

**Political Fiction:  
History, Origins and Main Writers**

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### **Abstract**

Political fiction is a genre in which political ideas and events play a dominant role throughout the context, in the form of a literary treatment of the politics, economics, social issues and culture of a nation. Its objective is to reform wrong politics, and expose corrupt and misleading politicians. In most of his works, the political novelist addresses pressing issues such as racism, discrimination, human rights, terrorism, elections, strikes, demonstrations and unjustified wars. This article discusses 'Political Fiction' in brief as a literary genre, citing some of its definitions, historical background showing some of its main figures. It examines national symbols, fake slogans of liberty and free expression, and the alleged war on terrorism and the intervention in the affairs of other countries. Political fiction also examines political references, criticizing politics, racial discrimination, causes of terrorism, and the decline of the American Dream.

**Keywords:** Political, genre, liberty, theory, postmodernism.

## الأدب السياسي تاريخه و نشأته و أبرز رواده

### مستخلص

يستعرض هذا المقال أحد أهم الألوان الأدبية المعاصرة وهو الأدب السياسي وتأثيره المباشر على حياة الناس وذلك من خلال تقديم نماذج أدبية تعكس الواقع والأحداث التاريخية والسياسية اليومية والتي يتم استعراضها بشكل روائي قصصي مثير وذلك للإستفادة منها في الحاضر وتغادي سلبياتها في المستقبل. ويهدف النقاد لهذا النوع الأدبي بغض النظر عن تسليط الضوء على الجوانب السياسية في كتابات الروائيين وإبراز الأساليب الأدبية التي استخدموها لنقل وجهات نظرهم المتعلقة بالأحداث السياسية التي كتبوا عنها إلى نشر الوعي السياسي لدى القارئ من خلال تلك الدراما القصصية المثيرة. وقد ركزت هذه المقالة على الأدب السياسي بشكل عام وأهم رواده، مع ذكر بعض تعريفاته ونشأته وتطوره.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** رواد، الحداثة، الحرية، السياسية، النوع الأدبي.

## Introduction

Political fiction is a literary genre, which provides social and political commentary on politics, real events, systems, governmental regimes, and social theories through narrative contexts. It can be seen as mixture of political activism and literary technique using real life incidents. Writers have to take notes on the great national and international issues. They are required to be more honest representatives of all genders, races, and classes, rather than making a show of their own moral superiority. In his brilliant study, *The American Political Novel*, Robert Alter attempts to give a comprehensive definition of political fiction; he states, "the novel's great strength as a mode of apprehension is in its grasp of character, and the political novel at its best can show concretely and subtly what politics does to character, what character makes of politics" (42). Furthermore, it is considered as a realistic reflection of the contemporary social life. It is, at least, a reflection of its time, and of society, so its characters, themes, and incidents are taken as political projections.

Nevertheless, the novel may supersede and replace reality: it may imitate the real life to criticize it. In this relation, Danto asserts the close relation between literature, and politics. He claims that art and politics complete one another. In this light, he says, "The system of political legitimacy and the structures of artistic expression should be reciprocals of one another is [sic] after all a deep thesis of Historical Materialism– the view that art and politics are surface manifestations of the same deep structure that defines a social order" (2). Political work is considered as a descendant of the historical and social fiction that mirrors realistic incidents of the present, political, social and economic aspects of life. However, the characters behave and act in accordance with some concrete political loyalty or ideological identity. They are also involved in politics: a medium that reflects life. Political novel can be classified into two categories, the adversary political novel and the conventional one. While the first assumes the idea: everything is okay with the state regardless of any problem, the second introduces a corrupt nation, which is rotten

to the core.

### **Definitions and Aspects:**

Political fiction is a genre of literature that seeks to change some facets of society. It persuasively adopts a particular political viewpoint. It touches the very force behind society, and thus can be a means of political and societal changes as well. Many critics investigate the close affinity between art and politics. In his *Politics and the Novel*, Irving Howe composes an influential and significant investigation on political works, in which he asserts that he pinpoints to a political work as "a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant setting" (17). In the political novel, the author often directly criticizes an existing society, or presents an alternative to an existing society or political structure. He often employs satire and irony to form a public awareness and to get his point across.

