Fundamental Undemocratic Values in Robert A. Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers*: How to Make Upper Secondary School Students More Self-aware of Their Fundamental Democratic Values

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Abstract

Democracy and democratic values have stagnated and are under attack. Current criticism of democracy points towards problems with efficiency, leniency towards undemocratic elements, collective problem-solving, and a suspension of the rule of law for public good. One solution to these problems could be to focus on teaching democratic values through literature in school. A suitable novel for this endeavor is the science-fiction novel *Starship Troopers*, written by Robert A. Heinlein in 1959, since it functions as fictional criticism and an alternative to democracy. However, most of the previous research conducted on *Starship Troopers* have focused on aspects regarding militarism and fascism. This research paper differs because it focuses specifically on how democracy is critiqued in the novel and how this critique could be used to teach democratic values. Teaching democratic values should be conducted since democracy and democratic values are arguably the most essential aspects of the fundamental values of the Swedish school system. Still, the relevant school policy documents do not define how these fundamental values are connected to the system of democracy and how they could be taught in a classroom. In order to fill that gap, this paper aims to use the theories and methods of didactic potential, Socratic pedagogy, and the politics of advocacy, attack, and assent to help students become more self-aware of their fundamental democratic values. The analysis demonstrates that *Starship Troopers* criticizes essential elements of democracy and complements those elements with its own alternative fundamental elements and values. The analysis also demonstrates how this critique can be used as a complement in a philosophical discussion that helps students become more self-aware of their fundamental democratic values.

**Keywords:** Democracy; Fundamental democratic values, *Starship Troopers*; Robert A. Heinlein; Socratic pedagogy; Politics of advocacy, attack, and assent; Didactic potential.
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One can lead a child to knowledge but one cannot make him think

(Heinlein 32)

The maximum responsibility a human can accept is thus equated to the ultimate authority a human can exert

(Heinlein 235)

Introduction

In 1989, right near the very end of the Cold War, a general belief in the total victory of democracy was present. After the fall of communism, liberal democracy would be the only and obvious choice of government. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama managed to capture that belief with his now legendary words:

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. (Fukuyama, “The End of History?” 4).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Fukuyama reiterated his point by calling liberal democracy the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution” since it is devoid of “fundamental internal contradictions” (Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man, xi). In brief, Fukuyama saw liberal democracy as the natural evolutionary step for humanity. He saw democracy as our shining star in comparison to other outdated forms of government and ideologies such as monarchy, fascism, and communism.

Today, scholars and experts agree that Fukuyama’s notion of liberal democracy as an end point of history was false. One influential school of thought argued that cultural differences and religious fundamentalism would become the new dominating
sources of conflict (Huntington; Barber). Also, China’s rise in economic and political power is seen as proof of undemocratic states being able to compete globally (Gat). Even Fukuyama himself now admits some of his mistakes when saying “[t]wenty five years ago, I didn’t have a sense or a theory about how democracies can go backward. And I think they clearly can” (qtd in Tharoor).

Before continuing, a definition of democracy needs to be established. According to UN General Assembly Resolution 59/201, adopted in 2004, the seven essential elements of democracy are: 1) separation and balance of power, 2) independence of the judiciary, 3) a pluralistic system of political parties and organizations, 4) respect for the rule of law, 5) accountability and transparency, 6) free, independent and pluralistic media, and 7) respect for human and political rights; e.g., freedoms of association and expression; the right to vote and to stand in elections (United Nations 1-2). A concept as extensive as democracy certainly has many different definitions, but these seven elements will function as a baseline in this paper.

These elements are not gaining ground globally, as recent reports indicate that democracy has stagnated over the last decade (The Economist Intelligence Unit 7). Another telling and depressive figure is the fact that only 4.5 percent of the world’s population live in “full democracies” while 35.6 percent of the world’s population live in “authoritarian regimes” (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2). Although there are numerous reasons for the stagnation of democracy, and some of the usual suspects are financial and social inequality, populism, nationalism, and corruption, this paper will focus on some of the internal problems of the system of democracy. Some typical internal democratic problems are, for instance 1) crime can easily spread in an open and democratic society, 2) undemocratic groups can abuse the democratic system to make it less democratic, 3) democracy can be seen as slow and stale where no ordinary citizen has any power and where decision-making is an endless chain of investigations, and 4) expert opinions can be overruled by politicians, sometimes resulting in less-than-ideal policy making (Larsson 13-14).

There are also several academics who have analyzed why democracy has stagnated. Recently, David Runciman, Professor of Politics at Cambridge University, published How Democracy Ends, where his introductory words are: “Nothing lasts forever. At some point democracy was always going to pass into the pages of history” (1). He continues to claim that even Fukuyama must have realized that liberal democracy was never the end point of human governance (1). Runciman’s primary
claim is that democracy has two main purposes: to make life better for everyone by solving problems, and to make people express themselves and make their voice heard, and that these two purposes are no longer aligned. During the era of 20th century democracy, these two purposes were connected and made democratic societies successful. Today, that is not happening anymore and instead “its [democracy’s] positive virtues are coming apart. … For democracy to flourish it needs to retain its ability to combine net benefits with personal recognition” (Runciman 214). The result is a democracy where the voters no longer care about making life better for everyone, and problem-solving is no longer connected to personal recognition through the ballot.

Philosopher Giorgio Agamben provides a different perspective on the stagnation of democracy. In his famous work State of Exception, he defines the term “state of exception” as a “point of imbalance between public law and political fact” (Saint-Bonnet qtd. in Agamben 1) “that is situated—like civil war, insurrection and resistance—in an “ambiguous, uncertain, borderline fringe, at the intersection of the legal and the political” (Fontana qtd. in Agamben 1). Essentially, the state of exception (also commonly referred to as “state of emergency”) is a term used for describing the inherent democratic problem of dealing with crises by letting the government transcend the rule of law in the name of the public good. One example of this transcendence was during the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, where the US vastly decreased its civil liberties in order to defend itself from terrorism. Some elements of this response to 9/11 by the Bush administration, such as the indefinite detention of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay and the Patriot Act of 2001, are still in effect today (Siemion and Stottlemyer; Kelly). Furthermore, there are currently other national emergencies declared or de facto underway, in, for example, the US, Turkey, France, and the UK. While the age-old notion of desperate times requiring desperate measures is understandable, these measures tend to be extended almost indefinitely. Also, what are the politics of “the public good”? Some, if not all of the state of exceptions mentioned above are not synonymous with policies for the welfare of everyone included in the public.

As stated above, democracy has stagnated, lost the connection between its positive virtues, and its rule of law is being transcended for the public good. While these problems have numerous facets and solutions, one solution is to strengthen democracy through the institution most focused on teaching democratic values: the school system. Sadly, many school systems have amplified the problems of democracy, rather than curtailing them. This belief is based on Martha C. Nussbaum’s, Professor
of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, notion that nations and schools have disregarded the teaching of skills that are not seen as economically profitable, including the skills necessary to keep democracy alive (2). Schools should focus on teaching the skills needed to help students become competent democratic citizens. Specifically, fictional literature should be the tool used in this endeavor since it enables students to become critical and empathetic citizens by “searching critical thought, daring imagination, empathetic understanding of human experiences of many different kinds, and understanding of the complexity of the world we live in” (Nussbaum 7).

Furthermore, literary researcher Louise M. Rosenblatt states that reading fictional literature is an essential activity in a democratic society: “Literature fosters the kind of imagination needed in a democracy—the ability to participate in the needs and aspirations of other personalities and to envision the effect of our actions on their lives” (222). Significantly, Rosenblatt considers fiction to be more convincing at highlighting societal issues than classic social sciences teaching since fiction has an emotional layer that the social sciences lack (vii, 7, 214). Clearly, literature in a classroom setting is the perfect intermediary for discussing criticisms and problems with democracy and making students more self-aware of their democratic views and values. A suitable piece of literature would be a work that discusses the valid criticism of democracy that Larsson, Runciman, and Agamben present while also presenting views and values that could enable students to examine and determine their own democratic values. A fitting novel is, as will be argued below, Robert A. Heinlein’s science-fiction novel *Starship Troopers*. Consequently, this paper will seek to answer the following questions:

▪ How does *Starship Troopers* criticize democracy?

This question will be answered by a literary analysis of the novel where the critique of democracy is mainly categorized into three “politics” of advocacy, attack, and assent.

