetic,” “form,” “narrative,” “style,” and “literary aspects/devices,” likewise, serves to show the vocabulary used in syllabi and its recurrence.

Table 2 suggests that a major curricular ambition nationally was to teach students a form of literary competence, to familiarise them with genre conventions and compositional strategies, with literary traditions and literary innovation. Another was to teach students ways in which literary works engage with matters of social unease and social justice. Notably, a large portion of the syllabi that announced an intention to address literary-textual features also made known that they addressed themes pertaining to society and the self. I return to this matter below

¹⁵ “Genre” was regularly used to indicate that prose, or poetry and drama, were taught; “the historical development of genres,” “questions of genre,” “genre awareness,” “genre conventions” and “subgenre” were referred to in about a third of the instances listed. Table 2, which includes all curricular instances of “genre,” indicates that this was an emphasised dimension of literature in most departments.

¹⁶ Together, the instances of “social/cultural issues & perspectives” and of contextualized reading practices appear in 19/21 curricula and in some 70 syllabi.

(4.1.3). Suffice it here to say that the subject community prioritised English students' knowledge of literary properties and their effects, and to some extent also their development. It also prioritised students' understanding of how literature represents human experience and social reality, particularly aspects concerning identity, ideology, and equity.

4.1.3 Conceptions of literature

In so far as conceptions of literature were made known in syllabi, the predominant understanding imparted to students seemed to be that literary works are complex responses to particular intellectual, material, and cultural conditions. Syllabi indicated that literature was seen as relating to and as commenting on those conditions, and, indeed, that it provided an occasion to address them. Literary works were described as “reflections of the writers’ and their readers’ values” (Skövde 2014:EN127G, my translation), and students were expected to “apply knowledge about literary and historical periods and their characteristic features in reading and analysis of individual literary works” (Mälardalen 2013:ENA200, my translation). In part, this entailed learning to make sense of literary works in light of their social, intellectual, and artistic antecedents, and of typical “themes, concerns and aesthetic strategies” (Uppsala 2014:5EN423). In part, it meant regarding literature as mirroring, inquiring into, or intervening in societal practices. Some syllabi, at MA level especially, were explicit about their assumptions concerning literature. These described literature as a “witness” to historical traumas and a potential healing force in society (Uppsala 2014:5EN475), and as a “political instrument for social critique” (Gothenburg 2016:EN2214, my translation). They addressed literature’s potential in creating “possible worlds” (Stockholm 2011:ENPS27, my translation), and they foregrounded its “representative function in the understanding of our contemporary world” (Gothenburg 2015:EN2213, my translation). These formulations suggest that literature was regarded as providing unique insights into cultural mentalities and into a host of social, political, ethical, and intellectual matters.

About a third of the undergraduate and about a quarter of the MA syllabi indicated that they subscribed to the view that literature engages with matters of public concern in ways that significantly contribute to our fathoming the nature and consequences of those matters. On

occasion, the subjects in question were presented as ethical and political quandaries, to which literary works may potentially offer answers. For instance, one syllabus on the ethics of hospitality and vulnerability articulated the relevance of its subject matter both as a literary problematic and as a human dilemma in the face of colonialism, the two world wars, and modern-day terrorism (Uppsala 2013:5EN471). Moreover, two thirds of the undergraduate and over two thirds of the MA syllabi that emphasised the ways in which literary works relate to specific literary traditions, foregrounded the students' ability to analyse literary works both as works of art and in relation to the cultural conditions of their production. Indeed, as a rule, literary-textual aspects of literature were considered in tandem with socio-cultural perspectives on literature, and were only rarely described as the primary focus and vindication of literature courses.

4.2 Disciplinary knowledge

In terms of the disciplinary knowledge imparted, the review indicates that English curricula primarily focused on the question of reading and on theories that highlight critical reading practices and the worldly knowledge that literature can offer.

4.2.1 Disciplinary questions and methods

English curricula were deeply invested in the question of interpretation, especially in relation to how we should read. Syllabi announced that students would learn to “read literary texts closely and sensitively” (Malmö 2015:EN102B). They emphasised students' abilities to use “theories and concepts in the form of independent analyses and interpretations” of works (Dalarna 2014:EN3067) and to “analyse and discuss” literary works in light of “their aesthetic, social and historical contexts” (Lund 2008:LIVR63, my translation). Virtually all syllabi, nine tenths of all undergraduate and fourth fifths of all MA syllabi, made known that they approached literary works as objects to be analysed and deciphered.¹⁷ Whilst the thematic areas of interest explored were many,

¹⁷ All 21 curricula emphasised literary analysis, and with the exception of Gävle, they specified that literary studies relied on interpretation, reading, and textual analysis.

they pertained, principally, to the disciplinary problem of literary sense-making (see also 4.1.2).

