PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA

MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

UNIVERSITY OF AMMAR THELIDJI- LAGHOUAT

FACULTY OF LETTERS AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Disrupting Slavery Grand Narratives Through Dystopian Fiction: Ben Winters' *Underground Airlines* as a Case Study

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF MASTER DEGREE IN CIVILIZATION AND LITERATURE

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2024/2025

Dedications

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, particularly my father and mother. Thank you for your support and love. My thanks go to all my friends, especially Ismail, Abelali, Mohamed, and Lamin.

Chaib Oussama

I gratefully dedicate this dissertation to my family for their support, and to my life partner for their love and patience.

Hamdi Rafik

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Acknowledgments

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to our supervisor, Dr. Selt Djihad Afaf for her support throughout this academic journey. She played a crucial role in shaping this work. Our heartfelt thanks go to all the teachers and the staff members of the department, especially Dr. A. Nouioua.

Abstract

Slavery has profoundly shaped cultural, political, and economic structures, leaving legacies that continue to influence contemporary societies. Its central role in declaring the American Civil War (1861- 1865) has been widely discussed for centuries. Ben H. Winters, in *Underground Airlines* (2016), creates an alternative history where the Civil War was never fought. The novel follows the protagonist's pursuit of freedom in a purely dystopian setting, highlighting themes like identity, freedom, racism, and oppression. The present research investigates how dystopian fiction can disrupt the grand narratives of slavery and history. This work is theoretically grounded in dystopian fiction within postmodernism, exploring concepts such as "incredulity toward metanarratives" and the questioning of history, relying on descriptive and analytical approaches. The data collected are of a descriptive nature, analyzed and interpreted in the light of the novel. Ultimately, the dissertation argues that *Underground Airlines* serves not only as a powerful dystopian text but also as a critical intervention in the discourse of slavery narratives. By imagining an alternative history, Ben Winters invites readers to reconsider the persistence of racial injustice and the fragility of freedom.

Keywords:

Underground Airlines; Dystopian Fiction; Postmodernism; Grand Narratives; Alternative History; Slavery; Racial Injustice; Freedom; Identity; Civil War.

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General Introduction

The history of slavery is one of the most controversial legacies of modern times. Starting from the Atlantic slave trade in the 15th century to the abolitionist movements of the 19th century. Slavery significantly influences the shaping of the modern world in all aspects. As a result, this influence made it one of the most famous themes in literature and the cultural memory. From Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845) and Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) to Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987) and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), authors presented the evil of slavery, and they give a voice for those who are voiceless as well.

Dystopian fiction has always been linked to totalitarian governments, technological control, surveillance, and oppression. This genre, however, is capable of reimaging history and its traumas by involving what-if scenarios. Dystopian and alternate history work together to blur the line between historical stories and speculative imagination. As Linda Hutcheon (1988) has argued in her theorization of historiographic metafiction, postmodern fiction revisits history to question its authority and reveal its constructedness. Dystopian fiction particularly expands this idea through showing historical structures of oppression in a present or future context where they appear familiar. In works such as Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) or Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (1979), slavery is not a closed historical chapter; rather, it continues to the present day. reminding readers of its ongoing afterlives. These texts function as counter-histories, destabilizing the narratives that dominate Western historiography.

Ben Winters, in his novel *Underground Airlines (2016)*, imagines an alternative history of the modern US where the Civil War never occurred and slavery is still legal in four southern states called the Hard Four. The novel follows a black man named Victor who escaped from the plantation when he was a teen. He was caught later and sent to work as a bounty hunter for

the US Marshals Service. By exploring the persistence of racism, institutionalized violence, dehumanization, complicity, and the struggle for identity and freedom, Victor's story in the novel recalls slave narratives in a dystopian setting.

In 2016, and just months before the election of Donald Trump as president of the USA, Ben Winters published his novel *Underground Airlines*. It was exactly the time when the movements of Black Lives Matter rose, and the violence of police reached its peak. In this sense, the novel is not only an alternate history but also a dystopian mirror of the present. Therefore, it works as a narrative device to critique contemporary realities of racial injustice and to challenge the widespread belief that slavery is a finished.

Slavery grand narratives have been dominated by History narratives in which They are presented as a concluded part. Literature has played a crucial role in resisting these narratives, and dystopian fiction provides a unique lens through which to investigate them. *Underground Airlines* novel offers a rare opportunity to examine how dystopian strategies can disturb the grand narratives of slavery. Therefore, the central problematic of this study would be as follows: How is the slavery grand narrative disrupted through dystopian fiction mainly through Winters' novella *Underground Airlines*?

To address the research problem, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the main theories that help to see if the grand narratives are disrupted via dystopian fiction?

2. How are slavery narratives disrupted through fiction, mainly through the work of Ben Winters' Underground Airlines?

3. How can we consider dystopian fiction as a referential historical account?

Slavery literature has been widely studied in previous studies by authors such as: Douglass, Morrison, Butler, and Whitehead, as well as Dystopian and alternative history. However, Ben Winter's Underground Airlines has received low critical attention in the context of disrupting slavery grand narratives through dystopian tools. The few studies that exist focus only on white authors writing about slavery and black culture. Other studies focus on the novel’s counterfactual premise as a literary experiment. Moreover, existing literature that studies the novel from a postmodernist view and Lyotard's concept of grand narratives is limited. this dissertation aims to bridge this gap by analyzing how Underground Airlines disrupt dominant narratives of slavery, freedom, and identity.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To analyze Underground Airlines as a dystopian intervention in the grand stories of slavery.