▪ How could the findings from question one be used to make students more self-aware of their fundamental democratic values?

This question will be answered by creating and discussing a set of questions and strategies suitable for making students examine and determine their fundamental democratic views and values.

The structure of this essay begins with a background section where the plot of the novel is summarized. Likewise, reception and critique of the novel, as well as the
historical context and previous research are presented in the background section. In the next section fundamental democratic values, what they entail, how they could be interpreted, and how they are relevant to teachers, are discussed. The theory and method section consist of a three-part discussion and definition of didactic potential, Socratic pedagogy, and the politics of advocacy, attack, and assent. In the first half of the analysis, the most relevant parts of *Starship Troopers* that criticize democracy are analyzed through its types of politics, its historical context, and current critique of democracy. In the second half of the analysis, these parts of *Starship Troopers* function as a basis for the philosophical discussions, questions, and strategies regarding fundamental democratic values.

Background

*Starship Troopers*

*Starship Troopers*, written by Robert A. Heinlein in 1959, will be the literary text analyzed in this paper. The primary plot revolves around the young man Juan “Johnny” Rico and is set in a future society ruled by a militaristic world government (Terran Federation). For most of the novel we follow Rico’s military service from a recruit to an officer as the Terran Federation goes to war against alien Arachnids, more commonly referred to as “Bugs.” Throughout the novel, the primary plot gets intertwined with discussions about moral and philosophical issues concerning suffrage, war, and civic virtue. These discussions tend to focus on the most fundamental concept of the Terran Federation: why only those who perform a two-year federal service are eligible to vote. In short, the Terran Federation is ruled by a veteran military elite whose attitude to responsibility and authority can be summed up in one quote from the novel: “Citizenship is an attitude, a state of mind, an emotional conviction that the whole is greater than the part … and that the part should be humbly proud to sacrifice itself that the whole may live” (207). The idea is that everyone who has fulfilled their duties during federal service has proved that they are ready to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of the whole.

*Reception and Critique*

*Starship Troopers* won the prestigious Hugo Award for best novel in 1960, became one of Heinlein’s best-selling books and is considered his most well-known work. Still,
*Starship Troopers* has also received a considerable amount of criticism for the political views it seems to support. Specifically, it seems that Heinlein disapproves of democracy and supports a type of militarism that is virtually fascist in its politics (Booker & Thomas 156). For clarification, militarism in this context is “any military activity that does not contribute directly to the purpose of military forces to prevent or win wars” (Vagt qtd. in Gray 329) and “the tendency of military institutions and their allies not only toward self-aggrandizement but also toward the promotion of war itself” (Gray 329). Some examples of militarism in *Starship Troopers* are the fact that there is no clear description of how the Terran Federation would function in times of peace and that the society we see through Rico’s eyes is based on the social Darwinist notion of society as a struggle for survival based on military strength. Consequently, the Terran Federation can be viewed as a militaristic society.

In a more general sense, Heinlein is often described as one of the main proponents of the premise that war is a natural part of human life. Also, scientific progress will not end war, it might simply displace it in time or space (Gray 316). Since Heinlein sees war as a natural part of human life, his works of science-fiction tend to involve war. Furthermore, this notion of Heinlein promoting militarism as utopian is reinforced by Heinlein’s own words about how imaginative he believes science-fiction to be:

> Science fiction is speculative fiction in which the author takes as his first postulate the real world as we know it, including all established facts and natural laws. The result can be extremely fantastic in content but it is not fantasy; it is legitimate — and often tightly reasoned – speculation about the possibilities of the real world. (Heinlein qtd. in Grady 194).

To summarize, Heinlein’s political views in *Starship Troopers* are not merely fantasy or fiction, it is *speculative* fiction. This means that the society depicted in *Starship Troopers* is, according to Heinlein, a possible and even likely society for the future.

**Historical Context**

Heinlein’s political views of a speculative militaristic future society are at least partly a product of its time. *Starship Troopers* was written during the Cold War, more specifically in the years in-between McCarthyism, or The Second Red Scare, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Additionally, after the Castle Bravo American nuclear test in 1954 and its unexpectedly large radiation fallout (Jacobs 2015), the US started to negotiate a nuclear test ban with the other nuclear powers. Essentially, this meant that...
the US had to trust its biggest rival, the Soviet Union, in how they handled their most destructive weapons. Before any treaty was signed, Heinlein had stated his strong objections to such an agreement, citing the Soviet Union’s poor record of promise-keeping. When President Eisenhower suspended nuclear testing, the Soviet Union quickly broke its promise and started testing the largest nuclear weapons ever detonated. This infuriated Heinlein and made him write *Starship Troopers* in a “white-hot fury” in only a few weeks (Gifford 2). The result is a novel that aims to be a response “to the belief of Heinlein (and many others) that the US was becoming soft and complacent in the late 1950s and was therefore not prepared to meet an all-out communist assault, should such an assault occur” (Brooker & Thomas 215). Essentially, Heinlein wanted to remind us that some enemies can only be defeated by force, and that societies that want to remain free and democratic sometimes have to exert that force. In brief, Heinlein wrote *Starship Troopers* as a criticism of both democracy and communism.

With Fukuyama’s post-Cold War notion of liberal democracy being the natural last evolutionary step of human governance, *Starship Troopers* is then put into another historical context. In the almost decade-long period of relative global peace between the fall of the Soviet Union and the 9/11 attacks, the view of *Starship Troopers* is best illustrated by its movie adaptation with the same title. The movie was released in 1997 and is a highly satirical interpretation of the novel. According to its director Paul Verhoeven, he “wasn’t interested in a movie adaptation that took Heinlein’s politics at face value. What he and his RoboCop co-screenwriter Neumeier aimed for instead was to inflate Heinlein’s overblown ideals to the max, flaunt their pomposity and then explode them like confetti” (Singer). Verhoeven wanted to warn his viewers of the fascist elements present in American society. However, in the 1990s, most critics saw the *Starship Troopers* movie to be “one-dimensional” and “totalitarian” and dismissed its messages completely (Singer). Consequently, the movie from 1997 functioned as a warning against undemocratic values while the novel from 1958 functioned as a warning against democratic values. Lastly, this movie adaptation has received far more attention from scholars than the novel. Popular research topics are the playful parodic ambiguities of Nazism and new media (Strzelczyk), fascism, genocide, and American “military-industrial-media-entertainment network” (Crim), and the role of spectacle in censorship (Williams).
In brief, the previous research on Starship Troopers and its movie adaptation has not fully analyzed their critique of essential elements of democracy. Additionally, there has been no research on how to use Starship Troopers in a didactical setting. The focus of my research is then to examine the critique of democracy in the novel Starship Troopers and to implement those findings didactically in a classroom setting. Also, my aim is to situate Starship Troopers within current democratic problems mentioned by Larsson, Runciman, and Agamben while still having Heinlein’s original historical context in mind.

Starship Troopers is a most suitable novel for classroom discussions about democracy and fundamental democratic values. First, much of the plot revolves around the views of the Terran Federation and their form of government. Second, these views are usually presented in contrast to democracy, where democracy is always seen as an inferior form of government. Third, a vast majority of these discussions about said views are presented in a classroom setting, creating a sense of familiarity for the students. Fourth, the difficulty level of the language and style is appropriate for upper school students, Fifth, the novel is an award-winning novel and could, therefore, be considered to be of high quality. Sixth, the novel has an added layer of a strong historical context that could be used to broaden the discussion.

**Fundamental Democratic Values**
In order to use Starship Troopers in a classroom setting, some guidelines have to be followed. The principal guideline of the Swedish upper secondary school system is situated in the beginning curriculum of the upper secondary school. There, the fundamental values are stated as the following:

The national school system is based on democratic foundations. The Education Act (2010:800) stipulates that education in the school system aims at students acquiring and developing knowledge and values. It should promote the development and learning of students, and a lifelong desire to learn. Education should impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based. The education should be based on scientific grounds and proven experience. Each and everyone working in the school should also encourage respect for the intrinsic value of each person and the environment we all share.

The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity between people are the values that the education should represent and impart. In accordance with the ethics borne by Christian tradition and Western humanism, this is to be achieved by nurturing in
the individual a sense of justice, generosity, tolerance and responsibility. Teaching should be non-denominational. (National Agency for Education, Curriculum 4).

