

TYPOLOGY OF THE HISTORICAL NOVEL IN  
AMERICAN LITERATURE OF THE SECOND HALF OF  
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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**Abstract:** *The historical novel occupies a significant position in the genre system of American literature of the second half of the twentieth century. During this period, the genre underwent substantial transformation and developed into a number of distinct but interrelated forms. The present article examines the typology of the American historical novel of the second half of the twentieth century and identifies three major genre variants: the documentary historical novel, the postmodern historical novel, and the neorealist historical novel. The classification is based on three interrelated criteria: epistemological, narratological, and functional. The epistemological criterion concerns the possibility of acquiring reliable knowledge of the past; the narratological criterion focuses on narrative strategies, the narrator, temporality, and self-reflexivity; while the functional criterion examines the cultural and ideological functions performed by historical fiction. The study demonstrates that documentary fiction is characterized by an aspiration toward historical authenticity and evidential reliability, whereas postmodern historical fiction emphasizes the constructed nature of historical narratives. Neorealist historical fiction combines critical awareness of the problems of historical representation with psychological depth, ethical seriousness, and a renewed interest in testimony and traumatic memory. Particular attention is*

*given to E. L. Doctorow's Ragtime, Thomas Pynchon's Mason & Dixon, Toni Morrison's Beloved, Louise Erdrich's historical fiction, Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian, and Don DeLillo's Libra. The article argues that the proposed typology should not be understood as a rigid classification, since many representative American historical novels combine features of several models.*

**Keywords:** American literature, historical novel, genre typology, documentary novel, postmodernism, neorealism, historical representation, narrative, historical memory, testimony.

### Introduction

The second half of the twentieth century was a particularly productive and complex period in the development of American historical fiction. The historical novel of this period cannot be regarded as a homogeneous or monolithic genre. Rather, it developed into a variety of forms distinguished by different approaches to the representation and interpretation of the past. Although these forms are united by the general purpose of reconstructing or reimagining historical experience, they differ considerably in their epistemological assumptions, narrative strategies, aesthetic principles, and cultural functions.

The historical novel developed in the context of significant changes in American intellectual and cultural life. The increasing awareness of the limitations of official historiography, the emergence of postmodern theories of language and representation, the growing interest in marginalized histories, and the cultural consequences of collective trauma all influenced the development of historical fiction. As a result, the genre moved beyond the conventional model of reconstructing historical events and increasingly became a means of questioning how historical knowledge itself is produced.

The purpose of this article is to establish a functional typology of the historical novel in American literature of the second half of the twentieth

century. The study identifies three major variants: documentary, postmodern, and neorealist historical fiction. At the same time, it recognizes the existence of transitional and hybrid forms that demonstrate the permeability of the boundaries between these categories.

### **Materials and Methods**

The methodological basis of the study combines historical-literary, typological, narratological, and comparative approaches. The research draws upon theoretical concepts concerning the historical novel and applies them to representative works of American literature produced during the second half of the twentieth century.

The typological framework is partly based on E. Wesseling's approach to historical fiction and is adapted to the specific characteristics of American literary material. Wesseling emphasizes the importance of examining historical fiction through several dimensions rather than reducing the genre to a single formal or thematic principle (Wesseling, 1991). J. De Groot similarly considers typology an analytical instrument that helps organize the complex diversity of historical fiction rather than a rigid system of mutually exclusive categories (De Groot, 2010).

Three principal criteria are used in the present study.

First, the epistemological criterion examines how a particular type of historical novel understands historical knowledge and whether the past is considered reconstructible through available evidence.

Second, the narratological criterion concerns the organization of historical material, the type of narrator, the relationship between historical and narrative time, the use of intertextuality, and the degree of narrative self-reflexivity.

Third, the functional criterion examines the cultural function of historical fiction: whether it reproduces or challenges official historical narratives,

restores suppressed voices, reconstructs collective memory, or problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge.

On the basis of these criteria, the major tendencies of American historical fiction are analyzed comparatively.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **1. Documentary Historical Fiction**

The documentary historical novel represents one of the most traditional approaches to historical representation. Its central principle is the attempt to achieve a high degree of historical authenticity through extensive engagement with primary and secondary sources. Such fiction may incorporate archival documents, memoirs, letters, newspapers, official records, diaries, and other forms of historical evidence.

The documentary novel does not use history merely as a decorative background for fictional events. Instead, historical reality becomes the central material of the narrative. Documents or documentary imitations frequently function as evidence designed to strengthen the reader's confidence in the authenticity of the reconstructed past.

One of the important characteristics of this model is the presence of documentary attribution. Authors may provide explanatory notes, historical references, source information, or other paratextual materials that establish a relationship between fictional narrative and historical evidence.

The development of documentary narrative techniques in American literature was also influenced by Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966). Although the work is concerned with a relatively contemporary criminal event rather than a distant historical period, Capote's combination of factual research and literary narrative contributed significantly to the development of the American nonfiction novel. The work demonstrated that documentary accuracy could itself become an aesthetic strategy.

Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* provides another significant example of the documentary tendency. The novel reconstructs the life and execution of Gary Gilmore through extensive use of interviews, letters, legal records, and journalistic materials. Its documentary method demonstrates how factual material can be transformed into an elaborate literary narrative without completely abandoning the claims of historical evidence.

From an epistemological perspective, documentary historical fiction tends to be based on a relatively optimistic understanding of historical knowledge. It assumes that careful research and responsible interpretation can provide a reasonably reliable reconstruction of the past. This distinguishes the documentary model from postmodern historical fiction, which is more skeptical about direct access to historical reality.

Narratologically, documentary fiction generally favors an authoritative or relatively reliable narrator. Historical and narrative time are usually organized in a comparatively coherent manner, and the distance between the narrator and the historical events does not necessarily become the main object of reflection.

Functionally, however, documentary historical fiction may perform a critical role. By recovering neglected documents, testimonies, and individual experiences, it can challenge omissions in official historiography. This function becomes especially significant in African American, feminist, Native American, and Chicano literary traditions, where literary representation often serves as a means of restoring historically marginalized voices.

## **2. Postmodern Historical Fiction**

Postmodern historical fiction represents one of the most theoretically significant developments in the genre during the second half of the twentieth century. Unlike documentary fiction, it does not primarily seek to reproduce the past as an objectively recoverable reality. Instead, it examines the processes through which historical reality becomes narrative.

Linda Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction" is particularly important for understanding this model. In postmodern historical fiction, history is neither simply rejected nor accepted as an objective and transparent record. Rather, the relationship between historical fact, narrative, interpretation, and ideological power becomes the subject of literary reflection.

The characteristic techniques of postmodern historical fiction include irony, parody, intertextuality, anachronism, metafictional commentary, narrative fragmentation, unreliable narration, and the deliberate combination of factual and fictional materials.

E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) is a particularly representative example. The novel combines fictional characters with real historical figures such as Henry Ford, Emma Goldman, Sigmund Freud, and Harry Houdini. Historical figures and invented characters occupy the same narrative world, thereby destabilizing the conventional distinction between historical fact and fictional invention.

The resulting uncertainty is not simply an aesthetic game. It encourages readers to reconsider the mechanisms through which historical memory is constructed. The novel suggests that the cultural image of the past is always mediated by narrative, selection, interpretation, and ideology.

Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* provides another important example. Set primarily in the eighteenth century, the novel reconstructs the experiences of Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon while employing anachronisms, fantastic elements, multiple narrative levels, and stylistic imitation of earlier forms of English prose. The historical past is therefore represented through a highly artificial narrative structure.

Pynchon's method demonstrates that documentary-looking materials cannot automatically guarantee historical truth. The apparent distinction between fact and fiction becomes unstable, and the reader is forced to recognize uncertainty as an essential element of historical knowledge.



The functional significance of postmodern historical fiction lies primarily in its critical examination of official historiography. It does not necessarily replace one historical truth with another. Instead, it reveals the mechanisms through which historical narratives are produced, authorized, circulated, and legitimized.

Nevertheless, postmodern historical fiction has certain limitations. Its irony and playful treatment of historical material may sometimes create an impression of ethical distance, especially when the subject matter involves suffering, violence, or collective trauma. This tension between epistemological skepticism and ethical responsibility becomes particularly important in the development of neorealist historical fiction.

### **3. Neorealist Historical Fiction**

Neorealist historical fiction represents a different response to the problems of historical representation. It shares with postmodern fiction an awareness of the constructed nature of historical narratives and a critical attitude toward official historiography. However, it also returns to several principles associated with realism, including psychological depth, coherent characterization, ethical seriousness, and sustained attention to individual experience.

The central concept in this model is testimony. Testimony involves more than simply providing information about historical events. It constitutes an ethical act through which individual and collective experiences are acknowledged and incorporated into cultural memory.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is one of the most significant examples of this tendency in American literature. The novel is based on the historical case of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who escaped from slavery. Morrison transforms this historical event into an exploration of the psychological and emotional consequences of slavery.



Importantly, *Beloved* does not reconstruct slavery exclusively through documentary evidence. Instead, it seeks to represent the internal experience of historical trauma. Memory in the novel is fragmented, nonlinear, repetitive, and sometimes supernatural. These techniques might appear postmodern, yet their primary function is not ironic destabilization. They are used to reproduce the psychological structure of traumatic memory.

Consequently, Morrison's historical representation occupies a productive position between realism and postmodernism. She employs fragmented temporality and supernatural elements while maintaining a profound ethical commitment to the experiences of the victims of slavery.

Louise Erdrich's historical fiction similarly demonstrates the significance of memory, collective identity, and multiple perspectives. Works such as *Love Medicine*, *Tracks*, and *The Bingo Palace* present the history of Ojibwe communities through multiple voices and generations. Instead of constructing a single authoritative historical narrative, Erdrich creates a polyphonic representation in which historical memory emerges through the interaction of individual and communal perspectives.

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* also illustrates the hybrid nature of neorealist historical representation. The novel focuses on violence in the American-Mexican borderlands during the nineteenth century and challenges romanticized representations of the American West.