Furthermore, in political fiction, "Satire appealed to Revolutionary audiences partly because it contained social comment and criticism, and political topics and social problems were the main subjects of the day" (VanSpanckeren 20). It should be noted however, that political writers use satire and irony in delineating real incidents of political surroundings portraying oppressive regimes and governments. Orville Prescott classifies political novels into two categories when he says, that political fiction can be classified into two main parts such as works "about characters involved in politics and so about politics themselves; and novels designed to persuade their readers to share their" (22-23) writer's political belonging, books that are mainly propaganda handbook. Hence, the political writer often uses the genre to express and support his political beliefs or outrages at the political life. He focuses mostly on the impact of power politics and political domination over human beings' needs, feelings, hopes and dreams.

The political writer is a sensitive person who is disturbed by the atrocities, and political mistakes committed by power– hunger fascist regimes, corrupt politicians, or even societal hypocrisy. He

then concocts a new fictional pattern using his strong weapon of eloquent expressions to criticize, satirize, and to take part in the progress of his society, and the whole world.

To assure the vital role of literature in society Lee reaffirms the importance of writing, so "he preferred to work indirectly by literature rather than directly by politics" (78). It is of great importance then to use projections, and political themes to express politics and political ideology of a specific society. The writer hence becomes perpetually preoccupied with the troubles and problems of his society, and often aims at establishing social justice. In his, *The Political Novel: Its Development in England and America*, Speare defines the political novel as a work of prose fiction which discusses the political events and keen on conceptions than to feelings. It manipulates the mechanization of law– create and concerns with theories of general attitudes of people "than with the merits of any given piece of legislation; and where the main purpose of the writer is party propaganda, public reform, or exposition of the lives of the" (ix) personage that seizes rule and controls everything.

As mentioned above, the political field actually inspires and influences writers to fictionalize the politics of the time. Accordingly America's political scene especially "in the post– 9/11 context, where George W. Bush's rhetoric has proved so powerful, and so powerfully destructive, the earlier philosophical investigation into the meaning of words acquires a new significance here because it can be understood as more politicized" (Varvogli 96). Most importantly, Political novels are actually "narratives about the contemporary age. It functions as a natural– science corollary of stories about terrorism and imperialism" (Sencindiver 245). In this context, Sencindiver and others argue that political novels of the cold war era as well as of all times aim at portraying the universal atmosphere in relation to its politics. Much in the same, they claim that, all the political novels with their narratives and well– knit plots seek to "depict the contemporary world as one out of control, fraught with alienation, powerlessness, global forces and injustices brought about, and reproduced, by the rich and powerful– yet they are,

without knowing it, digging their own grave" (Sencindiver 245). In wider terms, Political fiction is a clever way of portraying reality in order to understand the world.

### Themes in Political Fiction

It is very important for people to be aware of the fatal political mistakes and scandals in their society. Therefore, the central themes at work in this literary genre are political corruption, colonization, social hypocrisies, oppression, wars, resistance against the colonizer and the native tyrant, political opposition, communal oppression, racial discrimination, religious and political persecution, criticism of dictatorships and fascist politicians, reform, wealth distribution, who rules and how, freedom, liberty, and political diseases. However, war is a pivotal theme dramatically employed in political writings, Richard Gray claims, "war was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted" (331). Pope intermingles politics with psychoanalysis. He claims psychoanalytic and political analysis come to terms with each other (77).

The writer would use characters, themes and narration to criticize politics and politicians in the actual world and to inspire people to change it. Therefore, the writer is a little bit rebel who practices political activism by expressing his private opinions about certain events in a society by means of literature. The writer of such literary genre has to bear in mind some vital questions such as, who governs? who really rules?, and who actually seizes power and money? In this light, political and financial domination are also of great importance in the course of criticism. Whereas, the US is the most powerful and dominant country in the world, a great deal of political fiction along with criticism is projected on its politics, typically, as Auster conceives in most of his novels especially the two selected ones.