Clearly, the fundamental values are stated in the beginning of the second paragraph of the quote. However, I do not consider those values to be fundamental, democratic, or thought-provoking enough for a classroom discussion based on fundamental democratic values. Therefore, in order to create a lesson plan on fundamental democratic values, one has to define what the most fundamental parts of democracy are. According to the UN resolution mentioned in the introduction, the seven “essential elements” of democracy are: 1) separation and balance of power, 2) independence of the judiciary, 3) a pluralistic system of political parties and organizations, 4) respect for the rule of law, 5) accountability and transparency, 6) free, independent and pluralistic media, and 7) respect for human and political rights. In a sense, democracy can be condensed into voting rights, authority, responsibility, and the rule of law – the four central parts of a democracy that affect all of its citizens and institutions. As a result, voting rights, authority, responsibility, and the rule of law should all be areas discussed when the educational system tries to impart and establish respect for the fundamental democratic values.

The next step is to define how to impart and establish respect for these fundamental democratic values. In the curriculum for upper secondary school, there are no specific strategies on how to achieve this, but there are some general guidelines. The curriculum states that the school system is supposed to impart fundamental democratic values, and the teaching methods used should be democratic in nature to “develop the students’ ability and willingness to take personal responsibility and participate actively in societal life” (National Agency for Education, Curriculum 5). Also, every student should be able to individually “determine their views based on knowledge of human rights and fundamental democratic values, as well as personal experiences” (National Agency for Education, Curriculum 10). Lastly, teachers are supposed to “make clear the fundamental democratic values of Swedish society and human rights, and together with the students discuss conflicts that can occur between these values and rights and actual events” (National Agency for Education, Curriculum 11). These discussions about the possible conflicts between values and actual events are supposed to occur openly so the students are able to analyze different values, views, problems, and their consequences. (National Agency for Education, Curriculum 11). In summary, teachers
are supposed to impart knowledge about fundamental democratic values, enable the students to determine their fundamental democratic views, and openly discuss and analyze potential conflicts between fundamental democratic values and actual events. A balanced approach would, therefore, be to combine all these elements in a teaching module or lesson plan.

Before continuing, a critical outlook on the notion of fundamental values, of any kind, is desirable. David O. Kronlid, Professor of Ethics at Uppsala University, has written a work on the weaknesses of both the content and idea of the current fundamental values. Kronlid would like schools to put more emphasis on revealing and exploring the views and attitudes of the students. It would be, according to Kronlid, unethical to reject these views and attitudes, even if they were undemocratic. Obviously, the teacher would have to be skilled and experienced enough to handle possible conflicts arising from these discussions, such as insults and threats connected to students possibly advocating for views that could be racist, sexist, or fascist. The risks of revealing these undemocratic values are indeed plentiful, but it is necessary to train our students in how to defend democracy (Kronlid 121). I agree with Kronlid’s notion of the benefits outweighing the risks; locking our students into the safe space of the fundamental values does not prepare them for the exposure to alternative values found outside of the classroom. Additionally, Kronlid considers the whole construction and power of the fundamental values of the school system to be too restrictive. The teaching of specific morals and values could backfire and create students that are shaped after a specific mold, essentially “conserving democracy rather than developing it” (Kronlid, 126, my translation). Therefore, this paper avoids the notion of teaching values, and instead focuses on making students more self-aware of their views and values. A final thought from Kronlid is the possibility of the fundamental values becoming less democratic, since, after all, the fundamental values are created by elected politicians. A timeless defense of democracy independent from the current fundamental values is, therefore, to be preferred.

A suitable course for combining the critique of democracy found in Starship Troopers, a discussion on the students’ fundamental democratic values, and the guidelines put forth by The National Agency for Education, is English 7, an elective course for students in their senior year of upper secondary school. One reason for this is that one of the five main aims of the English subject is, according to the English syllabus, to give the students the opportunity to develop the “ability to discuss and
reflect on living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (National Agency for Education, English 2). Considering the fact that Starship Troopers’ critique of democracy was shaped by its historical context and the American perspective of the Cold War, English 7 constitutes the right environment to discuss the novel. Also, English 7 is the only course advanced enough to include content of communication such as “[t]heoretical and complex subject areas … [of] societal issues, … thoughts, opinions, ideas, experiences and feelings …” (National Agency for Education, English 11). In my view, fundamental democratic values are a theoretical and complex subject area that involves many types of thoughts, opinions, ideas, experiences, and feelings.

Lastly, another relevant part of the core content a teacher should include in English 7 is the following: “Oral and written production and interaction in different situations and for different purposes where students argue from different perspectives, apply, reason, assess, investigate, negotiate and give reasons for their views” (National Agency for Education, English 12). This quote describes how the fundamental democratic values could be discussed and analyzed in a classroom. In summary, according to the parts quoted from the curriculum for English in upper secondary school, it is relevant for a teacher to use Starship Troopers, its critique of democracy, and alternative fundamental values in a classroom setting to enable the students to become more self-aware of their fundamental democratic values.

Theory & Method

Didactic Potential

As mentioned in the previous section, the curriculum instructs teachers to impart knowledge about fundamental democratic values, enable the students to determine their fundamental democratic views, and discuss potential conflicts between fundamental democratic values and actual events. Since Starship Troopers has been chosen as the teaching material to achieve the aims above, the first step would be to analyze its didactic potential. This concept is borrowed from Malin Alkestrand and her doctoral thesis on how fantasy novels could be used to problematize fundamental values in school (67-76). Analyzing didactic potential, in this case, means to analyze how Starship Troopers creates opportunities to problematize issues of fundamental democratic values.
One important distinction to note is that *Starship Troopers* highlights many central issues that are not connected to the fundamental democratic values of the upper secondary school per se. These other issues are also useful in a classroom situation. Likewise, a novel’s didactic potential is not limited to how well it serves as a good example of fundamental democratic values. Conversely, *Starship Troopers* is not specifically a good or bad example of fundamental democratic values, but rather a novel filled with contradictions. This is a similar view of didactic potential as Gerald Graff has in his analysis of Conrad Heart’s *Heart of Darkness*. He concludes that there is a didactic potential in bringing up the internal contradictions of *Heart of Darkness* as a method to show the political conflicts that are connected to, for instance, racism (Graff 25-33, 142-143).

More specifically, for a novel to reach its full didactic potential, the reader(s) must engage in some type of dialogue with the novel. There are several levels at which a student can engage in a dialogue with a novel. These levels are: 1) individual reading, 2) literature discussion, and 3) classroom interaction. These three levels are based on a model created by Kathleen McCormick in her work *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English*. On the first level, the reader is engaged in an individual dialogue with the text, meaning that the only factors involved in the dialogue are the reader’s own experiences, ideologies, and values. On the second level, the reader’s individual dialogue is supplemented and possibly challenged by another reader’s experiences, ideologies, and values. In brief, by discussing a text with another reader, the didactic potential could get highlighted and/or expanded. The third level, and the most interesting level for this paper, concerns how classroom interaction affects the didactic potential of a novel. In a classroom setting, the teacher functions as a link between the novel and the students. This linkage could take many forms: the teacher could, for example, provide the students with a set of questions before they read the novel, or make the students discuss the novel in groups. Whatever the specific lesson plan may be, the teacher somehow focuses the students’ attention on specific parts of the novel (McCormick 73, 79, 88).

It is important to note that this teacher-led classroom interaction has both advantages and shortcomings. On one hand, the teacher could be able to expand the didactic potential by highlighting issues that the students would not otherwise be able to notice. On the other hand, by highlighting specific issues, the teacher could inhibit other issues that the students themselves identified and found to be important.
Additionally, teachers should avoid to wittingly or unwittingly impose their beliefs onto the students uncritically (Lipman et al. 69) Nevertheless, a teacher should not try to distance himself from his own experiences, ideologies, and values. Instead, the goal is to integrate the personal beliefs mentioned above in a professional manner. Also, a teacher should base his teaching on his didactic reading of the novel in question. A didactic reading ensures that the teacher reads the novel with the future classroom interaction in mind (Thorson 27-28 qtd. in Alkestrand 74). Furthermore, students could also be more affected by the social framing of the classroom and what kind of answers the teacher expects than the actual content of the novel (Malmgren 99-100 qtd. in Alkestrand 74).