This privileging of interpretation set the terms for the types of questions that featured in English curricula and for the abilities that courses sought to develop. Notably, the curricula did not normally foreground approaches to literature that focused on literary taste, on why literature is read, on the literary market, on book history, or on the craft of literary writing. Typically, they did not highlight how literary works have been transmitted, how they have been received, or how they have survived. Exceptions include two MA courses at Karlstad that emphasised the question of literary historiography (2012:ENADL5; 2012:ENADL6), the BA programmes at Kristianstad and Malmö that featured creative writing (2012:HGEN1; 2016:HGENS), and the thematisation of the literary market in the MA programme in creative writing at Stockholm (2015:HCREO). Exceptions also include an undergraduate course on Shakespeare that addressed “why the writer is still considered a genius almost 400 years after his death” (Gothenburg 2011:EZ1C16, my translation), a survey course at MA level that invited students to consider “how older literature gains renewed actuality” (Lund 2008:LIVR23, my translation), and an MA course that thematised the role of literary prizes for modern processes of canonisation (Umeå 2016:1EN071).

Literature courses, furthermore, did not appear concerned with the problem of “what is literature.” As an exception, an undergraduate syllabus foregrounded the question as one of several posed in literary theory (Stockholm 2014:ENTM14). Certainly, some courses subscribed to broad textual definitions, and so might be assumed to have addressed debates over what counts as literature and what the domains of literary studies are. These usually treated “English fiction and other media manifestations of culture” (Kristianstad 2016:ENK102) and foregrounded the students’ “ability to analyse older and newer cultural narratives in literature and in other media” (West 2013:ENB301, my translation). These courses, it is worth noting, appeared to rely on the assumptions underpinning the so-called narrative turn in literary and cultural studies, whereby the nature and operation of narratives across genres and media are studied, partly with the aim to critique cultural

beliefs and ideologies.¹⁸ Moreover, with the exception of the MA curriculum at Stockholm, syllabi seldom appeared to focus on the literary representation of reality “as an aesthetic and theoretical problematic” (Stockholm 2014:ENLM75, my translation). Only a handful of syllabi explicitly mentioned a concern with the function and potential of literature. It should be noted that syllabi, which did not make known the thematic orientation of courses, potentially included other types of questions than the ones mentioned here. Based on the syllabi that did specify areas of thematic concern, however, it was possible to identify the examples above as exceptions to an evident norm.

A final observation here is that the English syllabi did not indicate the mediation of methodological alternatives to reading, that is, other than paying attention to particular texts and making judgements on them in response to particular issues.¹⁹ The only exception I could discern was an MA course on digital approaches to literature which combined data-driven methodologies with “traditional textual interpretation” (Gothenburg 2015:EN2120, my translation). Indeed, the review points to a dominant curricular focus nationally on the cognitive dimensions of literary reading and on the key questions of interpretation and of how texts and contexts interact (I return to the latter in 4.3.2).

4.2.2 Theoretical-critical investments

Just over 40% of all syllabi announced that literature was read alongside literary and other relevant theories, and so suggested the significance of theory and of theorised approaches to literature as an educational goal.²⁰ As with the subject matters thematised, when it came to the theoretical orientations prioritised, many syllabi were vague about the perspectives

¹⁸ For a discussion of the narrative turn, see for instance Marie-Laure Ryan (2005:344-45).

¹⁹ I use here Toril Moi’s (2017:178) definition of method in *Revolution of the Ordinary*, where she writes that in “literary studies the methodological alternatives to reading are things like conducting interviews, setting up focus groups, doing chemical analyses of paper quality and watermarks, or using computers to crunch big data.”

²⁰ The relative emphasis on theory in syllabi from the different institutions varied. The Dalarna curriculum stood out, nationally, for its emphasis on theory and Lund stood out for its lack thereof.

taught, stating instead that courses addressed “different schools of literary theory” (Karlstad 2010:ENADL2, my translation). When theories taught were made known, in some 60 syllabi from 15 universities, these usually covered modern critical and cultural theories, as indicated in Table 3. The table illustrates the frequency with which syllabi explicitly stated theoretical schools and orientations studied. Each theoretical school included was mentioned in at least three syllabi.