2. To illustrate how the novel destabilizes grand narratives of slavery, freedom, and identity.

3. To put Winters’ work within the broader tradition of speculative and counterfactual literature on slavery.

This research is carried out on postmodern theories of history and narrative. John François Lyotard confirms that postmodernism is characterized by skepticism toward grand

stories that claim absolute truth. By applying this framework, the study investigates how Winters challenges slavery narratives and reveals its unsolved stories. In addition, dystopian theory and alternative history will also be employed.

The dissertation will be divided into three main chapters. The first chapter will investigate postmodernism and dystopian fiction by providing an overview of postmodernism in literature and its skepticism toward truths. It will then illustrate how postmodernism challenges historical narratives. The chapter will also discuss Lyotard's concept of "incredulity toward metanarratives. The second chapter will be entirely devoted to the protagonist of *Underground Airlines*, showing his struggle in a dystopian environment shaped by the burden of history and internal conflict. This chapter will then illustrate how his resistance embodies both trauma and the destabilization of grand narratives as tools of dystopian control. The third chapter will explore hogw Winters' novel reimagines slavery narratives through a postmodern lens. It will highlight Victor as a symbol of resistance. The chapter will demonstrate how the author used the alternate history to challenge the history, slavery grand narratives, and identity.

The approaches that will be applied to this research paper are qualitative and analytical. We will study the thematic and dystopian elements used in the novel *Underground Airlines*. To support the analysis, the data will be collected from primary sources, including the novel itself, and secondary sources, such as scholarly works on slavery, dystopian literature, and postmodern theory.

Chapter One:

Chapter One: Postmodernism and Dystopian Fiction

Introduction:

This chapter aims to investigate postmodernism and grand narratives to help readers become familiar with these concepts. Then, we are going to point out the relationship between postmodernism and literature generally, and dystopian fiction specifically. We will discuss how postmodernism questions history. At the end, we will address the term "incredulity towards metanarratives."

Postmodernism Grand Narratives:

In an attempt to fully comprehend postmodernism, it's important to first understand its etymology and realize its solid base. Postmodernism is a fusion of two key components: 'post-' and 'modernism.' 'Post-' is a prefix derived from Latin, meaning 'after' or 'beyond,' while ' modernism' refers to the modernist movement that dominated the early 20th century. Modernism itself stems from the Latin 'modernus,' signifying 'modern' or 'contemporary.' The term postmodernism has been used to describe the period after the Second World War, and it can be considered a response to anything associated with the modern period in terms of literature and philosophy. Jean-François Lyotard is known to be the first to introduce the term "postmodern" in 1979 in his book The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.

According to postmodernists, postmodernism is an aesthetic, literary, social, and political philosophy that deliberately reacts to the postmodern mind. So postmodernism is a movement away from modernism. In short, the rise of postmodernism is the end of modernism. Postmodernism is a mentality that rebels against the educational, cultural, social, and political power systems. The contemporary younger generation represents protest and rebellion—violent and non-violent acts against the policies of the earlier generation. The laws, structures, practices, and systems that discriminate against people based on social, racial, gender, and

cultural aspects are challenged (Patil 211-212). Therefore, our society has been chased by postmodernism at every turn.

There are three main postmodernist features. Firstly, the opposition to metanarratives and grand theories, and the emphasis on the local and contextual. This feature of Postmodernist thinking derives its origins from Lyotard's "The Postmodern Condition". The second feature of postmodernist thinking is the rejection of the idea that language has a fixed relationship with reality, or that language expresses essential realities or truths about the world. In terms of origins, this idea can perhaps be traced back to Wittgenstein's 'conversion' from his positivism in the philosophy of language, as seen in Tractatus, to the view of 'language games' that was developed in his later philosophy.

In addition to that, language is not such a "mirror of nature," according to the postmodernists as the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty characterized the Enlightenment view. Inspired by the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, postmodernists claim that language is semantically self-contained, or self-referential: the meaning of a word is not a static thing in the world or even an idea in the mind but rather a range of contrasts and differences with the meanings of other words. Because meanings are in this sense functions of other meanings—which themselves are functions of other meanings, and so on—they are never fully "present" to the speaker or hearer but are endlessly "deferred." (Duignan)

The last feature of postmodernist thinking is the rejection of the idea that there is an absolute universal truth. Instead, postmodernists accept relativism, where truth is relative to the perceiver or one's perspective. In some cases, there is a denial of the existence of truth, as in the case of nihilists who deny all values. This reflects the postmodernists' attitude of rejection towards any secure base on which one can 'ground' oneself. It also reflects the liberal attitude of not denying the perspective of others. This belief cuts across the various

philosophies identified as postmodernist, such as Existentialism, Nihilism, Social Constructivism, and Critical theory. (Shah 7-8).