In summary, the didactic potential of a novel is determined by the level of complexity of the interaction students manage to achieve with said novel. Furthermore, a novel’s didactic potential is based on the teacher’s ability to create a classroom environment where the social framing of the classroom and the teacher’s own personal beliefs are handled professionally. A practical middle ground to reach the maximum amount of didactic potential is for the teacher to let the reactions of the students be the foundation of the classroom discussion while simultaneously keeping the discussions connected to the teacher’s individual reading of the novel. One method of achieving this middle ground is by implementing *Socratic pedagogy*.

**Socratic Pedagogy**

Nussbaum has written extensively about the power of Socratic pedagogy and uses the classic proclamation by Socrates: “the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being” as an introduction (Nussbaum 47). For this paper, I would like to twist that quote into “Unexamined values are not worth having for human beings,” meaning that fundamental democratic values should be dissected through Socratic pedagogy to “stimulate students to argue and think for themselves, rather than defer to tradition and authority” (Nussbaum 48). Simply stating the fundamental values of the curriculum does not instill any meaningful democratic views or understanding. Instead, students need to examine themselves, or else they could be easily influenced by others (Nussbaum 50). In brief, Socratic pedagogy enables the students to truly examine and determine their fundamental democratic values.

Philosopher Matthew Lipman, together with A.M. Sharp, and F.S. Oscanyan have created a detailed curriculum for applying Socratic pedagogy in the classroom.
One chapter is a walkthrough on how teachers could guide a philosophical discussion. The general idea is to guide the discussion through philosophical questions. Logically, these questions are based on the discipline of philosophy, which is defined as:

a discipline that considers alternative ways of acting, creating and speaking. To discover these alternatives, philosophers persistently appraise and examine their own assumptions and presuppositions, question what other people normally take for granted, and speculate imaginatively concerning ever more comprehensive frames of reference. (Lipman et al. 88).

Also, the goal of philosophical education is to develop students’ intellectual judgement and to make them think effectively. The method proposed by Lipman consists, firstly, of a teacher who acts as a questioner, stimulating and facilitating the discussion with an interest in different points of view, contradictions, and particular opinions. By being the guide and questioner of a philosophical discussion, the teacher should aim at keeping the discussion relevant and keeping the length of any particular part of the discussion proportionate. Therefore, the philosophical discussion becomes cumulative as it grows and develops. By following this method, Lipman claims that withdrawn or reserved students feel more inclined to put forth their opinions because each point of view will be respected and taken seriously (Lipman et al. 89-90).

However, creating the environment needed for a successful philosophical discussion is difficult and requires the right type of setup. Ideally, the discussion should move from a teacher-student interchange towards a gradual student-student interchange as the discussion progresses. In order to achieve that, the teacher needs to “develop a feeling for which sort of question is appropriate to each situation and for the sequence in which such questions can be asked” (Lipman et al. 99). Lipman presents eleven different sorts of questions a teacher could ask to achieve the kind of thoughtful discussion that is desirable: 1) eliciting views or opinions, 2) helping students express themselves: clarification and restatement, 3) explicating students’ views, 4) interpretation, 5) seeking consistency, 6) requesting definitions, 7) searching for assumptions, 8) indicating fallacies, 9) requesting reasons, 10) asking students to say how they know, and 11) eliciting and examining alternatives. (Lipman et al. 100-111).

Lastly, there are some general strategies that complement the more specific eleven types of questions mentioned above. These general strategies consist of 1) grouping ideas, 2) suggesting possible lines of consequence or divergence, and 3) moving discussions to a higher level of generality (Lipman et al. 112). In the last section of the analysis, these eleven
types of questions and general strategies will be the framework for how to guide a philosophical discussion about *Starship Troopers* and fundamental democratic values.

*Politics of Advocacy, Attack, and Assent*

Before any type of philosophical discussion can take place in the classroom, the teacher needs to prepare by performing his own didactic reading of the novel in question. I chose to perform an ideological analysis of *Starship Troopers* since ideology essentially is a system of values. My analysis will be based on educationalist Peter Hollindale’s theory of the three types of ideologies present in children’s literature. The first type is explicit ideologies, which Hollindale sees as conscious, deliberate, and pointed beliefs presented by the writer. The second type is implicit ideologies, which are seen as passive, unexamined, and underlying beliefs communicated by the writer (Hollindale 10-13). The third type of ideology is historic ideologies: “A large part of any book is written not by its author but by the world its author lives in” (Hollindale 15). This last type of ideology is a concept that should never be overlooked, and that it why the historical context of when *Starship Troopers* was written will be added into the analysis.

However, to fully analyze how democracy is criticized in *Starship Troopers*, a more detailed theory of ideologies is needed. A suitable theory has been written by Robert D. Sutherland, semiotician and linguist, who expands the theory of explicit and implicit ideologies by categorizing them into three different “politics.” Sutherland’s definition of ideology is the following and this will be the definition used in this paper. Ideologies are the authors’ respective value systems, their notions of how the world is or ought to be. These values—reflecting a set of views and assumptions regarding such things as “human nature,” social organization and norms of behavior, moral principles, questions of good and evil, right and wrong, and what is important in life—constitute authors’ ideologies. (Sutherland 143).

The three categories of “politics” are: 1) the politics of advocacy, 2) the politics of attack, and 3) the politics of assent. The politics of advocacy is when an author pleads and promotes, either explicitly or implicitly, a specific cause or upholds a point of view or course of action being moral and right (Sutherland 145). Examples of the politics of advocacy in literature could be honesty or national pride. Conversely, the politics of attack is the opposite of the politics of advocacy and may include attacks on issues such
as sexuality, slavery, or dishonesty (Sutherland 147). Combined, the politics of advocacy and the politics of attack are types of explicit ideologies.

Lastly, the politics of assent concerns prevalent ideologies of our current society that the novel in question affirms. By affirming widely accepted ideologies, the work manifests the current status quo and therefore inhibits change (Sutherland 152). Authors and readers alike could very well not be aware of all of the politics of assent within a novel, which makes it a powerful reinforcing force of the status quo. Sutherland even concludes that the politics of assent is the most potent one:

> of the three types of political expression, its influence is especially potent, for its persuasive force is hidden. Yet its consequences in shaping attitude and behavior are profound. By inhibiting change and supporting tradition, it has great potential impact on the shape of society—for good or ill (155).

Although I agree with Sutherland’s definition, I would like to expand the politics of assent to also include how it is applied to the inhabitants of the Terran Federation.

Sutherland is not the only one that sees the politics of assent as an inhibitor of change and supporter of tradition. Roberta Seelinger Trites has noticed a trend of delegitimization of adolescence among adolescent literature: “[adolescent texts] accomplish this delegitimization by frequently conveying to readers the ideological message that they need to grow up, to give up the subject position culturally marked ‘adolescent.’” (83). Furthermore, since adult characters are usually the ones who must be rebelled against, and adult authors are usually the source of the text’s repressive ideology, it seems that adolescent literature conveys the message that authority does not and should not belong to adolescents. The result is that adolescent literature becomes an institution that wants to repress adolescents for the greater good. (Seelinger Trites 83).

The three types of politics described above will be the three main tools used to analyze how democracy is criticized in *Starship Troopers*. These types of politics will then be used to determine the didactic potential of the novel, and as a last step these politics will form the foundation for the guidelines for a philosophical discussion.
Analysis

Critique of Democracy in Starship Troopers

In this first half of the analysis, the sections of Starship Troopers that are most closely tied to the essential elements of democracy (voting rights, authority, responsibility, and the rule of law) and fundamental democratic values are analyzed through its politics of advocacy, attack, and assent. These findings will be discussed through the historical context of Heinlein and current criticism of democracy made by Larsson, Runciman, and Agamben. All these steps are taken to ensure that Starship Troopers has a high level of didactic potential and can be used to make students more self-aware of their fundamental democratic values.

Throughout Starship Troopers, the most comprehensive politics of attack, advocacy, or assent concerning democracy happens in either a high school or military classroom setting. These segments are either recollections of Johny Rico’s history and moral philosophy classes during his high school years, or military classes happening in the present time. Thus, Rico’s teacher, Mr. Dubois, or Rico’s instructor, Major Reid, usually figure as speakers and teachers while the readers also get to experience Rico’s thoughts during these classes.