Table 3. List of the theoretical schools most frequently stated in syllabi.

Theories stated in syllabi	Number of syllabi			Number of institutions
	Total	Under-graduate	MA	
1. Postcolonial theory	14	2	12	8
2. Literary and cultural theory ²¹	10	6	4	6
3. Gender studies	9	4	5	4
4. Feminist theory	8	3	5	4
5. Narrative theory	8	4	4	6
6. Poststructuralism	7	3	4	3
7. Cultural studies	6	2	4	4
8. Ecocriticism	6	3	3	4
9. Postmodernist theory	6	2	4	2
10. Psychoanalytic theory	6	2	4	2
11. Marxism	5	2	3	2
12. Structuralism	5	3	2	2
13. Ethnic/ity studies	3	2	1	1

The table presents a canon of theories foregrounded in many theory courses and in some of the thematic courses.²² Other, less frequently stated theoretical perspectives include classical rhetoric, systemic functional linguistics, and continental philosophy, as well as theories about memory and mourning, about ethics and humour, and about constructions of race and nationhood. Theories drawn upon were

²¹ “Literary and cultural theory” includes only references in syllabi that do not also list the theoretical schools taught.

²² Some syllabi listed several theoretical schools, stating, for instance, that literary works were studied “in dialogue with a number of critical theories dealing with power and society (such as Marxism, Feminism, Postcolonialism, Critical Sociology, and Poststructuralism)” (Linköping 2016:711A13 *Writers and Contexts*).

normally found in English III and in advanced level syllabi. Some seven syllabi (at six institutions) nationwide mentioned a specific theoretical approach at English I and II.

As Table 3 indicates, the theories most frequently announced were consistent with the attention paid to what one syllabus called “historical, social and cultural aspects” in relation to literature (Jönköping 2016:LE2K16, my translation), as illustrated in Table 2. However, whilst literary-textual elements were also regularly foregrounded in syllabi as subject matters taught (Table 2), there was less evidence in the syllabi that theories on literary forms, genres, and compositional strategies accompanied the teaching of those aspects of literature to an equal extent (Table 3). Instead, the norm seemed to be to teach literature in relation to critical and cultural theories. These, notably, were the explicit focus of theory courses in two thirds of the undergraduate (12/19) and in a handful of the MA (4/13) curricula. The theory courses that stated this focus also comprised the ones that announced which theoretical perspectives were taught. Indeed, with few exceptions, the undergraduate and MA syllabi nationally, which stated the theories addressed or in other ways made known the theoretical-critical investments underpinning courses, emphasised cultural perspectives on literature.

It was difficult to determine to what extent certain approaches permeated the studied curricula. In a few cases, where underlying theoretical-critical investments were explicit in all, or in most, syllabi, this was possible to discern. The English syllabi at Dalarna, Södertörn, and Uppsala, for example, displayed a main curricular orientation toward cultural perspectives on literature. The MA syllabi at Gothenburg, Lund, and Stockholm suggested an ambition to complement cultural perspectives with other questions and approaches. Even as it was not possible from the remaining syllabi across the studied institutions to establish to what extent the findings on theoretical-critical investments may be generalizable, there was nothing in those syllabi to suggest an idea of the curriculum that is based on courses presenting complementary or conflicting ideas about literature and its study.

4.2.3 Intellectual legacies and horizons

An ambition linked to disciplinary knowledge and the teaching of theory worth mentioning was to introduce students to the socio-historical and

intellectual antecedents of the theoretical schools taught. A handful of syllabi, at English III and at advanced level, stated the aim not only to impart “knowledge of the research contexts” of the topics studied (Malmö 2015:EN113A), but also to introduce “ideas which are still central to the study of literature and other forms of cultural expression” (Örebro 2015:EN002G). The syllabi announced the desire to help students situate “theories in a larger cultural, social, and ideological context” (Dalarna 2015:EN3056) and to convey an understanding of how theoretical debates are “placed in a greater, both Western and post-colonial, socio-political context” (Uppsala 2013:5EN459). Pronouncements of these kinds suggest an ambition to initiate students into disciplinary debates and to impart to them insights into an intellectual tradition that informs, and shapes, the academic study of English literature. Besides, the formulations suggest the desire to provide students with an intellectual horizon for understanding a range of social, political, ethical, or representational matters, which transcend the characteristics of English literature and the conditions of English-speaking societies. In terms of what students should come to know by way of literary studies, this points to influential intellectual precursors of the discipline and of the Humanities more broadly.