In other words, postmodernists are advocating for a perspective where truth is subjective and contingent upon individual interpretations of reality. For instance, there can be a hundred interpretations of a single painting and still, all hundred interpretations would be right and valid. They believe that every individual constructs his or her reality according to their culture, environment, and experience. Nothing appears real to them, for them there are billions and billions of subjective realities and there is no single objective reality. A postmodernist is not convinced with the objectivity of the science as promoted in the modernist era. Science studies facts and according to the post-modernist view, facts can be understood and interpreted in more than one way depending upon the nature and subjectivity of the scientist.

As previously stated, Richard Rorty in his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* emphasizes that it is self-contradictory to say whether postmodernism holds truth or whether it provides knowledge. So, postmodernists are required to employ language ironically. He writes:

> The difficulty faced by a philosopher who, like myself, is sympathetic to this suggestion, one who thinks of himself as auxiliary to the poet rather than to the physicist, is to avoid hinting that this suggestion gets something right, that my sort of philosophy corresponds to the way things really are. For this talk of correspondence brings back just the idea which my sort of philosopher wants to get rid of, the idea that the world or the self has an intrinsic nature. (7-8)

Our focus will now be on elucidating the complexities of grand narratives within the landscape of postmodernist discourse.

Postmodernism in Literature:

In the first instance, the term Postmodern literature is used to describe certain characteristics of post-World War II literature relying heavily, for example, on fragmentation,

paradox, questionable narrators, etc., and a reaction against Enlightenment ideas implicit in Modernist literature (Ramen and Sharma 189). In an attempt to define the term postmodernism in a literary context, M. H. Abrams in his book *A Glossary of Literary Terms* mentioned:

> The term postmodernism is often applied to the literature and art after World War II (1939–45) when the effects on Western morale of the First World War were greatly exacerbated by the experience of Nazi totalitarianism and mass extermination, the threat of destruction by the atomic bomb… Postmodernism involves not only a continuation, sometimes carried to an extreme, of the counter-traditional experiments of modernism but also, diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms.

Although postmodernist literature does not include everything written in the postmodern period, several post-war developments in literature such as the Theatre of the Absurd, the Beat Generation, and Magic Realism have significant similarities. These developments are occasionally collectively labeled "postmodern"; more commonly, some key figures Samuel Beckett, William S. Burroughs, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, and Gabriel García Márquez are cited as significant contributors to the postmodern aesthetic. several themes and techniques are indicative of writing in the postmodern era. (Yasir)

If we look at T.S. Eliot's poem The Waste Land, it serves as the best and perfect example of a postmodern poem for it employs every technique of postmodernism. It has an element of intertextuality, narrative fragmentation, parody, pastiche, and collage. It also expresses the loss of sublime, the technique of anti-elitism, and the feelings of anti-establishment which are the explicit characteristics of Postmodernist literature.

The novel is the most preferred genre of postmodern writers. The most famous postmodern novelists are Zadie Smith, Salman Rushdie, Gunter Grass, and many others. Zadie Smith's novel White Teeth (200) is a prototype postmodern novel. It belongs to the postmodern genre of novels called hysterical realism. Salman Rushdic's novel Midnight's Children (1980) also is

the best example of postmodern literature or novel. It employs the elements of magical realism, historiographic metafiction hyperreality. Gunter Grass's Danziger Trilogie is also a piece of postmodernist literature to reckon with. The titles of postmodern novels are very unique and absurd. We have Thomas Pynchon's novel titled (1963). Likewise, Zadie Smith has written a novel titled NW (2012). This is one of the specialties of postmodern novel (Dar 52)

The postmodernist writer distrusts the wholeness and completion associated with traditional stories and prefers to deal with other ways of structuring narrative. One alternative is the multiple ending, which resists closure by offering numerous possible outcomes for a plot. The French Lieutenant's Woman (1969) by John Fowles is a classic instance of this. The novel concerns the love of respectable amateur naturalist Charles Smithson (engaged to the daughter of a wealthy trader) for Sarah Woodruff, an outcast rumoured to have been scandalously involved with a French lieutenant. Although the book is set in Lyme Regis in 1867 and follows several love story conventions, it is far from being a regular historical romance.

Another means of allowing a place for the open and inconclusive is by breaking up the text into short fragments or sections, separated by space, titles, numbers, or symbols. Some authors go even further and fragment the very fabric of the text with illustrations, typography, or mixed media. As Raymond Federman puts it in the introduction to Surfiction: Fiction Now . . . and Tomorrow (1975): 'In those spaces where there is nothing to write, the fiction writer can, at any time, introduce material (quotations, pictures, diagrams, charts, designs, pieces of other discourses, etc.) totally unrelated to the story (Barry 127).

Vicious circles arise in postmodernist fiction when both text and world are permeable, to the extent that we cannot separate one from the other. The literal and the metaphorical merge when the following occur: short circuits (when the author steps into the text) and double binds (when real-life historical figures appear in fiction). The short circuits that plague postmodernist fiction rarely occur in other forms of fiction. In realist literature, for example, there is an

unbroken flow of narrative 'electricity' between text and world. The author never appears directly in his or her fiction, other than as a voice that indirectly guides the reader toward a correct interpretation of the

The equivalent of the double bind occurs in postmodernist fiction when historical characters appear in a patent fiction. We are used to the idea of the historical novel, which shows famous people from the past acting in ways consistent with the verifiable public record. A common alternative is to sketch in the 'dark areas' of somebody's life, and again care is usually taken not substantially to contradict what we already know about them. In postmodernist writing, however, such contradictions are actively sought. So in Max Apple's *The Propheteers* (1987), the motel mogul Howard Johnson plots against Walt Disney race. In E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), Freud and Jung go through the Tunnel of Love together at Coney Island. These are just some of the many derangements of postmodernist fiction (Barry 131-132).