The Founding Veterans

In order to understand the society of the Terran Federation, Heinlein provides a description of its origin. In this section, the instructor Major Reid explains the basics of how and why war veterans became the ruling class. The major problems for the democratic societies started after the end of the war between the Russo-Anglo-American Alliance and the Chinese Hegemony in 1987. The peace treaty that followed ignored the subject of prisoners of war, resulting in the prisoners of war on the Russo-Anglo-American side to be set free while the prisoners of war who were captured by the Chinese Hegemony stayed. While never explained in detail, the situation for the prisoners of war on both sides created such discontent among the peoples of the Russo-Anglo-American democratic states that great disorders spread. Eventually, these disorders toppled the democratic states, and war veterans were the only ones able to stop the chaos.

While not being a case of an explicit politics of attack, the democratic states’ inability to handle the disorders is an implicit attack on the openness of democratic
This openness, according to Larsson, is a common critique of democratic societies since it enables crime to spread more easily than in a non-democratic and closed society (13). Also, Major Reid strongly implies that the disorders started because the Russo-Anglo-American Alliance ignored their prisoners of war, and he keeps pestering Rico on whether a state should go to war over one unreleased prisoner of war (226-228). Finally, Rico answers, “[i]t doesn’t matter whether it’s a thousand – or just one, sir. You fight” (228), an answer that Major Reid approves of. The attacks on democracy are again implicit in the form of making the alliance of democratic states look weak and slow, compared to the Chinese Hegemony. When Major Reid pestered Rico about the unreleased prisoners of war, Major Reid claimed that a new or resumed war would almost certainly result in millions of deaths. A democratically ruled society would most likely not vote to sacrifice millions for only a few. In comparison, the Chinese Hegemony chose not merely to keep their prisoners of war, but also chose to go as far as sentencing thousands of civilians captured during the war under suspicious “political” pretenses (227). As discussed in the introduction, one of the critiques of democracy Larsson mentions is that democracy can be too slow and inefficient – a critique that is implied during this whole section. By saying that the democratic states chose peace over the freedom of every single prisoner of war, Major Reid implies that democracy does not serve the best interest of everyone. A lack of responsibility is implied, although if looking at the lack of responsibility from another angle, starting a war over one prisoner of war would put an enormous amount of authority on that single prisoner. Also, by ignoring the prisoners of war, the democratic states sow the seeds of their own destruction, as war veterans and escaped prisoners of war became the ones spearheading the change of governmental system.

This new system, casually explained as civilians doing “what they were told, see?—while us apes straightened things out!” (230). The “apes” ruling the civilians are the veterans, in Major Reid’s classroom parlance. While the system of veterans ruling civilians obviously is a vastly different system than democracy, Major Reid assures his cadets that the veterans never instigated any type of revolution. Instead, the veterans took power over matters the collapsing democratic national governments could no longer control (229). This seemingly minuscule detail indicates that the takeover by the veterans could have been a result of a prolonged state of emergency. For instance, it seems likely that the veterans could have been a type of military police conducting unlawful arrests and even killings as a way of subduing the escalating disorders.
Ultimately, this military police force grew stronger, and these emergency measures became normalized, creating this new form of government without having to remove the old democratic system. Essentially, as Major Reid states, the veterans did not have to rebel to take power because the old system of power had slowly collapsed; thus, this takeover was a replacement—not a revolution. Most importantly, this means that the whole system of the Terran Federation could be seen as a continuous state of emergency. Either way, if the veterans instigated a revolt it was unlawful, and if the state of emergency became the new norm, then the rule of law is at least severely weakened.

*The Perfect Federation of Authority and Responsibility*

The rest of the discussion between Major Reid, Rico, and his classmates is a discussion on why their system functions so well. Therefore, the upcoming paragraphs are mostly descriptions of the politics of advocacy concerning the governmental system of the Terran Federation. Major Reid asks numerous cadets why franchise is only limited to discharged veterans. The cadets do not know the correct answer, but they provide Major Reid with some adequate guesses. The first guess is that the veterans are simply smarter, a notion that Major Reid dismisses completely since scientists “can be men so self-centered as to be lacking in social responsibility” (189). This view is linked to Larsson’s notion of politicians sometimes trumping experts in democracies. In Major Reid’s view, experts should be denied any access to political policy making. The second guess is that the veterans are the most disciplined, an answer that Major Reid rejects by stating that some veterans have a background in non-combatant federal service, meaning that they were not subjected to the rigors of military discipline. Also, the crime rate of veterans is as high as the crime rate of civilians.

Then Major Reid takes over and explains to the cadets that “[t]hroughout history men have labored to place the sovereign franchise in hands that would guard it well and use it wisely, for the benefit of all” (231). He continues by stating that monarchy, anarchy, and everything in between has been tried in thousands of ways for thousands of years. Even “unlimited democracies,” Major Reid states, “excluded one quarter of their population by age, birth, poll tax, criminal record, or other” (232). The point that Major Reid makes, and the answer he has alluded to during his whole class, is that the Terran Federation system works because “every voter and officeholder is a man who has demonstrated through voluntary and difficult service that he places the
welfare of the group ahead of personal advantage” (233). Clearly, this quote is a nod towards the earlier discussion on how not fighting for every last prisoner of war led to great disorders among the democratic states.

Democracy is seen as a system where personal gain is at the center and the welfare of the group is put aside. This criticism somewhat mirrors David Runciman’s critique of the current state of democracy—where he no longer sees democracy as fully able to solve collective problems because personal recognition through the ballot has become more important than problem-solving. Personal recognition does not necessarily equate to personal advantage, but it at least highlights the problem of the collective welfare being seen as the opposite of personal advantage. By removing the importance of personal recognition, the Terran Federation has, according to Major Reid, collectively created a society of no rebellions, great personal freedom, few laws, low taxes, a high standard of living, and a low crime rate. Why Major Reid chose to mention “few laws” specifically could be another allusion to the notion that the Terran Federation is, by extension, a continuous state of emergency.

Why the system works so well is also explained by the system’s ability to balance authority with responsibility. Major Reid sees authority as a concept closely related to force:

To vote is to wield authority, it is the supreme authority from which all other authority derives … Force, if you will!—the franchise is force, naked and raw, the Power of the Rods and the Ax. Whether it is exerted by ten men or by ten billions, political authority is force (234).

However, personal responsibility is equally important, a responsibility that Major Reid thinks the democratic system lacked. He sees the unlimited democracies as a system of unlimited authority by the voters, but without the component of any type of social responsibility. As a result, the democratic voters could vote for the impossible but experience the disastrous possible instead. According to Major Reid, the system of only granting voting rights to veterans is the perfect mix between authority and responsibility:

Since sovereign franchise is the ultimate in human authority, we insure that all who wield it accept the ultimate in social responsibility—we require each person who wishes to exert control over the state to wager his own life—and lose it, if need be—to save the life of the state. The maximum responsibility a human can accept is thus equated to the ultimate authority a human can exert. Yin and yang, perfect and equal. (235).
This notion of direct responsibility for those who exert their authority through the ballot is by no means a completely foreign concept when looking at the historical context of *Starship Troopers* and Heinlein. Before the US entered the First World War in 1917, a group of Nebraska residents sent a petition for a proposed constitutional amendment that would require a national referendum before Congress could declare war. Additionally, and most controversially, the voters who voted yes would be forced to enlist (Kessler). The outcome of this proposed amendment would have been that those who voted for the US entering the First World War would be prepared to be sent to Europe and fight the war themselves. The main difference between the system of the Terran Federation and the proposed amendment is then that the proposed amendment has a more immediate effect on the electorate. The veterans of the federal service in *Starship Troopers* have *already* proved to be prepared to sacrifice themselves for the state, while according to the proposed amendment, voting for war could send you to war *immediately*. However, the similarity between the fictional system of the Terran Federation and the proposed amendment is that the responsibility accepted or declined when either voting for or against a declaration of war, or when choosing to complete federal service or not, is in both cases entirely a matter of voluntary choice. Major Reid explains the concept with these words: “Social responsibility above the level of family, or at most tribe, requires imagination—devotion, loyalty, all the higher virtues—which a man must develop himself; if he has them forced down him, he will vomit them out” (236). While the concept of forcing those who vote for war to enlist never gained any serious traction, the notion of conducting a national referendum before a declaration of war remained popular all the way up until 1938, when it was definitively defeated by a vote in Congress. Congressman Ludlow, the main supporter of the proposed amendment of 1938, said the following about the philosophy of the proposed amendment:

> The amendment would do more to keep American boys out of slaughter pens in foreign countries than any other measure that could be passed. It is based on the philosophy that those who have to suffer and, if need be, to die and to bear the awful burdens and griefs of war shall have something to say as to whether war shall be declared. (*New York Times* qtd. in Head & Boehringer 2018).