4.3 Knowledge about culture

The third cluster of aims attached to literary studies, nationally, concerned various aspects of cultural knowledge and its relevance for understanding literature.

4.3.1 Literature and cultural knowledge

Aims regarding cultural knowledge partly involved furthering students’ understanding of English-speaking societies and histories by way of literary studies. This objective was sometimes expressed in terms of text selections that “illuminate multicultural aspects of the modern, English-speaking world” (Södertörn 2015:1059EN), or that impart knowledge about “social structures and everyday life in the USA and Great Britain” (Linköping 2012:711G26, my translation). On occasion, syllabi announced that students should familiarise themselves through literature, with “the cultures, societies, everyday life and current situations in

different Anglophone countries” (Kristianstad 2016:ENK102). These goals were normally accompanied by the ambition to develop students’ knowledge about various compositional features of literature and students’ abilities to perform literary analysis. Cultural knowledge was rarely described in this manner outside English I, as syllabi normally foregrounded context as part of the knowledge students need to make sense of literary works. Nonetheless, it is worth noting the impetus to regard literature, in part, as a means of conveying knowledge about social conditions, political ideologies, or cultural mentalities, and so, presumably, of assisting the teaching of “culture” to language students unfamiliar with the histories and societies of the English-speaking world. Such goals occurred (in one or more literature courses) in at least half of the curricula and they featured both at the undergraduate and at the advanced level. About half of the MA curricula included such goals.

4.3.2 Contextualising reading practices

Chiefly, cultural knowledge and contextualisation seemed aimed at teaching students specific ways of reading and sense-making. This was repeatedly made known in syllabi formulations that pointed to the disciplinary assumptions underpinning courses (see also 4.1.3). For instance, an MA course encouraged students to regard formal innovations in relation to “the historical and social conditions that lead to these changes” (Mid Sweden 2013:EN009A, my translation). Other syllabi proclaimed a concern with how literary works present “political and poetic resistance” (Stockholm 2011:ENP2V0, my translation), and emphasised students’ abilities “to analyse and discuss literary texts from earlier historical periods with the use of those aids made available by the historical contextualisation of comparative literature” (Lund 2008:LIVR43, my translation). The choice of wording indicates that the courses sought to introduce students to particular modes of literary interpretation concerned with the theoretical problem of how texts and contexts interact. The ambition to teach students what it means to read literary works with reference to other texts and to specific ideas, incidents, or events featured in all curricula. About a third of all syllabi from 17 curricula, at the undergraduate and the MA levels, explicitly stated the goal to contextualise literary works culturally, socially, or historically.

Definitions of context varied, as did the conceptions of how literary works can be correlated with various contexts, and, I hasten to add, syllabi far from always made known what areas of context and modes of contextualisation courses treated. Moreover, contextualising objectives featured differently in the undergraduate and in the advanced curricula. Theoretical convictions about literature—say, about its relation to the historical and political world out of which it arose, and about its affordances—tended to be verbalised in MA level curricula, even if not all MA syllabi did so. In undergraduate syllabi, theoretical assumptions of the field normally remained absent or implicit. One exception is the English I syllabus which stated that, in part, “literature is studied as a particularly important art form, the significance of which derives from its ability to record, reveal and question cultural assumptions, social structures and political outlooks” (Dalarna 2014:EN1120). On the whole, there is little evidence in undergraduate curricula that the relation between literature and its cultural-historical contexts were problematised. Only as an exception did a syllabus refer to the “complex links” between literary texts and historical contexts (Gävle 2016:ENG308). Nevertheless, the undergraduate curricula testified to the underlying principle, also imparted to students at MA level, that literary studies attended to the “inevitable links” between texts and their cultural contexts (Halmstad 2015:EN1001, my translation). Students of English, that is, were regularly taught that literary studies is a contextualising discipline.