One of the fundamental themes pervasive throughout postmodern literature is historiographic metafiction. Linda Hutcheon coined the term "historiographic metafiction" to refer to works that fictionalize actual historical events or figures; notable examples include Ragtime by E. L. Doctorow (which features such historical figures as Harry Houdini, Henry Ford, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, Booker T. Washington, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung), and Rabih Alameddine's Koolaids: The Art of War which makes references to the Lebanese Civil War and various real-life political figures. Thomas Pynchon's Mason and Dixon also employs this concept; for example, a scene featuring George Washington smoking marijuana is included. John Fowles deals similarly with the Victorian Period in The French Lieutenant's Woman. In regard to critical theory, this technique can be related to The Death of the Author by Roland Barthes.

Paranoia emerges as a prominent and widely explored theme within the discourse of postmodernism. Perhaps demonstrated most famously and effectively in Joseph Heller's Catch-22 and the work of Thomas Pynchon, the sense of paranoia, and the belief that there's an ordering system behind the chaos of the world is another recurring postmodern theme. For the postmodernist, no ordering system exists, so a search for order is fruitless and absurd. The Crying of Lot 49 by Thomas Pynchon has many possible interpretations. This often coincides with the theme of technoculture and hyperreality. For example, in Breakfast of Champions by Kurt Vonnegut, the character Dwayne Hoover becomes violent when he's convinced that everyone else in the world is a robot and he is the only human.

Additionally, literary minimalism can be characterized as a focus on a surface description where readers are expected to take an active role in the creation of a story. The characters in minimalist stories and novels tend to be unexceptional. Generally, the short stories are "slice of life" stories. Minimalism, the opposite of maximalism, is a representation of only the most basic and necessary pieces, specific by economy with words. Minimalist authors hesitate to use adjectives, adverbs, or meaningless details. Instead of providing every minute detail, the author provides a general context, allowing the reader's imagination to shape the story. Among those categorized as postmodernist, literary minimalism is most commonly associated with Samuel Beckett (Ramen and Sharma 196 197 198)

Postmodern authors were certainly not the first to use irony and dark humor in their writing, but for many postmodern authors, these became the hallmarks of their style. Postmodern authors are very frustrated with World War II, the Cold War, and conspiracy theories. They try to illustrate it indirectly so that irony, playfulness, and black humor come. Several novelists later to be labeled postmodern, were first collectively labeled dark humorists.: John Barth, Joseph Heller, William Gaddis, Kurt Vonnegut, Bruce Jay Friedman, etc. It's common for postmodernists to treat serious subjects playfully and humorously.

Some examples of texts that bear the above features are Roland Barthes’s The Pleasure of the Text. The central concept of Joseph Heller's Catch-22 is the irony of the now-idiomatic "catch-22", and the narrative is structured around a long series of similar ironies. Thomas Pynchon in particular provides prime examples of playfulness, often including silly wordplay, within a serious context. The Crying of Lot 49, for example, contains characters named Mike Fallopian and Stanley Koteks and a radio station called KCUF, while the novel as a whole has a serious subject and a complex structure.

Arguably the most important postmodern technique is magical realism, magical realism is the introduction of fantastic or impossible elements into a narrative that seems real or normal. Magical realist novels may include dreams taking place during normal life, the return of previously deceased characters, extremely complicated plots, wild shifts in time, and myths and fairy tales becoming part of the narrative. Many critics argue that magical realism has its roots in the work of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez, two South American writers, and some have classified it as a Latin American style. Jorge Luis Borges’s Historia Universal de la Infamia, is regarded by many as the first work of magic realism. Apart from this, Colombian novelist Gabriel García Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude, Salman Rushdie, and Elizabeth Graver's "The Mourning Door" are some examples of magic realism.

Furthermore, many postmodern authors feature metafiction in their writing, which, essentially, is writing about writing, an attempt to make the reader aware of its functionality, and, sometimes, the presence of the author. Authors sometimes use this technique to allow for flagrant shifts in narrative, impossible jumps in time, or to maintain emotional distance as a narrator. Though metafiction is primarily associated with Modernist literature and Postmodernist literature, but is found at least as early as Homer's Odyssey and Chaucer's 14th-century Canterbury Tales. Some examples of metafiction literary texts are The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer and Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes (Nuri).

According to postmodernism, all stories have already been told, which makes it impossible to create anything original. Every text is merely a copy. Postmodern texts express this through a device called intertextuality. When a text includes a reference to another text, it is intertextuality. This reference can be anything from just a famous quote to the borrowing of characters or even plots. For the readers to fully appreciate this, they must know the text referred to. Intertextuality is sometimes closely linked to pastiche as pastiche can be one way of expressing intertextuality. Another function of intertextuality is to make the readers aware that what they are reading is merely fiction. This is closely linked to metafiction. William Shakespeare's many plays are among texts that are often referred to via intertextuality. For instance, the movie "Shakespeare in Love" borrows some of its plot and characters from.

