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Literature and the Struggle for Social Power

Power Pow"er, n. OE. pouer, poer, OF. poeir, poir, F. pouvoir, n. & v., fr. LL. potere, for L. posse, potesse, to be able, to have power. See Possible, Potent, and cf. Posse comitatus.

1. Ability to act, regarded as latent or inherent; the faculty of doing or performing something; capacity for action or performance; capability of producing an effect, whether physical or moral: potency; might; as, a man of great power; the power of capillary attraction; money gives power.

("Power," def. 1).

"Freedom is participation in power." (Cicero)

In the microcosm of human history, the United States is but a mere thread on the tapestry that is human existence. Yet despite its transience, for the first time since man was first placed on this earth he was empowered in a nation "born as a revolutionary force in a world of conservatism [. . .] and [whose] people have pioneered in the revolutions against colonialism, racism, sexism, ignorance and poverty [. . .]" (Bailey 1043). It is true that this great nation was founded on then revolutionary principles and that even today this nation has much to be proud of. However, in a government created by humans, it would be unrealistic to claim that there are no flaws. But there has always existed the inborn human urge for man to grow and prosper, an urge for self-development and progress, a desire that has defined mankind since the beginning of time. And thus, in this great nation known as "The United States of America," was born the freedom to disagree, to argue, to protest, to revolt! That was the idea, anyway. But, as Immanuel Kant was free to mention in *Idee zu Einer Allgemeinen Geshichte in Weltgebürglicher Absicht*, "Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing ever can be made." In other words, humanity is not perfect. Thus, even the guarantee of a written statement was not enough to ensure the true freedom of its citizens; the people of America whom had escaped from ancient

autocracy were plagued by the new plutocracy. Nevertheless, mankind in all its glory finally realized the power of the masses. And, in this power was born the socialist movement, a movement out of which was born a new class of literature. This style of literature was the embodiment of popular writing during the early twentieth century. For these revolutionary figures were not the “obscure pamphleteers, but among the most famous of American literary figures, whose books were read by millions” (Zinn, *People's History* 314), such as Upton Sinclair, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris (Zinn, *Twentieth Century* 32). Thus this movement created many works of criticism, whether left or right, liberal or conservative, works which criticized this great nation, works which criticized the works which criticized this great nation, and so on and so forth. This birth brought forth a multitude of ideas to the masses; it gave birth to the new American radicalism. For it is certain that Johannes Gutenberg had never considered the impact on the political structure of great nations that his printing press was to, ultimately, be the cause of. But what is it that makes a socially critical novel successful? This paper will attempt to dissect twelve of the most popular twentieth century novels of this genre, as well as several less well known, albeit still well written, novels.

As previously mentioned, the first of the socially critical novels were woven by the Socialist Party of the United States. During a time when the rights of the paid worker were at its lowest point in the history of our great nation, a new party, based on the Marxist philosophy, emerged—a party that stressed the rights that workers had as the foundation of the entire economy. Thus, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* arose from the stockyards of Chicago. Sinclair's novel was extraordinarily popular not for its socialist subject matter, but for the great many facts which eventually would cause Theodore Roosevelt to investigate the claims of extraordinarily poor working conditions and lack of quality of meats in packing factories. Sinclair’s novel takes

place in what would then have been the present, and uses an amazing amount of facts, unlike any other famous novel of its type. For, as Sinclair would later state, “I aimed at the public's heart and by accident I hit their stomach” (Dickstein vi). *The Jungle* pioneered the genre of socially critical novels, and, through its widespread success due to its factually accurate style, pushed Sinclair out of anonymity and into the limelight.

Like Sinclair’s famous novel, Jack London’s *The Iron Heel*, although considerably less well known, was written by a well-respected author. London's story takes place in the then-near future, when the proletariat is trying to “strike [its] first blow at the nervous system of the Oligarchy” (London 226). But despite the fact that this well written novel was authored by one of the most famous authors in American history, it failed to reach and appeal to the masses. Why is this? Perhaps because it depicted an all too grim future. Or perhaps it was because few could relate to the struggles of the people in the work. Yet, as we will see, numerous other novels that are written in a similar style were immensely popular. Although London himself was a socialist, only his stories about canines seemed to have stood the test of time.