4.4 Scholarly attitudes

To turn to the fourth cluster of objectives, a key goal with literary studies in English curricula nationally was the understanding of the principles underlying scholarship: both scholarly practices that are discipline specific and conventions that are generic. These included, first, developing students’ abilities to formulate independent and theoretically informed interpretations. It involved conveying “knowledge of methods used when analysing literature and culture” (Södertörn 2012:P1325) alongside the discursive practices of the field. Second, it meant schooling students into a scholarly attitude that comprises critical reasoning and argumentation, and awareness of the ethical dimensions of research. The latter included the ability to “demonstrate insight into the role of

knowledge in society and the responsibility of the individual for how it is used” (Malmö 2015:EN113A). Third, disciplinary goals involved providing an orientation in questions of the field as well as developing the students’ ability to identify and formulate problems. The goals also included students’ abilities to assess or “compare different critical or theoretical texts/perspectives” (Stockholm 2013:EN30H1, my translation) and the ability to “critically analyse and assess these concepts and theories as scholarly methods for literary analysis” (Dalarna 2015:EN3064). These goals, it can be noted, are consistent with the stipulations of the Swedish *Higher Education Act* (1992:1434) and *Higher Education Ordinance* (1993:100), which regulate the academic standards and overarching goals of Swedish higher education.

The scholarly goals of literary studies, arguably, formed their backbone. They were present in all syllabi and provided curricular coherence, especially in cases where few narrowly specialised and thematically disparate courses perhaps failed to do so. Having said this, the presence of individual goals varied across curricula. For instance, whilst theoretical knowledge and skills in literary analysis formed an integral part of all curricula, just over half (13/21) featured goals pertaining to students’ argumentative skills. Those goals referred mainly to the students’ abilities to motivate an interpretation of a literary work and to present that interpretation in the form of an argument. When it comes to critical thinking, goals foregrounding the ability to evaluate ideas—be these in the form of literary works, critical texts, theoretical concepts, or student arguments—appeared in all curricula, though usually in English III and MA courses. Critical reasoning, it can be noted, comprised both the ability to “critically assess information and sources” with “scholarly awareness” (Lund 2014:ENGX54, my translation), and the ability to “critically consider language representations as constructing gender, ethnicity and class” (Gothenburg 2015:EN2214, my translation). In other words, critical abilities both designated a detachment and rigour associated with a scholarly attitude (in 19/21 curricula) and referred to the cluster of reading conventions that go under the name of critique (in about half of the curricula). As regards the scholarly knowledge imparted to students, it would seem that primacy was given to literary reading and writing skills, as well as to critical abilities. Ethical aspects of research, by contrast, were articulated

in just under half of the curricula (9/21), normally in English III and MA courses.

4.5 Language use

Finally, the knowledge and skills attached to English literary studies included language proficiency. Most curricula (17/21 at undergraduate level and 8/13 at MA level), linked language skills to the study of literature. In a couple of syllabi, literary studies were described as providing an occasion for students to train their skills in oral presentation and written production. The dominant practice, however, was to interweave proficiency goals with disciplinary ones, so that the ability to formulate interpretations of works or literary arguments was tied to the display of students' language skills. Whilst the latter aim was found in about half of the undergraduate and about half of the MA syllabi, it remains unclear to what extent such goals had more than a gatekeeper function, by emphasising that student work needed to demonstrate a high standard of English usage. Given the review above, it seems safe to say that developed language skills were not the primary vindication of literary studies in the English curriculum.

5. The "What" and "Why" of English Literary Studies: On Educational Value

Over the last several pages, I have identified areas of knowledge mediation foregrounded in English syllabi in relation to literary studies. I have assumed that the subject knowledge foregrounded in these documents points to knowledge that the scholarly and teaching community deemed as legitimate and valuable for students of English. I have observed that the words used to specify this knowledge regularly express underlying valuations about what literary studies are and do, and why they matter. Therefore, I have also assumed that the documents indicate how the value of English literary studies is understood within the subject community. Thanks to the lateral character of the review, which analysed curricula across all English departments, it was possible to discern a basic conceptual concord nationally. In what follows, I address the chief tenets thereof and outline main answers that curricula provided to the question why students of English should study literature.

First, however, I briefly comment on the position of literary studies in the English subject.

In the opening of this article, I noted the commonplace observation that, in academic language departments, literature has often functioned as a means for reaching educational goals other than knowledge about literature. A review of first and second term Spanish courses at Swedish universities, for example, identified the state of literary studies in that subject in 2004 as delimited by students' language proficiency and by subject goals of cultural illustration (Alvstad & Castro 2009). The findings of the present study suggest a different picture for English in 2016. The curricular review shows that literature was mainly studied in its own right in English departments in Sweden, even as its *raison d'être* often relied on the relation between literature and culture. In English curricula, goals concerning cultural knowledge normally harboured ambitions that transcended cultural illustration, as MA syllabi, especially, indicated. Notably, English curricula repeatedly pointed to the ambition, in linking literature to culture, to engage with the disciplinary question of how texts and contexts interact.²³ In addition, the repeated emphasis on social-historical contexts of the works studied and on cultural and historical perspectives on literature, suggests that in several cases the English curricula were shaped by the scholarly paradigm that Joseph North (2017:11) calls "historicist/contextualist cultural analysis." Whether these findings are typical of the English subject or a result mainly of other factors cannot be answered by the present study.²⁴

²³ The curricular predilection for contextualising reading practices is consonant with Bo Ekelund's (2012:32) findings that PhD theses in the English subject in Sweden between 1985 and 2005 display a contextualising tendency.