That would be to conclude, Postmodern literature shares many similarities with modernist literature, as both movements deal with the modern world and its depressing loss of tradition and meaning. However, what makes postmodern literature different is the fact that its mindset towards all this is more optimistic and playful. The postmodernists accept that life is basically without meaning and stability, and they make the best of it by playing around with this in literature in numerous ways. Its authors often mix a variety of genres and styles, from past to present and from high culture to low culture (Primestudyguides.com, 2024).

Postmodernism and Dystopian Fiction:

Dystopian fiction has long served as a canvas for writers to project the darker undercurrents of contemporary society, extrapolating them into future worlds where the consequences of today's choices are lived out in often harrowing detail. This literary form allows authors to navigate through the murky waters of political, environmental, and ethical quandaries, creating cautionary tales where humanity's worst impulses and most dire predictions are brought to the

fore. These narratives, with their blend of imaginative speculation and critical insight, act as both reflections and warnings, giving voice to anxieties and posing questions about the trajectory of human civilization.

Dystopian literature is a genre of speculative fiction that explores social and political structures within a setting that is typically characterized by a totalitarian government, environmental disaster, or other characteristics associated with a cataclysmic decline in society. Unlike utopian fiction, which presents idealized worlds and societies, dystopian novels often depict societies in which the ideals of those in power have warped reality into oppressive and controlled environments, often under the guise of some form of perfection or utopia. The characteristics of dystopian societies can include pervasive government surveillance, blatant environmental degradation, gross social inequality, and the suppression of freedom in various forms.

In addition, the central themes of dystopian literature often revolve around the struggle against the state, the loss of individual identity, and the repercussions of societal control. Protagonists in these stories may grapple with the state's oppressive mechanisms, confront moral dilemmas, or work to overturn the societal norms that have led to dystopian conditions. The settings serve not only as backdrops for the narratives but also as critical components that shape the characters' decisions and ideologies.

Dystopian narratives hold a significant place in literature due to their ability to challenge readers' perceptions and foster critical thinking about the present and future of society. They act as a magnifying glass, accentuating societal issues that may otherwise go unnoticed or unexamined in the everyday. By presenting exaggerated worst-case scenarios, they compel readers to confront potential realities that result from current actions and policies. This genre serves as a social and political critique, making it both timeless and immediately relevant, as it resonates with the fears and anxieties of any given era.

Furthermore, the importance of dystopian literature is reflected in its capacity to encourage discourse on ethics, governance, human rights, and the balance between state control and personal freedom. It often provokes introspection about the values that shape societies and the path human progress is taking. Dystopian stories have the power to influence public opinion and can serve as a form of resistance to real-world political situations by illustrating the dangerous paths societies might take if they fail to heed the warnings embedded within these cautionary tales. As such, dystopian literature continues to be a vital part of literary tradition, offering a dark mirror to the present and a prescient vision of the future that has the power to inform, warn, and potentially guide humanity's choices (Douglas)

History Into Question:

The sphere of history is an area of postmodern thought that examines a way of viewing and presenting traditional history, which has dramatically transformed generations of historians all over the globe and ultimately opened up new interpretive concepts. The one and singular wholly defined and unerring truth, just like it is within the concept of Postmodernism, where instead of wholeness one can see constant fragments of it, indeterminacy, and view at metanarratives as a whole truth (Harrison 163-173). Moreover, as far as postmodernism is the sugar daddy for the history that illustrates them all as imperfect and subjective, it claims that everything is a matter of opinion, having different views (Moniz 207-264).

The arguable place that history writing holds, so the history professionals have always engaged in a disagreement about the nature of the history topic. For example, some history scholars implement various postmodernism theories in their research, whereas some dissidents argue that everything they are doing is postmodernizing the 19th century, which was the real beginning of modern history in the current society (Kaya 779 – 795). One of the struggles that historians come up against is that due to the disbelief that some of them either dismiss or

underestimate postmodernism, and the way critical views that destroy history as a major subject, the discipline of history is undermined.

The so-called the Postmodernists, the opposition in addition to the forms of history is not the only thing that they target, especially the portraying of the development of science as a straight step towards objectivity comes to light as well (Harrison 163-173). Postmodernism weakens the supposedly truth-value of these narratives as they give room for subjectivity and interpretations upon which power relations will contend in societies. Postmodernism's association of more than one truth and the irrelevance of metanarratives will always be its strength.

In general, we can say that the effect of postmodernism on the study of history is principal since it brings a need to rethink methodical narratives and texts which characterize history. The challenge set by the postmodernist dilemmas to the conventional historicism, which is based on objective historical facts, encourages the formation of a number of interpretations of this material as reflected by the general human discourse of the postmodern age with regard to the notions of information, truth and knowledge.

Incredulity Into Meta-Narratives:

Regarding the postmodern thinking standpoint from which “meta-narrative incredulity” has arisen, these are the doubts about the overarching, all-encompassing narratives that can shout the world in a single voice. The refusal to accept any kind of grand narrative is a core value of postmodernism, and this idea obliterates the myth of the existence of a universal truth. The only explanation for everything has been destroyed. Postmodern theorists, as portrayed by Maddern (359-381), could be said to have aimed at the undoing of historicism when they ridiculed the idea of a single and unrealistic grand narrative.