Clearly, the notion of a direct link between personal authority and responsibility is by no means a novel idea without any historical precedent. In summary, what Heinlein
advocates for is a governmental system where social and collective responsibility is closely linked to the decision-making and policies made by the ruling class.

What Man is
The third type of politics found in this classroom scene with Major Reid, Rico, and Rico’s classmates is the politics of assent. In my view, the politics of assent is mainly found in the believed naturalness of the system that the Terran Federation has created. These aspects are not, as in the paragraphs discussing politics of attack and advocacy, compared to democracy in the same way because they are not truly challenged—it is what it is. I would, therefore, consider these values to be as fundamental as can be.

As stated above in Major Reid’s list of successful societal achievements of the Terran Federation, he states that “[m]any complain but none rebel …” (232), a situation a cadet has to explain the logic behind later. The cadet explains that “[i]f you separate out the aggressive ones and make them the sheep dogs, the sheep will never give you trouble” (235). This could be seen a natural fail-safe in the system that follows the basic principle of giving the potentially most dangerously rebellious persons the access to the personal recognition and authority they demand. Although rebellions have been non-existent, the wars seem to have spread outward as a result of the system of the Terran Federation. As Congressman Ludlow stated in the previous paragraph, the idea to connect authority with responsibility, at least in matters of war, through the proposed amendment was to avoid the slaughter of “American boys.” In the world of the Terran Federation, that notion seems to have failed completely as the Federation is locked in a constant galactical battle against the “Bugs” or any other type of alien lifeform. This situation is explained in Rico’s mind as deriving from the most basic moral rule: “all correct moral rules […] derive from the instinct to survive; moral behavior is survival behavior above the individual level” (236-237). The logical next step is then, according to Rico, that all wars are a result of population pressure. More specifically, this means that all peoples or species always have to maximize their population and territory; otherwise another people or species will take their place. Rico’s inner dialogue ends with the question of whether it is right to wipe out other species and spread mankind throughout the universe. His answer is clear:

Man is what he is, a wild animal with the will to survive, and (so far) the ability, against all competition. Unless one accepts that, anything one says about morals, war, politics—you name it—is nonsense. Correct
morals arise from knowing what Man is—not what do-gooders and well-meaning old Aunt Nellies would like him to be. (238).

Here Rico reveals the core politics of assent, the absolute fundamental value that cannot be challenged: that whatever the Terran Federation is or does is unavoidably natural. It seems obvious then that rebellion is futile, that alternative forms of governance, values, and views are a waste of time, and that the Terran Federation is the natural last evolutionary step of human governance.

The underlying theme of naturalness throughout the sections discussed so far follow a few steps and principles: 1) democracies collapsed because they were not willing to fight for the greater good of everyone, even if that meant sacrificing millions to save only a few, 2) war veterans took over, since they naturally had been prepared to sacrifice themselves for the greater good, 3) since this system was performing better than any alternatives, it spread and eventually turned into the Terran Federation, 4) its continuation was secured by a natural balance between authority and responsibility, and 5) since man is what he is, a being trying to survive, this system is the natural result of that willingness to survive.

_How to Raise a Society_

Another prime example of a section discussing fundamental democratic values is a long classroom discussion in one of Rico’s History and Moral Philosophy classes in high school. Again, the topic of the disorders that preceded the formation of the Terran Federation, is discussed: “‘Law-abiding people,’ Dubois had told us, ‘hardly dared go into a public park at night. To do so was to risk attack by wolf packs of children, armed with chains, knives, homemade guns, bludgeons … to be hurt at least, robbed most certainly, injured for life probably—or even killed’” (143). Rico’s immediate thought was disbelief and an inability to “imagine such things happening in our schools” (143). The quotes above suggest that Mr. Dubois sees the disorderly children as “wolf packs,” implying that since they were not law-abiding citizens, they were barely human. While, again, being a case of politics of attack on the democratic system of the olden days and its inability to handle crime, it is simultaneously a case of politics of assent of the dangers of adolescents rebelling.

This type of politics of assent is precisely what was discussed in the Theory and Method section, where Seelinger Trites’ notion of adolescent literature’s ability to stifle adolescent rebellion was brought up. Clearly, these “wolf packs of children” did not,
and should not wield the authority that the adult population do. This notion is reinforced by the fact that the only adult in the classroom, the teacher Mr. Dubois, is the one describing the horrific nature of the disorders led by adolescents. In this case, it is not too speculative to consider Mr. Dubois to be an extension of Heinlein’s views. Here we do see the double-sided nature of the classic adolescent novel, while Starship Troopers in mainly a coming-of-age novel where the main character rejects the values of his parents by volunteering for federal service, it is also a novel that informs the readers of the horrors of adolescent rebellion. Seelinger Trites calls this repression of the adolescent as a “repression for the greater good” (83), a sentiment that fits perfectly into the world of Starship Troopers, where rebellion on all levels are repressed for the good of humanity. Additionally, Rico’s own thoughts about Mr. Dubois’ comments tell us that the Terran Federation had been the status quo for so long that he was unable to conceive a different system, meaning that the politics of assent is dominant when describing the adolescent main character.

Mr. Dubois then lectures the class on why the Terran Federation never has any disorders like the ones in the olden days. He compares their system of upbringing to the upbringing of a puppy. In more specific terms, Mr. Dubois says that children need to be scolded and spanked if they behave badly, just as one would (according to Mr. Dubois) when housebreaking a puppy (144-146). In the world of the Terran Federation, parents and the government have the authority and are encouraged to scold, spank, and even flog their children if necessary. Again, children are described and compared to animals as they are now law-abiding puppies instead of disorderly packs of wolves, suggesting a widespread forced system of obedience, especially for the younger part of the population. Also, the old democratic society of the past is used again as a contrast to instill the naturalness of the current system. In the past, flogging was only a lawful sentence in one state and was rarely invoked.

Mr. Dubois continues by saying that a judge’s sentences should “cause the criminal to suffer, else there is no punishment—and pain is the basic mechanism which safeguards us by warning when something threatens our survival” (146). He concludes by seeing no reason why people in the past stayed away from such punishments. Here Heinlein employs a different type of politics of assent; the main argument of Mr. Dubois is that physical punishment needs to be cruel and unusual in order to be significant and act as a deterrent. This works because of the human instinct to stay away from something that threatens their survival, meaning that this criminal justice system
is perfect because it is *natural*. The notion of seeing these punishments as natural is reinforced by the fact that no student ever questions Mr. Dubois’ teachings, and one student goes so far as to say: “I don’t see anything wrong with our system, it’s a lot better than not being able to walk outdoors for fear of your life—why, that’s *horrible!*” (149). To clarify, what the student sees as horrible is the democratic element of giving adolescents any type of authority and protection through the rule of law. Finally, to view a system as perfect clearly contrasts the democratic view of always discussing and trying to improve the current democratic system. Larsson lists this view as one of the essential aspects of democracy (14). Clearly, both Mr. Dubois and his students reject any discussion on how their system could possibly be improved, because it is already seen as perfect.

*The Worst Things in Life are Free*

However, there is a deeper meaning behind the systematic painful punishments. The goal is to instill *moral instinct*. This moral instinct is an elaboration of the will to survive and has to be taught by gaining moral sense through training and experience. Moral sense is needed since “[t]he instinct to survive is human nature itself, and every aspect of our personalities derive from it. Anything that conflicts with the survival instinct acts sooner or later to eliminate the individual and thereby fails to show up in future generations” (149). Still, an individual moral sense is not enough, moral sense has to be applied to all types of groups as well, such as the family, and the nation. This is another instance where the old democracies supposedly failed: they did not instill any moral duty to the group and were instead too focused on *rights*. The topic of rights is handled easily by Mr. Dubois when he plainly states that human beings have “*no natural rights of any nature*” (151). Obviously, this is not a surprising statement since the whole governmental system of the Terran Federation is based on voting rights and authority having to be earned through federal service. Moreover, since democracy is not based on any natural survival instincts, it was doomed to fail and be replaced by a more natural form of governance. The importance of earning the rights you possess is further strengthened by another classroom scene with Mr. Dubois. This scene starts with Mr. Dubois attacking the Marxist idea of “value”: that the value of a commodity is objectively measured by the number of labor hours it took to produce. Mr. Dubois compares that definition to the orthodox definition of “use” theory. His conclusion is that
unskilled work can easily subtract value, an untalented cook can turn wholesome dough and fresh green apples, valuable already, into an inedible mess, value zero. Conversely, a great chef can fashion of those same materials a confection of greater value than a commonplace apple tart, with no more effort than an ordinary cook uses to prepare an ordinary sweet. (116).