²⁴ The difference between the findings in each study likely resulted from a combination of factors. These include the premises for each language subject in Sweden and the focus in Alvstad and Castro's study on first-year courses alone, compared to the examination also of English III and MA level courses here. Moreover, the tendency in the 2016 syllabi to foreground disciplinary assumptions and abilities may well be influenced by recent policy and audits, particularly the 2007 Higher Education Reform and the 2012 national evaluation of the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education. The privileging of cultural analysis in English curricula, additionally, may be understood in relation to the dominance of this paradigm in the Anglo-American study of literature (North 2017); other language subjects in Sweden may be influenced by different scholarly traditions.

However, the English curricula in 2016 imply that the position of literary studies in language departments, and their relation vis-à-vis culture, are more deeply shaped by the contextualising principles of scholarship in the Humanities than some previous curricular studies may have been able to recognise. What is more, the English curricula are a reminder that, in (language) education, where the instrumental worth of literature often serves to legitimise literary studies, the relation established between literature and culture is, potentially, intellectually more complex and productive than is implied by the idea of cultural illustration.

To turn to the characteristics of the English curricula nationally, a main finding from the review is a fundamental consensus about the objectives and nature of literary studies. Despite displaying a, sometimes considerable, differentiation at the level of specialised theme, the curricula point to an accord at the conceptual level. Literary studies were defined as foremost concerned with close textual analysis, with contextualising aspects of interpretation, and with the knowledge that literary works can offer. This definition is visible in an almost exclusive curricular focus on the interrelated disciplinary questions of reading and interpretation, and in the apparent absence of methodological alternatives to reading. It is manifest in the prevailing conception of literature as a complex response to the intellectual, social, and artistic conditions of its production. And it is discernible in the principal orientation of literary studies towards thematic interests and theoretical perspectives that emphasise the cognitive and guiding functions of literature, especially in relation to the potential of literature to provide worldly fathoming. Given that subject knowledge in Swedish higher education is not centrally steered, the review suggests that the subject community nationally shared assumptions about the core of English literary studies.

That this understanding predominated nationally is unsurprising. The focus on reading and sense-making, for example, harmonises with the position granted to literary studies in language subjects, internationally and historically. In these subjects, literary studies have been a point of convergence between language, literacy, and culture (Kramsch & Kramsch 2000:553). The focus in English departments notably also overlaps with the curriculum of the academic literature subject (*litteraturvetenskap*) in Sweden, as this, too, has centred on professional modes of reading and interpreting literature (Persson 2007:177-182). Significantly, given the theoretical orientation of English literary studies

nationally, the focus on reading and interpretation is typical for much modern criticism, which, as Jane Tompkins (1980:203) has maintained, has taken “meaning to be the object of critical investigation.” In the Swedish context, the curricular focus on reading may also be understood as a corollary of the high expectations placed on the scholarly abilities of students, relative to the opportunities English students have to engage with literature in their studies. The focus could be regarded as the partial result of how the subject community has interpreted the Swedish *Higher Education Ordinance* (1993:100)—on students’ “knowledge of applicable methodologies in the field, [and] specialised study in some aspect of the field”—and of how it has understood what the emphasis on those stipulations in recent audits entails for the focus of literary studies.

Some curricula, I hasten to add, indicated a desire to include in the subject knowledge mediated other questions, such as the circulation and reception of literary works. These were principally limited to the MA level and to some of the institutions that could afford a relatively large English curriculum. Given that a portion of syllabi revealed little about the chosen topics and approaches, it is likely that greater variation existed than the current review has been able to identify. Without access to course handbooks, however, it is only possible to make observations based on what is made visible in syllabi. The location of the examples identified could suggest that the questions were included only when a core of English literary studies had already been established and when institutions had the financial leeway to offer extra courses. Conversely, the very presence of these examples could imply changing ideas about what knowledge is possible or desirable to impart. As I have written elsewhere, the increasing academisation of the English subject, over the past several years, has brought with it new ways of defining the place of literature, and of culture, therein (Dodou 2020). In so far as the examples noted above are indicative of such redefinitions, they may well herald larger curricular changes to come.