Huxley’s *Brave New World*, a story of two men in a utopian society, takes place in the far future. This well thought-out novel contains intricate descriptions of how a utopian hierarchy might work; the basis of the society is structured around promiscuous sex and a “chemical compound called soma” (Huxley, *Revisited* 69). Huxley attempts to place a character from a non-utopian society, indeed, one from our society, into this futuristic atmosphere. The reader ends up being both partially horrified at the seemingly childish actions of the populous as well as sympathetic to that same populous, for this new character is trying to ruin a quasi-perfect society. In addition, despite the idealistic utopian idea of freedom, the characters in this new society have been controlled and restricted through developmental control of their childhood. Is it the

“Universal happiness [which] keeps the wheels steadily turning” (Huxley, *BNW* 228) that has caused *Brave New World* to become a classic? As Aldous Huxley put it, “Liberties are not given; they are taken.” (Zinn, *Declarations* 226). Perhaps this novel is popular out of some suppressed fear that we will lose our liberties.

Socialist criticism continued up to around World War II, when most socialist (and communist) ideologies were suppressed, due to extreme anti-war sentiment. Social criticism was suppressed during the post-World War II era due to tensions with the Soviet Union as well as anti-communist fervor during the cold war (Bailey 911). Thus, radical politics suffered, and the number of socially critical novels slowed to a trickle until the early sixties. The civil rights movement, born during the pre-World War II period, was set again to rise at this time. Finally, for the first time in United States history, would the colored man be, at least legally, the equal of the white man.

Ralph Ellison, author of *The Invisible Man*, sets his story in the then-present New York City. The main character leads a life of hardships until he meets up with a group of people fighting for the rights of black people. There, he is surprised to find that many whites support this noble cause. Although the main character is a good speaker, he is however transferred to another district to speak on women's rights, when the party leaders see that he is gaining too much power. Similarly, after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s ideas began to spread to “problems untouched by civil rights laws,” the FBI issued “internal memos [discussing] finding a black leader to replace King” (Zinn, *Twentieth Century* 205). Interestingly enough, Ellison's work was written nearly twenty years prior to King's rise to fame. *The Invisible Man* ends with the main character coming back to Harlem, where he originally spoke, only to find that none of the things he has said have made any difference—that people have forgotten all that he tried to teach them.

An uprising takes place, and the main character finally realizes that he is “an *invisible* man” (Ellison 573), that everything he had worked so hard for was fleeting; the people live the present without regard to whatever past there might have been. Times long gone are lost; history is forgotten, not remembered so as “not repeat mistakes.” Ellison’s work perhaps became most popular due to its anarchical status.

Perhaps one of the hardest earned things in American history has been the “inalienable right” to freedom of speech. Despite being a right guaranteed in the United States’ cherished Constitution, often this right has been overlooked or abridged at the whims of those in power.

James Orwell's *1984* is a novel of fear and the powers of a police-state government. In a future where order is kept out of fear not of the police on the streets, but out of fear of the “thought police,” Orwell paints a tale of two people struggling against oppression who are ultimately crushed and their will forced into submission to the system. There is no doubt that this novel stand as a criticism to totalitarianism and dictatorships which whisk away freedom of speech, but it is also interesting to note that both that Orwell was “critical of communism” and also “considered himself a Socialist” (Fromm). *1984* portrays Winston, the main character, as being extremely cautious and suspicious of everything that anyone does. As someone who does not like the system, Winston tries to hide his every action from the “thought police,” for he knows that in the end, “The Thought Police would get him just the same. [. . .] You might dodge successfully for a while, even for years, but sooner or later they were bound to get you” (Orwell 19). Orwell was able to successfully capitalize on the then-growing fear of communism.

Although Orwell probably wrote his novel against communism because he felt the ideals of socialism being betrayed¹, there is no doubt that the American public became attached to his fear

¹ Many socialists were upset at the policies initiated by the USSR, specifically those pertaining to personal freedom. As socialism expressed solidarity and nonviolence, they felt betrayed by the Soviet use of the term “socialism.”

against the fall of democracy—the removal of power from the people. At a time when the Soviet Union was a terrifying power on the horizon, Orwell’s literature played into the fears of every American—that if communism were not to be stopped in its tracks, than Orwell’s nightmare would come true.