His next step is to conclude that value cannot be absolute, it is instead relative to a particular person. This notion is summed up by Mr. Dubois’ rejection of the classic sentiment “The best things in life are free,” a quote he believes to be “Not true! Utterly false!” (117). Instead, he discusses the two factors connected to relative “value” for a human being: firstly, what he can do with a thing, its use to him, and secondly, what he must do to get it, its cost to him. Mr. Dubois ends his discussion with the conclusion that the voting rights that democratic states handed to all of their citizens were the factor that brought them down. Democratic rights had no value to the voters since the voters never had to earn them. This is another allusion to the fact that there are serious problems connected to democracies with a broad electorate. Voters who do not have the correct moral sense or sense of collective responsibility will turn the whole system into an inedible mess. More voters do not automatically add more value into the system. Lastly, Mr. Dubois’ total rejection of the Marxist theory of “value” is likely the most explicit example of Heinlein criticizing Communism.

In summary, the parts analyzed above represent the fundamental democratic values connected to voting rights, authority, responsibility, and the rule of law present in Starship Troopers. As a result, these findings should be seen as my personal and didactic reading of Starship Troopers. My own personal interest in democratic values have, in connection with the guidelines found in the curriculum for the upper secondary school, created a didactic reading and analysis of Starship Troopers. In the upcoming part of the analysis, my didactic reading will function as the foundation for the philosophical discussions and will be mixed with my students’ hypothetical personal reading of Starship Troopers.

**Philosophical Questions and Strategies**

As previously stated in the Theory and Method section, this second half of the analysis will be a discussion on how the sections and views on the essential elements of democracy analyzed in Starship Troopers could be turned into a set of philosophical questions for discussing, examining, and determining students’ fundamental democratic values. As mentioned in the section on fundamental democratic values,
teachers are instructed to enable the students to “determine their fundamental democratic views,” and “discuss potential conflicts between fundamental democratic values and actual events.” By engaging the students in a Socratic discussion about fundamental democratic values in *Starship Troopers*, the students’ fundamental democratic views could be determined. Also, by engaging the students in the numerous conflicts between fundamental democratic values and the values expressed in *Starship Troopers*, students could become more self-aware of their democratic views and values.

Before continuing with the philosophical questions, I would like to clarify that I am aware that there are contradictions in creating premade questions for a philosophical classroom discussion. Philosophical discussions are supposed to be based on the participants’ answers and create a cumulative discussion, meaning that the discussion should build upon earlier contributions to the discussion (Lipman et al. 86). My intent with this section is to create four types of questions and three strategies that would most likely eventually guide the students towards topics related to fundamental democratic values. This section should, therefore, be interpreted as a general and suggestive discussion, rather than a specific mold that would fit for every classroom, at any moment, and at any level. Since the overall discussion is supposed to be based on the students’ answers, a first step for the teacher should be to “elicit views or opinions” (Lipman et al. 94). This will be done by simply asking the students what they found interesting in the novel. The first question would then be the following:

- What did you find interesting in *Starship Troopers*?

These points of interest would then be the foundation for the rest of the discussions. Nevertheless, there is a delicate balance to uphold here; while it is important to let the teacher’s interests and didactic reading of the novel influence the classroom reading, it is just as important to let the students’ personal reading and interests guide the classroom discussion. To keep this balance, the students should be allowed to first create the points of interests, and the teacher should only guide the students towards specific parts of the novel that is crucial for the aims of the lesson and teacher if the students have not been able to bring up those parts spontaneously.

A second step would be to turn the focus on the views found within *Starship Troopers*. Clearly, the simple term “views” is more compelling in a classroom environment than the more complex terms such as “ideology” or “politics” and is
therefore more fitting for eliciting a livelier discussion, at least in the beginning. A suggestion for a question would then be:

- Which views [in Starship Troopers] do you agree or disagree with?

Obviously, students could answer the question without directly relating their answer to the topics analyzed and discussed in this paper. For instance, a student could disagree with the view that the “Bugs” should be eradicated and say that a more diplomatic approach would be desirable. Another student could say that they agree with Rico’s view of defying his parents’ wishes of having him work in the family business. Still, these topics are related to the fundamental values found in the first half of the analysis.

The will to eradicate the Bugs instead of reaching any sort of diplomatic compromise is tied to the view of human authority over other species: the humans must eradicate the Bugs in order to not be eradicated themselves. Also, the system of granting voting rights and the ability to be an officeholder only after completing federal service is tied into Rico’s decision of joining the Mobile Infantry. Essentially, there should not be any problem for a teacher to eventually guide students towards the fundamental values presented in Starship Troopers or fundamental democratic values in general. However, if the teacher finds it hard to do so naturally, there are a few types of questions that the teacher could ask to move the discussion into that topic.

After eliciting which views the students agree or disagree with, the teacher could start “requesting reasons” (Lipman et al. 102) for why they agree or disagree with these views. These requests could be fairly explicit and could be in the form of questions such as:

- What makes you think that…?
- Why do you believe your view is correct?
- Would you like to tell us why that is so?

By asking these types of questions, the discussion could become more centered on fundamental democratic values. For instance, if one student says that they agree with the notion of voting rights being a right one has to earn through federal service, the type of questions above could reveal deeper opinions on voting rights and other fundamental democratic values. Lipman describes this concept as follows: “When one offers a reason in support of an opinion, it is generally because the reason is less controversial and more acceptable than the opinion it is meant to support. In other words, we appeal
to reasons because they carry plausibility” (Lipman et al. 102). Keeping with the same example stated earlier, a less controversial reason for agreeing with the notion of voting rights being a right one has to earn through federal service could be that the student sees the value of citizens having to earn voting rights, but that the requirement could be as small as a short compulsory course in high school. This reasoning is highly plausible.

Conversely, a reason for a student’s opinion could of course be more controversial than the opinion and carry a low amount of plausibility. For example, one student could say that they agree with the notion of voting rights being a right one has to earn through federal service because joining the military sounds like a fun thing to do. Clearly, the last example of opinion has no strong reasoning behind it. Lastly, students could be encouraged to find the reasoning for their opinions by citing the appropriate parts of the novel whenever possible. Still, the goal for the teacher is not to spend too much time debating the weakness of the argument, but rather to advance stronger arguments for the students’ opinions. To clarify, it is not the students’ opinions that might need improvement; it is the reasoning behind the opinions that needs to be improved. One way of achieving improved reasoning skills is to “elicit and examine alternatives” (Lipman et al. 104) by asking questions that encourage the students to explore what other alternatives there are to their reasoning. This type of questions is, for instance:

- Suppose someone wanted to contradict your view—what position could they take?
- How else could this matter be viewed?
- Does anyone else have a different view?