By reading C. Wright Mill's important book, *The Power Elite*, one comes to the point that the U.S. social, political, military, and economic elite have historically alternated different configurations of dominance throughout the short American history, which paved

the way to composing impressive political writings, like that of Paul Auster.

Human beings are political creatures by nature, and the study of that nature should be a concern for both critics and readers alike. However, cultured people are more concerned with politics than others in their society are, but politics and political surroundings draw the attention of all citizens. Subsequently, to focus on American political fiction is like an account of the invisible problems in the American politics and society as well. Politics is such a beastly thing for critics to address or deal with as it brings about differences in points of view that may lead to disagreement and controversy. American literature abounds with literary models that aptly satisfy political interests with fascinating literature.

In this relation, many critics agree with Harold Bloom when he asserts, "all art must be political" (241). Accordingly, Guizzini claims, "politics refers to the art of possible" (64). The numerous and successive events at the contemporary time such as, "the media event that 9/11 and its aftermath have become, the military action that followed the attacks, Bush's rhetoric and actions, and generally America's role in world affairs have all created a new context in which American authorship needs to be considered" (Varvogli 96). All collaborate to enrich the literary field with political fiction in order to say in fiction what you cannot in actual. The writer therefore, is required to manipulate the apparent events and fictionalize them to serve his political belief. Literary critics as a result, translate the present societal problems in accordance with politics. In this relation, Hicks adds, "Pornography therefore, is not free speech but political oppression" (4). As repeatedly noted, American history and politics greatly inspired writers to create impressive political fiction.

Furthermore, the genre is a reflection of culture, history, as well as the politics of a society, and presents a true image of country and people. It is then that, the political life of a society provides its writers vivid themes and tools. American history teems with worthwhile political events such as, the civil war in 1861, the two



world wars, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the changing role of government, the civil rights movement, the impact of the Vietnam War and of course the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York. All these events form the mentality and beliefs of the writers and are the main source of political writings for decades.

### Major Political Writers

English literary history teems with great political satirists and writers who gave much to the genre. The most famous are, of course, George Orwell, Jonathan Swift, Henry David Thoreau, Aldous Huxley, Franz Kafka, Henry Adams, Noam Chomsky, John Locke, Robert Penn Warren and others. Contemporary American literature boasts of having many great political writers including, Robert Sterling the author of *50 Reasons Not to Vote for Bush*, and Philip Roth the novelist of *American Pastoral*, and *The Plot Against America*. Much in the same, "the politics of the subsequent War on Terror," as Lee–Potter claims is best seen in the literary "work of Richard Ford, Paul Auster, Kamila Shamsie, Nadeem Aslam, Don DeLillo, Mohsin Hamid and Amy Waldman" (3). Typical works of political fiction are Orwell's *1984*, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, and *Animal Farm* in which he criticizes authoritarian tyranny, and the political status quo. Orwell is of course the twentieth century's most renowned political writer. He highlights political issues using irony and satire to convey his ideas.

Political writers in a similar way aim at persuading, interrogating investigating, provoking, and fictionalizing social and political illness, in order to, face and reform corruption, oppression, discrimination and inequity, and to speculate about the better or worse futures to come. As political writers are originally reformers, they work for the good of their societies. Therefore, the writer is a social worker using political activism. They often want to see the world fair and free. In his *Writing the 9/11 Decade*, Lee–Potter highlights the statement of the administration of President Bush: "that the state and politicians create our own reality served to reinforce the difficulties that novelists faced in creating their own. Against the background of public commentary post–9/11, and the

politics of the subsequent 'War on Terror'." (3) Accordingly, political writers have a great opportunity to form the public opinion in the present critical moment. Moreover, the writer undertakes a moral responsibility to fictionalize the events focusing on their results.

In Hicks's own words, "Tolerance is good and dominance is bad— but when ... [political writers] come to power [,] political correctness follows" (184). In this relation, he assures that the political writer is required to correct the mistakes of his society. Hicks also claims, "the leading postmodern [writers and] thinkers are left in their politics" (21). Political writers then "address the meaning and importance of authorship by exploring the lived world by means of the invented world, and both use the central trope of the ailing author to aid their investigations into contemporary authorship" (Varvogli 94). In this respect, Pope recognizes that the psycho political force of the novel as a "double— edged act of repression/oppression and expression" (75).

