

# The Counterfactual: Rewritten History in Robert Harris' *Fatherland*

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ABSTRACT

The counterfactual is a form of historical fiction that reverses historical facts and uses them as the material into which created characters and events are embedded. In this study, a text that has been categorized as counterfactual was analyzed using an eclectic approach, a combination of formalistic, reader-response approaches; and genre criticism. *Fatherland* is a novel set in 1964 in Germany that emerged victorious in WWII.

*Fatherland* was examined in terms of the kind and amount of counterfact used, possibilities and probabilities, and narrative elements. The analysis shows that *Fatherland* is a counterfactual novel in its entirety. However, be that as it may, the novel fails to emerge as a rich counter-memory. That is, it does not go against the grain of history, that while it does present an alternative concept to a historical fact, it ultimately just presents a most probable continuation of the history that it counters.

## Introduction

Historical fiction, as a distinct literary genre, has been around for quite some time as history proves to be a rich source of materials for creative endeavors such as writing. James Michener, for instance, has produced such books as *Hawaii*, *Alaska*, *Poland*, *The Covenant*, *Centennial* and a host of other texts that present fictional characters against the backdrop of factual history. The first three are books on the beginnings and histories of the places the titles themselves represent. *The Covenant* deals with South Africa, while *Centennial* with the American West.

Leon Uris who produced *Exodus*, *Mila 18*, *QB VII*, and *Trinity* among other books, also used the historical fiction genre. *Exodus* is a moving tale on the birth of the State of Israel, *Mila 18* is the story of the uprising of Jewish fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto during the second World War, *QB VII* is an account of a Nazi doctor's medical atrocities masquerading as experiments in a Nazi concentration camp; and *Trinity* is a novel about Ireland.

In some cases, artistic endeavors focus on historical gaps, those little or big things that history is silent about maybe because of uncertainty brought about by outright absence of documentary evidence. Such gaps become very rich sources of interpretations. The film "Rizal" directed by Marilou Diaz-Abaya created quite a stir because it allegedly contained historical lapses. In the controversy that ensued the showing of the film, it was pointed out that history deals with the possible, what actually happened whereas the film, as a product of artistic processes, presents an interpretation of history – in other words, what could/might have happened.

This notion of historical probability is exploited and extended in a variation of historical fiction, the counterfactual genre. This genre is also based on history but uses it (history) not as a backdrop but as a fact that could be reversed, hence, the name "counterfactual." Early examples of texts in this genre are British historian George Trevelyan's essay "If Napoleon Had Won the Battle of Waterloo," written before WW I, and "Virtual history"

edited by British historian Niall Ferguson. The latter "examines an England without Cromwell and a United States without the assassination of John F. Kennedy (Nagorski, *Newsweek*, June 18, 2001).

This paper explores a text categorized by Nagorski to be in the counterfactual mode, Robert Harris' *Fatherland* primarily to satisfy curiosity on this genre. Specifically, this study sought to determine the extent of the counterfact in the novel, and to assess the appropriateness and believability of the counterfact in its fictional narrative.

## Procedure

The novel, *Fatherland*, was analyzed using an eclectic approach, a combination of critical approaches and literary precepts such as the formalistic approach, genre criticism, reader-response approach focusing on the narrative elements, textual artistry, subtlety, and probability vis-à-vis possibility. *Fatherland* presents "a Europe living with the consequences of a Nazi victory." Moreover, the overall strategy of the analysis is integrative and not linear, that is, the approaches are freely combined in the appreciation of the texts.

In addition, the counterfactuals were compared with historical accounts found in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* by William Shirer.

## Analysis and Interpretation

It is April, 1964, and Nazi Germany is preparing for a week-long celebration of the 75th birth anniversary of the Fuehrer, Adolf Hitler. The mood is festive, children have been released from school for a week of celebration and merrymaking. The Fuehrer's birthday is not the only reason to celebrate: the government has just received confirmation of President Joseph Patrick Kennedy's acceptance of Germany's invitation for him to visit Germany in September that year. This is regarded as a significant event as it will mark the final legitimization of Nazi Germany's ascendance to power after World War