Perhaps one of the most famous novels warning against the danger of not having freedom of speech comes from Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*. In Bradbury’s future, firemen have become the makers of fire – fire which burns at 451° F, the temperature at which books burn. Books are banned in this future, and the few that are discovered owning books soon find their houses burned to the ground—often time with the owner still in the house, lost in pain and agony over seeing his books being incinerated. Bradbury describes the fast paced twentieth century as a time when “Books [are being] cut shorter. Condensations. Digests. Tabloids. Everything boils down to the gag, the snap ending. [. . .] Classics cut to fit fifteen-minute radio shows, then cut again to fill a two minute book column, winding up at last as a ten or twelve-line dictionary resume” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 54*). As more and more parts of books are eliminated, eventually novels are banned entirely, and people brainwashed into thinking only what the government wants them to think—they even go so far as to report relatives and neighbors who they discover have books. Despite Bradbury’s obviously concocted history, the novel perhaps appeals most to people’s fear of the government willingly trying to hide them from something. The fact that everyone would collectively act together to burn down the house of someone who had books keyed in to a vital fear that people had of communism. As put in a pamphlet by the United States government entitled, “One Hundred Things You Should Know About Communism,” one point was, “Where can Communists be found? Everywhere” (Zinn, *Twentieth* 172).

In yet another topic which has caused major controversy, including the arrests of

numerous political leaders and interrogation by the House on Un-American Activities Commission, numerous authors wrote about anti-war topics, both pre-World War II, and later, during the affectionately remembered 60s.² While some authors expressed the violence and inhumanity of war, others challenged the assumption that, as Zinn so eloquently put it, “if the enemy was evil, than your side must be good” (Zinn, *Lecture*).

Joseph Heller, in his landmark novel *Catch-22*, writes in his logical but humorous novel about a man who is stuck in war, but is constantly trying to get out because he realizes that war is all about a bunch of random people running around “trying to kill [him]” (Heller 25). His work expresses strong anti-war sentiment, but perhaps not as strong as Dalton Trumbo’s *Johnny Got His Gun*, where the main character is a “slab of flesh in an American uniform” (Zinn, *Declarations* 76) who is stuck on the field of battle still alive with “[. . .] no legs and no arms and no eyes and no ears and no nose and no mouth and no tongue [. . .] he wasn't breathing. His lungs were pumping air but he couldn't stop them from doing it. He couldn't live and he couldn't die” (Trumbo 62-63). Perhaps most appealing in these novels was the apparent truth they carried; although Heller’s novel *Catch-22* is humorous and a good read, it never the less depicts war in a then-unique fashion. Whereas war had previously been portrayed as noble, just and righteous, these new forms of novels gave war a completely new feeling. The effects of these novels were most apparent with the spread of American anti-war sentiment during the 60s, concluding with the massive anti-Vietnam War movement where in “1969, 69% of those interviewed indicated that they considered the war a “mistake” (Bailey 954). This was a far cry from World War II,

² The Espionage Act of 1917 prevented many from speaking out against war. The clause “Whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully cause or attempt to cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty in the military or navel forces of the United States, or shall willfully obstruct the recruiting or enlistment service of the U.S.[. . .]” (Zinn, *Twentieth Century* 83-85) provided a penalty for up to twenty years in prison. According to Zinn, this act has been in constant force “because the United States has legally been in a 'state of emergency' since the Korean war” (86).

affectionately known as a “people’s war.” (Zinn, *Declarations* 78).

Thus concludes our discussion of modern day literature and social criticism. But this conclusion leaves one more question open to those who wish to write a socially critical novel—“How do I write a socially critical novel?”

First and foremost, one must consider the readership target. Who is the novel to be written targeting? In the case of novels such as *The Jungle* and *Catch-22*, these novels were perhaps written primarily to inform—the reader would learn new information and perhaps accept the viewpoints of these novels. In the case of novels such as *Brave New World* and *1984*, the author tries to create a sense of distrust in the reader about society. The author expects a large audience; thus he skillfully taps into the errs in society and exaggerates them to confuse the reader and make him question the current social processes. No matter who the target of the novel may be, it is of utmost importance to recognize the key target audience: in this way, the author can best tap into the reader’s likely personal experiences and ideals.