Derek Rubin and Jaap Verheul name some of the most renowned political writers when they say, "American Self— Criticism in John Updike. Placing Updike's highly controversial novel *Terrorist* (2006) ... and examining it in relation to novels by other mainstream writers such as Jay McInerney, Jonathan Safran Foer, Paul Auster, and Don DeLillo" (14). The world witnesses a tremendous amount of political writings, which followed the attacks of September 11, 2001. Most of them meant to criticize, "This Godless Democracy': Terrorism, Multiculturalism ... [of] contemporary America for the ways in which it has failed to live up to its promise" (14). In her *Anarchism a Beginner's Guide*, Ruth Kinna investigates political fiction and cites some of its outstanding writers and their outstanding novels such as Emile Zola's *Germinal*, G.K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Henry James's *Princess Casamassima*, Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*, and, most importantly, Paul Auster's *Leviathan*. He also argues that the recurrent themes in political genre are assassinations, wars, Bomb— throwing assassins, revolutionary action and political oppression (172).

Political writers such as Patrick Martin alludes, "are to be concerned with the political aspect of representation" (11), and that they have some responsibility and "obligations when electing to speak on behalf of others, to name and classify them, prepare them for audience recognition" (11). In most of his books, Auster gives a political statement like that when he comments on *The Arabian Nights* saying, "The story begins with the end. Speak or die. And for as long as you go on speaking, you will not die. The story begins with death" (149). In this quotation, Auster clearly pinpoints and highlights the right way which any writer should take in consideration. The Austerian law now and then becomes speak to lead a better life. Therefore, the writer's primary mission is to enlighten the audience specially his people, in order to avoid the worst, which may befall them all. In this sense, the political writer must have highly sensitive eyes to see farther and wiser. He should have the insight to probe what may happen in the future because of the present.

However, politicians of Auster's time are responsible for wars and secessions, as in *Man in the Dark*, writers have another responsibility as some critics state, "American thinkers correctly claim that recognition and respect are important, and that cultural differences matter in politics" (Sencindiver 253). Significantly enough, McKay illustrates that the author of this genre portrays in fiction, "What changes is the role that these [political] authors portray for themselves in relation to political events" (93). Political writers strive through literary works in order to bring about, "a new way of conceiving political and economic democracies that respect cultural differences" (Benzon 43). Therefore, they make full use of the social and political realities. The writer is simultaneously an eyewitness and a historian of his age. He also mentions that the American democracy and politics are "all about, upholding the rights of the individual. As he wants to reform his society, Paul Aster, as Barone puts it, "predicts the past in order first to capture and then to free himself from it. But memory's achieves [sic] are both chaotic and infinite, and the clerk who attempts to record them will soon get lost in the maze" (32).

To conclude Political fiction is a literary genre in which political experiences are the main source of works: it satirizes political systems, events and institutions. In this vein, the writer creates fiction to spare himself direct participation in the politics of the time. Each political novel has a close relationship with the social sciences like history and sociology. It brings fresh insights into the future of human beings as a feedback of previous experiences. Human beings are required to cooperate, live, judge, have comments, and practice politics. A successful political author should embrace life as to gain insight into its hardships and crises. Politics and political events as noted above motivated political writer to politicalize his characters and novels. He does not write only of personal pains, but rather of common national pain and trauma.

The political writer should work hard to convey his political thoughts. Naturally, societies are not the same concerning liberty and freedom of expression. In such an atmosphere, the writer resorts to projections implied. He then contrives a new literary parallel world in which he can say what he wants. Political fiction is greatly a powerful and active weapon in changing the social and political atrocities. In this sense, Auster presents fantasy world in which he imitates real political events. He aims at changing the bad present and turns it to better future. Auster is permanently, preoccupied with nationalism or Americanism. He is like a teacher, who helps his people to gain their attentiveness, their problems, and their ambitions. Auster presents the strength of youth in detailed representation of disappointment and frustration, with inclination to films, books, and politics.

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