The novel incorporates historical materials and recognizable historical circumstances while employing a highly stylized literary language. At the same time, its treatment of violence is characterized by ethical seriousness rather than comic or purely ironic distance. In this sense, *Blood Meridian* challenges the traditional mythology of the American West and exposes the violence underlying the ideology of civilization and expansion.

#### **4. Transitional and Hybrid Forms**

The three models identified above should not be regarded as completely isolated categories. Some of the most significant historical novels of the period occupy an intermediate position and combine features associated with several types.

Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988) is a particularly important example. The novel addresses the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and incorporates historical materials associated with the Warren Commission and other sources. At the same time, DeLillo does not attempt to offer a definitive reconstruction of the assassination.

Instead, the novel focuses on the production of competing explanations and conspiracy narratives. Historical reality becomes inseparable from the narratives through which society attempts to explain it.

Thus, *Libra* combines documentary research with postmodern epistemological skepticism. Its historical material is carefully researched, but its narrative does not claim absolute authority. The novel demonstrates how historical events become culturally meaningful through competing interpretations.

The concept of a "conspiracy epistemology" is particularly useful in this context. The central question is not simply what happened, but how societies construct explanations of what happened and who possesses the authority to define the historical meaning of an event.

African American historical fiction provides another important field in which these models overlap. Works such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz*, as well as Alex Haley's *Roots*, combine documentary seriousness, critical revision of official history, and an ethical commitment to recovering suppressed experiences.

Therefore, African American historical fiction can be considered a particularly productive space for the interaction of documentary, postmodern, and neorealist principles.

## Typological Model

The analysis can be summarized through the following comparative model:

| Criterion                      | Documentary<br>Historical Novel                    | Postmodern<br>Historical<br>Novel                      | Neorealist<br>Historical Novel                                          |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Epistemology                   | Historical<br>knowledge is<br>potentially reliable | Historical<br>knowledge is<br>mediated and<br>unstable | Historical<br>knowledge is<br>incomplete but<br>ethically<br>meaningful |
| Attitude to<br>historical fact | Emphasis on factual<br>accuracy                    | Fact and fiction<br>are deliberately<br>destabilized   | Fact is<br>transformed<br>through memory<br>and experience              |
| Narrator                       | Relatively<br>reliable/authoritative               | Unreliable,<br>fragmented,<br>self-reflexive           | Often multiple<br>or<br>psychologically<br>involved                     |
| Narrative<br>structure         | Generally coherent<br>and chronological            | Fragmented,<br>nonlinear, self-<br>conscious           | Often nonlinear<br>but<br>psychologically<br>motivated                  |
| Intertextuality                | Primarily<br>documentary                           | Highly self-<br>conscious and<br>playful               | Functional,<br>mnemonic, and<br>culturally<br>oriented                  |

|                  |                                              |                                       |                                        |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Main function    | Reconstruction and recovery                  | Critique of historical representation | Testimony, memory, ethical recovery    |
| Typical examples | Documentary narratives and nonfiction novels | Ragtime, Mason & Dixon, Libra         | Beloved, Love Medicine, Blood Meridian |

This table demonstrates that the three categories are distinguished not by subject matter alone but by their different relationships with historical knowledge, narrative form, and cultural function.

### **Conclusion**

The historical novel in American literature of the second half of the twentieth century represents a complex and internally differentiated genre system. Its development cannot be adequately explained through a single linear movement from traditional realism toward postmodernism. Instead, documentary, postmodern, neorealist, and hybrid forms coexist and interact throughout the period.

The documentary historical novel emphasizes the reconstruction of the past through evidence and research. Its epistemological foundation is a relatively strong confidence in the possibility of historical reconstruction, while its documentary strategies seek to create an effect of authenticity.

Postmodern historical fiction shifts attention from the reconstruction of the past to the mechanisms through which the past is narrativized. Through irony, parody, intertextuality, metafiction, and fragmented temporality, it exposes the constructed nature of historical discourse.

Neorealist historical fiction, by contrast, combines awareness of the problems of historical representation with a renewed commitment to psychological depth, ethical seriousness, and testimony. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* demonstrates particularly clearly that formal fragmentation does not

necessarily lead to postmodern irony. Fragmentation can also reproduce the structure of traumatic memory and serve an ethical function.

The analysis also demonstrates that some of the most important American historical novels cannot be assigned exclusively to one category. *Libra*, *Blood Meridian*, *Beloved*, and other works combine documentary, postmodern, and neorealist features. Such hybridization should not be regarded as a weakness of the typology. On the contrary, it demonstrates the dynamic character of the genre.

Consequently, the proposed three-dimensional typology—epistemological, narratological, and functional—provides a productive analytical framework for studying American historical fiction. It makes it possible to examine not only what historical novels represent but also how they construct historical knowledge, how they organize historical experience, and why they return to the past.

The historical novel of the second half of the twentieth century thus emerges not simply as a literary form about the past but as a form of cultural inquiry into memory, identity, power, trauma, and the nature of historical knowledge itself.

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