As regards the content of literary studies, the curricula, likewise, reveal considerable agreement about their historical and theoretical orientation. Syllabi that made known their course profiles pointed to a main preoccupation with literature from the late eighteenth to the twenty-first century. The present analysis of course descriptions and learning outcomes would need to be complemented with a review of literature lists to more precisely outline the literary repertoires made available to

students. However, it is worth noting that the course profiles in the studied curricula largely match those of secondary and upper secondary English teacher education curricula nationally for the same period. Literature lists in the latter point to a distinct modern and contemporary profile for English literary studies (Dodou forthcoming). This profile is consistent with findings in studies on the Spanish literature curriculum at Lund for 1970-2015 (Johansson 2016) and on the French literature curriculum at Stockholm for 1995-2010 (Cedergren 2015). It is unclear from these studies to what extent the focus is linked to the identity of academic language subjects and whether it is indicative of what is regarded in Sweden as relevant—and, perhaps, appealing—knowledge for language students. What can be noted, however, is that the focus impacts on the literary repertoires made available to the students.

A similar observation can be made about theory, as most of the syllabi that stated the theoretical perspectives taught foregrounded modern critical and cultural theories. Considering the significance of these theories for the field of literary studies, at least since the 1980s, their presence in English curricula is hardly unexpected. Yet, their predominance in curricula and, especially, in theory courses suggests that critical and cultural theories shaped the conceptual toolkits provided for English students. The theories most frequently taught, notably, seek to describe what Jonathan Culler (2007:4) has called “problems and phenomena of general interest,” such as consciousness, language, meaning, narrative, nature and culture, and the relations of individual experience to larger structures. Whilst curricula on occasion introduced a broader range of critical practices, ostensibly the prevalent norm was to orient literary studies toward the fields of interest and reading modes typical of these theories. The latter, it may be noted, often rely upon “the methodological centrality of suspicion” (Sedgwick 2003:125). This orientation, it may be surmised, influenced how English students came to understand the domains of literary studies, the questions that were legitimate to investigate, and the characteristics of sophisticated reading modes.

The priority given to modern critical and cultural theories, moreover, meant that English curricula nationally displayed a notable discrepancy between the sum of the thematic concerns outlined in syllabi and the subject matters that were explicitly presented as theorised. Specifically, the curricular preoccupation with literary properties and with literary

history was much less frequently described as theorised than matters concerning, for instance, identity, society, and power. It would, of course, be hasty to conclude that the theories stated in syllabi were the only ones taught. Yet, the frequency with which syllabi, which did state the theories taught, foregrounded modern critical and cultural theories is suggestive. It would seem to reflect educational practices and attitudes regarding what and, indeed, whether various aspects of literature (and culture) needed to be theorised. The frequency with which these theories occurred across the curriculum nationally does not merely point to a consensus regarding the types of theories worth teaching. It also suggests a dominant perception of the questions and approaches that could justify English literary studies as an educational and scholarly project.

What do these findings on the nature and orientation of English literary studies imply about what makes it valuable? Three assumptions about the relevance of literary studies stand out in the review. First, the focus in the curriculum on students' mastery of professional ways of reading and discussing literature suggests that a key value was the "disciplining" of students' reading—and writing—practices, to speak with David Shumway and Craig Dionne (2002). The emphasis on literary concepts, on close textual reading, and on critical analysis recalls the idea, long-established in the discipline of literary studies, that academic reading practices are and ought to be kept distinct from lay reading (Guillory 2000:31-32). The significance of developing literary reading abilities in English can be measured, so some syllabi indicated, by the transferability of the skills gained. As these syllabi suggested, literary modes of reading are useful for approaching a range of other "cultural phenomena" (Linköping 2013:711G25, my translation) and "forms of narrative" (Stockholm 2011:ENPS27, my translation), presumably also in other languages that students know. The presupposition was arguably present in parts of about half of the curricula and suggests that the value of studying literature originates from the reading skills that literary studies provided. This justification recalls J. Hillis Miller's (1989:111) argument that our "fundamental task, the new rationale of the humanities, is to teach reading and the effective writing that can only come from or accompany a sophisticated ability to read."