Spaces and phantoms, being non-existent and non-collective in nature, represent the invisible and confounding process of wider-scope historical narrative building.

Postmodernists, on the other hand, after considering solidarity as yet another grand narrative that can potentially shut up people from poor backgrounds, Maruggi tells us, is of no help to them. Refutation of the appellation to meta-narratives is argued to be a way to give a stroke to power systems that can be propagated through separate narratives that do not give attention to a variety of views and experiences. That is one of the sources of the postmodern movement that has the purpose of negating the dominant narrative, and at the same time making room for the underrepresented ones.

Through this portrayal, Smit & Chetty expresses the persistent denial of a post-postmodern character to Meta-narratives by painting it in a much broader political-socio settings where the farewell and destruction of empire-thematic and colonized narratives is dominant.

Rendering these rejections, there would be a series of Transformatoren phases and also a steppingstone against hegemonic policies that uphold roots of inequalities and ills that are unfair. Hence, through the concept of critical approach based around meta-narratives, people can now equally have an open-minded interaction with history, ethics and authority relations.

Harrison brings up Lyotard's perspective of postmodernism as a skeptical attitude to metanarratives" and unmistakably points out a lack of universally valid explanations in the contemporary world. The fact of not knowing something from reality, urges a more scattered and a pluralistic view of knowledge and truth, which refers to the impossibility of totalizing narratives to do justice to the complexity of human experiences and histories.

Seachris is focused on explaining in an existentialist way how the finality of narratives refers to the isolation and meaninglessness of naturalistic meta-narratives. Narrative endings are a vital point.

As an essential stance in postmodernism, "loss of confidence in grand narratives" grounds the relative attitude toward big narratives and results in putting the emphasis on the superiority of pluralism, diversity, and criticality in historical, social and cultural interpretation.

Conclusion:

Rejecting the universal, overarching metanarratives of modernism, postmodernism, like the type of literature analyzed in this work, undermines claims to totalizing and objective explanations of human life and experience. This skepticism toward all-encompassing interpretations of the world, exhibited in dystopian fiction, advocates for a multiplicity of experiences and narratives instead of placing emphasis on a single and absolute truth. The use of an unreliable narrator or a collage of fragmented perspectives throughout postmodern literature necessitates a more critical relationship with history and culture, as an unquestioned acceptance of a singular authority figure is replaced by skepticism. This rejection of a single system of thought for interpreting life, in its own way, forces us to create meaning from a multiplicity of lived experiences.

Chapter Two: Dystopian Subjectivity and the Burden of History: Victor’s Resistance to Grand Narratives

Introduction:

In this chapter, we will investigate the dystopian elements portrayed in *Underground Airlines* by examining the representations of oppression, racism, and surveillance that shape the novel's dystopian setting. Additionally, we will analyze the protagonist Victor as a symbol of resistance. Moreover, we will examine how Winters challenges the traditional slavery narrative by imagining an alternative history. This helps us to discover the way dystopian fiction destabilizes history and to shed light on racial injustice.

The Internal Conflict and the Legacy of Trauma

The main character of Underground Airlines, Ben H. Winters's, is a conflicted individual defined by the aftermath of psychological and systematic violence, a legacy of trauma, and emotional and behavioral damage left in his wake. A case in point, he spends the duration of the novel hiding his personal history by working undercover for the U.S. Marshals Service, posing as a slave catcher. He perpetually dons new aliases, Jim Dirkson in the presence of Father Barton, Kenny Morton when meeting with Dr. Venezia-Karbach, his birth name, Victor, and many more. This even extends to instances such as him switching his name for Dudley Vincent and Jean-Claude Cisse in preparation for a train station role, and then again to Albie the gardener for the murder mystery on an aircraft. The protagonist openly states:

> My name is not Jim Dirkson. Neither is my name Dudley Vincent… I had a lot of names. Or, more precisely, it was my practice at the beginning of a new job to think of

> myself as having no name at all. As being not really a person at all. A man was missing, that's all—missing and hiding, and I was not a person but a manifestation of will. I was a mechanism—a device. That's all I was. (Winter 18)

A slave in an alternate America and an operative for the U.S. Marshals Service. When working, he posits that he is "neither black nor white. Just action. Just work. A machine. He thus does not view himself as a single, unified person with a clear, consistent identity but rather an ongoing assemblage of adopted versions of self devoid of inherent, intrinsic life.

The protagonist's main task is to find Persons Bound to Labor (PBs). However, he frequently refers to himself as a nigger stealer, a soul catcher, to his abhorrence for his line of work, his mission, and his life in it. He thinks of himself as dead in a world of the living and expresses both to his handler, Bridge, and to the readers his hatred for the authoritarian state he works for, describing the choice to collaborate with his official employer by stating, "I was done with this approximation of a human existence, with bending not only my abilities but my real human soul to the sinister will of an authoritarian state." (Winters 50). This sense of inner tumult finds its tangible expression in his thoughts in the physical and emotional aftermath of conversations with Bridge. He describes that he experiences a sense of intense guilt and moral anguish after every interaction by opining, "Certain emotions were bubbling up in my stomach, close to my throat." (21). This dislike of his life for what it represents and who it impacts impels him to be a wolf in sheep's clothing, to use his work to end his life under their employ by coming to "fix Bridge from the inside, remake him and, in the process, remake myself into a sword aimed at his heart."