The overall goal here is to avoid narrow-mindedness and rigidity, and not necessarily to change the students’ convictions but rather to equip them with alternatives. If we again use the same example opinion as the one in the previous paragraph, a different view could be that voting rights is a natural or human right and should consequently not have to be earned. However, in order to guide the discussion towards the topic of fundamental democratic views and to utilize the full didactic potential of *Starship Troopers*, the teacher might need to use other types of strategies. These strategies are more general than the types of questions listed above. The first strategy is to group ideas that the students have discussed. By doing this, the teacher could help the students to see the different perspectives and views that the different
opinions and argument represent. For instance, if it has become clear to the teacher that the main two sides of the class consist of either accepting or rejecting the notion that voting right should be earned, the teacher could specify that these two sides exist. Obviously, there are cases where it has become apparent for the students that several groups or clusters of perspectives are present in the classroom. The teacher should be careful and only summarize groups of ideas when it is needed. Another useful strategy is to “suggest possible lines of consequence or divergence” (Lipman et al. 105-106) which could “broaden the range of views being offered by students, or that you’d like to steer some of the strands of discussion into greater convergence with one another” (Lipman et al. 105). Firstly, the teacher could request distinctions of specific points to sharpen the different views present in the classroom. One student could make a sweeping claim such as “democracy is weak,” but what the student actually means after being asked for a distinction is that “democracy is weak in times of war” which is a more specific claim. Clearly, this strategy is similar to the type of questioning labelled “elicit and examine alternatives” mentioned earlier. Secondly, the teacher might find it useful to show that some views expressed by the students are not merely different, but in direct conflict with one another. The teacher would then need to point out the two views’ incompatibility as their implications contradict each other. For example, one student might say that every decision made by the Terran Federation is made for the welfare of everyone, while another student might say that some decisions made by the Terran Federation are made for the welfare of everyone. Obviously, these two statements are not compatible since they lead to statements in contradiction with one another. Thirdly, the teacher could specify connections or differences between opinions expressed by the students. Lipman sees this third strategy as a tool for broadening the discussion, as highlighting differences and connections between opinions that have gone unnoticed could be useful for the overall discussion.

The final strategy is to move the discussion to higher levels of generality. More specifically, this is a chance for the teacher to “direct [the] discussion to concepts and notions that are being taken for granted, but which are in need of analysis” (Lipman et al. 106). This is where a teacher could truly raise the discussion to a higher philosophical level and start examining and determining the fundamental democratic values of the novel and the students. The class may be discussing how voting rights in Starship Troopers differ from voting rights in Sweden, or whether the system of the Terran Federation is better than the Swedish democracy at improving the lives of
everyone. While those areas are important to discuss, at some point the teacher should lead the discussion into a higher level of generality by asking questions such as “What is fairness?” or “What is authority?” It is at this stage the high didactic potential of *Starship Troopers* is apparent. Since much of the criticism of democracy and the fundamental values discussed in *Starship Troopers* concludes at a high level of generality, the classroom discussion concerning these topics should reach a high level of generality as well. Other suitable questions would then be “What are natural rights?” and “What is responsibility?” At this point it is important to notice that the aim here is not to reach a certain conclusion: the question “What is responsibility?” could have many answers. The teacher should be more interested in differences in points of view, or confirmations of and contradictions in opinions (Lipman et al. 83). Hopefully, by reaching this level of generality in the discussion, the students will be able to determine their fundamental democratic values. Also, by using the novel as an actual alternative to our democratic society, the students have a shared alternative for their values. Students should also feel less nervous about revealing and expressing views that are possibly undemocratic and which do not align with the fundamental democratic values of Swedish society.

Still, it is certainly possible to use *Starship Troopers* as a mirror towards our own values. I see a value in letting students discuss our fundamental democratic values at a high level of generality. For instance, “What are the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based?” is a question that could lead to the students realizing that they cannot agree on values that are supposed to be so obvious that they do not need to be put into words (at least by The National Agency for Education). Eventually, the students could also realize that our view of democracy is based on concepts and notions that are being taken for granted and seen as natural. Hopefully, the students could then see the possible dangers of such an idealistic view of democracy, since a different, but still naturalistic, view created such a brutal, totalitarian, and undemocratic system as the one depicted in *Starship Troopers*.

To clarify, the idea is not to undermine democracy and democratic values in the students, but rather to expose them to alternative opinions they could then choose and learn how to dispute. I see no possibility for a student ever being able to defend their democratic views and values if they never get the chance to discuss alternatives in school. Instead of avoiding undemocratic ideas about forms of government in the
classroom, we should bring them into the fray and collectively poke and prod their views, values, notions, opinions, reasons, and arguments.

**Further Remarks and Possible Problems**

There are a few matters that I would like to discuss and clarify further in this section. Firstly, since the topic of this paper is so closely linked to democracy and other forms of government it might be beneficial to include a social sciences and/or history teacher to form a larger teaching module spanning over more than one subject. For example, this English literary teaching module could be used in combination with a broader social sciences discussion about democracy or a broader history discussion about the Cold War. Secondly, I have chosen a neutral approach to many of the views presented in *Starship Troopers*; this was chosen to focus the discussion on the alternatives to democracy, and not the strengths and weaknesses of the alternatives themselves. This was necessary for keeping the analysis focused on the arguments and reasoning behind the alternatives. For this paper, I see no value in adding my judgements on the governmental system of the Terran Federation.

There are also a few problematic areas of this paper that I would like to discuss further. Firstly, I am fully aware that this teaching module is probably not applicable in all English 7 classrooms. There could be problems with students aggressively spouting their views onto their classmates, or a teacher who is not experienced or comfortable with discussing this topic with some of their classes. Secondly, a potential weakness of *Starship Troopers* is its dominant male perspective with its male author, male main character, and almost exclusively male minor characters in a male-dominated field such as the military. The women in *Starship Troopers* are not allowed to serve in combat and may only serve on the spaceships of the navy. Instead, women serve merely as untouchable and unobtainable sexual objects. Obviously, I fully believe female students are able to identify with male characters, but it is worrisome that the female perspective is more or less non-existential in the novel. Still, the lack of the female perspective can be treated as an opportunity for another point of discussion rather than merely being seen as a problem. Thirdly, merely having a philosophical discussion about *Starship Troopers* is not what I would consider an adequate use of the novel’s didactic potential. There are many steps that could be taken before, during, and after the reading of the novel that would improve the overall learning outcomes for the students. However, I
firmly believe that teachers prefer guiding principles rather than a prefabricated mold as inspiration for their lesson planning. Furthermore, again, to keep this paper focused, and to keep the paper within the limits set by its formal guidelines, I had to focus on one of many steps in a possible teaching module involving *Starship Troopers* and fundamental democratic values.

**Conclusion**

The overall aim of this paper has been to analyze criticism of democracy in *Starship Troopers*, and to see how this criticism could help upper secondary school students become more self-aware of their fundamental democratic values. In the first part of the paper, it was established that there is a current view that democracy today has stagnated and that literary teaching in schools should be a method deployed to contribute to halting that stagnation. Furthermore, this paper concluded that *Starship Troopers* is seen by critics to endorse undemocratic values by promoting an alternative form of government. These undemocratic views are partly explained by the American historical context of the Cold War. Also, the fundamental values of the Swedish school system are presented and problematized for its perceived lack of connection to the system of democracy. It is concluded that there is no definition of said values, and the proposed solution presented in this paper is to condense fundamental democratic values into values connected to voting rights, authority, responsibility, and the rule of law.

In the second part, the analysis of *Starship Troopers* discusses voting rights, authority, responsibility, and the rule of law extensively. It is, therefore, a suitable novel for students to discuss fundamental democratic values. The literary analysis of *Starship Troopers* demonstrates that democracy is criticized in an extensive and intriguing manner. Lastly, the section on the philosophical questions and strategies a teacher could prepare conclude that these questions and strategies could help students become more self-aware of their fundamental democratic values. This is achieved by creating a classroom situation where students dare to share their opinions, and where the teacher is focused on reasoning, opinions, and points of view rather than what is considered right or wrong. Obviously, what is right or wrong when discussing fundamental democratic values is difficult, if not impossible, to determine. However, the aim of this paper was never to answer that question, but rather to present a literary lesson plan that
aims to make students examine, determine, and discuss their fundamental democratic values.

In conclusion, *Starship Troopers*, in combination with Socratic pedagogy, might be used in a classroom setting for its controversial and alternative fundamental values. Essentially, teachers and students should all examine, determine, and discuss their fundamental democratic values since these values are such an integral part of the school system. Sadly, teachers are stuck in a borderland of policies where they are required to teach, pass on, present, and discuss fundamental democratic values that are never defined. I believe that teachers that never examine their definition of fundamental democratic values and instead take them for granted are doing their students, and by extension, the democratic system a disservice. Taking concepts for granted could, if taken to extreme levels, result in classrooms becoming similar to those in *Starship Troopers*. Fundamentally, unexamined values are not worth having for students, or any human being. Choosing to blindly accept and follow the undefined fundamental democratic values of our school system is, in my mind, one of the least democratic choices one could make.
Works Cited