This projected value is related closely to the implicit claim in the curriculum that literary studies sharpen students' critical-analytical skills. This vindication featured in all curricula and largely rests on the

cognitive functions of literature and its study. The discipline, notably, has regarded the promotion of critical thinking both as a corollary of literary studies, particularly in arguments that emphasise their vigilant and detached reading practices (e.g. Miller 1989), and as a property of literature itself, especially when literature is understood as enacting social or political critique (Felski 2015:16). To be sure, the ability to “critically interpret” relevant information and to “discuss phenomena, issues and situations critically” is stipulated in the *Higher Education Ordinance* (1993:100). Yet, that developed critical and analytical abilities were attached to literary studies, to some extent, would also seem a result of the theoretical assumptions regarding the affordances of literature and of literary studies underpinning much of the curriculum.

A third manner in which the value of literary studies was asserted in syllabi is by way of the subject matter studied. The recurring thematisation of literary-textual properties and of literary history attests to a desire to develop students’ literary competence and to familiarise them with traditions and ways of thinking about various representational and intellectual problems. At the same time, the vindication of literary studies on the basis of the studied subject matter largely depended upon the intellectual investment in the exceptional “representativeness and sociality” of literature, to borrow Dorothy Hale’s phrase (2006:453). Literature was valuable as an object of study, so many of the studied curricula suggest, because of the ways in which it relates, and responds, to the circumstances out of which it arises and, at least in part, because of its social power. Literary studies, in turn, presented an opportunity to discuss, with the help of theory, a host of social, ethical, and political matters, often with bearing on students’ understanding of English-speaking societies. The frequency with which matters of social justice, for instance, featured in the literature curriculum nationally suggests that the legitimacy of literary studies was taken, partly, to rely on their potential for worldly fathoming and ethos-building.

This vindication, it can be noted, is congruent with the stipulations in Section 5 of the Swedish *Higher Education Act*. These concern the promotion in the operations of higher education institutions of “sustainable development to assure for present and future generations a sound and healthy environment, economic and social welfare, and justice,” as well as the promotion of “equality between women and men” and of the “understanding of other countries and of international

circumstances” (1992:1434). Here, as with critical skills above, it would seem that syllabi frequently foregrounded those parts of literary scholarship that also enabled direct links to central steering documents of Swedish higher education. Thereby, curricula implicitly vindicated literary studies in relation to those policy documents. Besides this, however, literary studies were legitimised in English curricula by virtue of the opportunities that they offered for students to engage with intellectual problems as well as with matters of social unease, and by way of the horizon with which they provided students so that they could understand those matters. Likewise, they were vindicated by the conceptual tools and contextual thinking abilities with which they equipped students.

By way of concluding, I want to propose that the present review provides an occasion and a basis for discussion about the present and future shape of English literary studies. As clarified at the onset, an impetus for the present study came from scholarship that attends to the “what” and “why” of literary studies and of the literature curriculum. From this perspective, the review raises questions of praxis and principle. The consensus nationally about the nature and orientation of English literary studies begs the question of what factors have led to its formation. These include subject traditions, but also the opportunities and limitations for curricular development in the English subject. The latter are important to consider, since institutions are relatively free to determine what subject knowledge to mediate. The consensus, additionally, raises the issue of what it means to talk about institutional profiling, as is the current trend, whether to showcase the expertise available or to claim a competitive edge in student recruitment, when the curricula are underpinned, essentially, by the same conceptual assumptions about literature and its study. Crucially, the review raises the question of consequences. Foremost, perhaps, is what it means to orient literary studies toward certain types of theories and topics, and certain literary periods, for how the English subject nationally claims its legitimacy, and for the repertoires and competencies with which undergraduate and MA students become equipped. A corollary of the perspective I take here is to ask what aspects of literary studies could—or should—be imparted to students of English. Here it is worth considering whether students should also encounter, from the beginning of their studies, literary scholarship that does not primarily focus on

interpretation or on the cognitive functions of literature. Likewise, it may be asked whether it is important that students become familiar with methodological alternatives to reading. Ultimately, these questions concern the position and rationale of literary studies within the English language subject. They are inextricably linked to the larger questions of why literary studies matter and also of what the subject of English in Sweden is and ought to be. It is my hope that the present review may generate discussion on these issues.

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²⁵ English course names are indicated in syllabi, and are not my translations. Not all documents included information regarding the faculty boards, or equivalent, which passed the syllabi. This accounts for discrepancies in the amount of information included in the reference list.

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