One of the prime tenets of his conflict is his "tethering" by the U.S. Marshal's Service. He has a device inside of him, right up at the place where the top of the spine meets the base of the brain. Screwed in by government doctors, sending out coordinates on him all day, every day to Bridge. He refers to it as his (hook, an anchor, a leash). The main thing he hopes to do

is to have that pin pulled out and be unclipped. When the moment of the novel comes to an end, he believes, with joy and relief, that his arrival in Canada will at last lead to his freedom. The reason for his becoming a snitch, to begin with, for the Marshals Service was under duress as he signed my life away when chained to a table and chair in a Chicago basement. As such, it was a choice that was no choice.

The novel's protagonist is generally inured to the emotional, psychological trauma he suffers in the course of his work, slowly working towards complete numbness and insensibility: the main character opines that he has developed a habit, one of those passive biological hardenings like calluses and blisters that form on our bodies in response to stimuli that are just not meant to be savored. It's to savor whatever is there to be savored, whatever is available, whatever they just put out for you to take. However, the described encounter is specifically poignant for him in a way. He admits that to him, to have heard "petty authoritarian bullying hurled at Martha, a white woman, was a novelty as the former has been exposed to that kind of talk so often, in such unrelenting blasts in his experiences with black persons. His interactions with Martha and her son, Lionel, and even the sheer experience of seeing Jackdaw's file photo and having a tangible reaction to it are other key instances of the slivers of empathy seeping through his calluses and his self-protective armor. At several instances in the book, he is a visibly bothered and flustered person with his heart trembling. He writes that he is having the beginnings of mourning for Jackdaw already, and how the phrase 'you can't go home again' has a more literal connotation when applied to a slave, of how the slave wants but can never have is not only freedom from the chains but also from their memory and the experiences that created these instances of interiority.

Victor, by the looks of it, has some distinctive physical markers. The most prevalent of them is a single black box tattooed on his collarbone instead of the bell-and-cow logo of my birthplace. Psychologically, the aftershocks of his trauma manifest in the form of sudden red

flashes and a trembling heart. He also describes himself as a monster in the shape of a man, a being with the skin of a snake and the feet of a wolf, and alludes to the theme of violence in the slave catcher in him as it relates to Jackdaw, his quarry. While these may be embellishments to show off to Jackdaw and strike fear into the hearts of Bridges, his handler, and the reader, he is cognizant of his erstwhile monstrosity and the ease with which he might slip back into his slavish past. He opines that he is fearful of whether his old bad times are not just deep asleep but keyed up, or curled around themselves quietly like a long wet spider rattle rattling out their chains and rattling in him. This imagery is not new to him, as he had just as much occasion for similar metaphors.

The protagonist, on more than one occasion, states that his heart has hardened, his life has become one of being "numb", as he would rather have nothing new to agitate the still depths of the brain, not anything that might disturb us or cause us pain. He is one in a long line of slaves whose priority is nothing if not being alone and being silent. He also feels this about sensory recollections of his childhood, of being a PB himself, in how he fixates on their old loud sounds and the stink that always clouded my nostrils" and how he sought silence first and foremost. He is one of the many persons in a traumatic cycle. He knows that when one is a slave, one not only wants "freedom from the chains but also from their memory". He had to become numb because he had to do so much damage and keep the memories of what he had done from being too disturbing. In the present, though, those red-and-black memories are crashing in and pushing in on him.

Victor as a Powerful Embodiment of Dystopian Self in Underground Airlines:

Victor, like the other key characters in the novel, is a deeply complex and often contradictory embodiment of the dystopian self. His identity, fractured and constructed for

survival in a hostile world, is a kaleidoscope of false personas such as Jim Dirkson, Kenny Morton, and Albie the gardener, in addition to his own name, Victor, and his alias Wilson Teller. These identities are not just names, but carefully crafted psychological constructs that Victor uses to navigate a world where a single mistake could lead to re-enslavement or death. His role as a bounty hunter for the US Marshals Service, hunting escaped enslaved people, forces him to lead a life of perpetual deception, where trust is a luxury he can ill afford. This necessity of deception isolates Victor, making every interaction tainted by the inherent lie of his existence.

Victor's self-perception and internal monologue further deepen the complexity of his character and the dystopian self he represents. He describes himself as a mechanistic device and a manifestation of will, indicating a profound level of self-erasure necessitated by his profession. When he is alone in the examination room, he becomes “a blank screen”, “a dead television”, nothing, revealing the emotional toll of this fractured identity. He is able to shift into and out of these roles with chilling fluidity, adopting the persona of Albie the gardener to infiltrate the community center or Kenny Morton to gain entry to Dr. Venezia-Karbach.