The second most important thing to consider when examining the critical readership target is whether the reader will be able to make a change. In this manner, one can best determine whether this novel should be written as a warning, as in the style of *Fahrenheit 451* or *1984*, or as a truth telling fiction—when Theodore Roosevelt read *The Jungle*, he launched an investigation into the meatpacking industry, which would later lead to federal legislation protecting the interests of the consumer.³ In addition, the author should consider whether this novel is intended to induce a change to the system. For if the answer to this last question is a resounding, “no,” then the author should not concern himself with reading this paper. The

³ Perhaps most ironically, Theodore Roosevelt found socialism to be “ominous.” (Bailey 697) Upton Sinclair’s original message had apparently been lost to much of the public, a fact that Sinclair recognized when he gave aforementioned quote, “I aimed at the public's heart and by accident I hit their stomach” (Dickstein vi).

primary purpose of any socially critical novel should be to try to convince the reader for a need to change—a socially critical novel is, in essence, a passive protest against the entrenched system.

What makes socially critical books particularly effective? Certainly, to recognize the target audience is key, but there is more to writing an effective novel than one simple statement. What style should be used? What time period?

It is interesting to note that socially critical novels tend to fall into two distinctly different time periods. These novels either take place in the present, in which the novel will critically examine the life of one main character and how mistreated and disadvantaged this citizen is, or take place in an anti-utopian future where utopia has been somewhat achieved, yet the right to freely express ideas has been abridged. These two types of novels have been extremely successful, and, although there is no definitive key to writing a timeless social novel, chances are that if it is truly successful, it will either be one of the above types. Some may wonder whether a novel must be popular in order to be successful. The answer to this question is two-part; the first answer is an affirmative, “yes.” For certainly a novel that is written to change the minds of the masses must be read by the masses first. The second answer to this question is “no,” for the real purpose of a novel is to change the current system. Despite these seemingly two contradictory answers, most often a success in the second answer is the direct result of a success in the first answer.

There are numerous types of socially critical novel style types. These include the traditional style, as well as such styles as satire—as in *Catch-22*—and autobiographies, such as in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Although it is important to recognize the different types of socially critical novels, generally an author should know a style well ahead of time.

This paper has given great consideration to many socially critical novels and the ways that they were written, but perhaps the best conclusion is one which would better give the reader an idea of the current socially “hot” topics.

Perhaps the most heated debate topic in society today is in the area known as “corporate welfare.” For in the United States, companies are treated with all the rights as a person, yet they seem to get more benefits from the government than some citizens do. Perhaps the most accurate observation was one made by Ralph Nader. He suggested that “U.S. Companies Should Pledge Allegiance” (57). Indeed, companies seem to get many benefits from the government, yet have no duty to remain loyal to the country—often times companies move operations overseas in order to reduce prices, many times destroying American jobs. As Bradford Show said in a personal interview, “I got downsized. They didn’t need us in the US anymore. My job went to Mexico.” Despite these types of practices, American companies continue to receive legislation in their favor due to—most simply put—corruption.

Although America claims to have a fair justice system, many people now recognize that there is something wrong with our country’s system. After the protested conviction and denial of a new trial of Mumia Abu-Jamal (who now sits on death row), a man sentenced to death despite the conflicting evidence in the trial, and despite the way witnesses were brought in to testify, many began to lose confidence in our justice system. As Jim Borowski commented in a personal interview, “How do we know we’re not going to be arrested for doing something we didn’t do tomorrow, if someone with more power doesn’t like something we’ve done?” In the book *Downsize This!*, Moore sarcastically commented, “As we know in our own country, if the police arrested him, he must have done *something* wrong.” (104). As long as the justice system remains in question (and it no doubt will remain in question as long as prejudices exist in the nation), it

remains a viable topic for exploitation by any socially critical author.

Through all the facets of social criticism aforementioned, it is in the hopes that the reader should now begin to plot out his own socially critical novel that this paper has been written. For as Kant was free to point out, man is not perfect, and thus there will always be wrongs in society. To write a socially critical novel is therefore not out of dislike of the system, but rather perhaps out of a love of a more perfect system, and to, perhaps appeal to the reader's own idealistic self in an effort to cause change to a system—to make it more perfect in the protestor's eyes. Thus, socially critical novels are an extremely important part of our society, despite their critical, cynical and often negative view of our country. For, as Benjamin Disraeli said in a speech on October 20, 1867, "Change is inevitable in a progressive society. Change is constant." If America is to become a "more perfect union," then it must strive towards this change and to give freedom to all ideas; in America, this is the land of the free.

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