His fractured identity is powerfully articulated by his own self-description and his perception of the monstrous nature of his actions. He describes himself starkly: “I am a monster in the shape of a man. I am a man with the skin of a snake and the feet of a wolf.” This self-description is not just a moment of dramatic flair; it reveals the depth of his internalization of the dystopian system's dehumanization. The imagery of a snake’s skin and a wolf's feet is a potent symbol of the survivalist, predatory nature of his work and the deceit he must perpetrate. He is acutely aware of the horrors he perpetuates, which aligns him with the dystopian self as an agent of a corrupt system. Victor’s role as a bounty hunter for the US Marshals Service hunting escaped enslaved people forces him to confront the brutal realities of modern slavery, deepening his internal conflict and sense of self-betrayal. He is a “nigger-catcher soul-stealer

motherfucker" (244), both in the eyes of the society he works for and, it seems, in his own mind. His freedom, which he so desperately clings to, is inextricably bound to the very "institutionalized horror" that perpetuates the enslavement and dehumanization of black individuals, making him both victim and the enforcer of the dystopian system.

Victor's search for Jackdaw (Kevin) forces him into a direct and brutal confrontation with the realities of modern slavery. The novel's alternate history premise, with the 1860 Crittenden Compromise being ratified, means slavery was permanently enshrined in four Southern states. Each mission takes Victor face-to-face with the inhumanity of the Persons Bound to Labor (PBs) system, a euphemism that belies the true barbarity of slavery. His own history as a slave on Bell's Farm, with its kill floor, shed, and the rules against Theft of Rest or Thoughts Against Good Work, haunts him, rendering his current complicity all the more torturous. The "squish of old blood beneath his feet" and memories of the cattle slaughter, his brother Castle, and the oppressive rules are constant reminders of his past. The trauma of his enslavement experience makes his complicity in the system all the more psychologically torturous, as the PBs he captures feel like a piece of himself lost to the evils he once endured.

The violence of modern slavery is pervasive, often hidden behind euphemisms and corporate facades. The treatment of the Persons Bound to Labor as property is a constant, with checkpoints where their own body is searched, reflecting the state's invasive control over black individuals, free or not. The threat of violence is a constant undercurrent in his world, a silent acknowledgment of the power dynamic at play. The cruelty of the system is explicit, not just in its rules but in the physical and psychological control it exerts over its captives, as he witnesses on his missions.

The Jackdaw (Kevin) case becomes a catalyst for Victor, turning his mission into an unraveling of a conspiracy that links government agencies and corporations to the perpetuation of slavery. He discovers that his own handler, Mr. Bridge of the US Marshals Service, and even

Father Barton and Willie Cook, are entangled in a web of deceit, manipulation, and conflicting interests. The full file on Jackdaw is a goddamn mess, full of conjecture and pure search-engine bullshit, leading Victor to realize he is being misled and used as a "pawn in a much larger game".

Victor's investigation leads him to the ultimate horror of the dystopian system: "hybrid cells" and an attempt to grow slave people with no bloodline, people with no past and no future, to solve certain constitutional issues. This revelation shatters any remaining illusions Victor might have had about the system's good intentions or the possibility of simple justice. He confronts the cynical truth that Bad is faster than good; wickedness is a weed and does not wither on its own, it grows and spreads, a worldview shaped by his years in the dystopia. This understanding informs his controversial decision. While the abolitionists, like Father Barton and Willie Cook, dream of revolution through exposing the truth about Garments of the Greater South, a corporation guilty of violating "Clean Hands laws" by using slave-produced goods, Victor, for all his moral revelations, takes a different path. Despite his ideological alignment with the abolitionists, his final decision to betray them and hand the evidence to Bridge is a pragmatic one, rooted in his deep cynicism about the system and his primary goal of self-liberation. He rationalizes that turning the incriminating package (the vial of hybrid cells) over to Father Barton would change not a goddamn thing for the three million enslaved, as people would go back to Townes, because their shit is pretty cheap. He cynically notes that history, from Lincoln to Dr. King, has failed to truly change the fundamental "compromise" that defines America, as the fundamental compromise remains. He is willing to betray the abolitionists to the government and corporate actors he despises, using the evidence as a bargaining chip to secure his own true, unconditional freedom from the Marshals Service and its tracking device. His body betrays him, or at least taunts him, in a constant reminder of his dystopian self; he feels the small, little device embedded in his spine as a "tiny hum in the very center of him,

like something almost alive, or maybe not something at all", an almost audible presence like "a hook. An anchor. A leash." (48) that only abates when he finally kills Bridge and presumably has it removed.

His final, philosophical rumination encapsulates the essence of his dystopian self. He declares

I was a monster, but way down underneath I was good. Wasn't I? Wasn't I good? Didn't I have some good part of me, buried deep underground, beneath Jim Dirkson and Kenny Morton and Albie the gardener and whoever and whatever else I was? I was good underground. In the buried parts of me are good things. (Wimters135)

This passage reveals the internal struggle between his constructed identity and a buried, perhaps more authentic, moral core. His "goodness" is not overtly manifested in heroic rebellion but is rather underground, hidden beneath layers of cynicism and self-preservation. Victor rationalizes his decision to betray the abolitionists as the only way to achieve his goal of self-liberation, a selfish but understandable choice in a world where systemic change seems impossible. His act of self-liberation, gained through further manipulation of the dystopian system he despises, is itself a compromise, which is, as he realizes, the busiest of sins. Victor's arc, therefore, is not a clean narrative of redemption but a deeply unsettling portrayal of a dystopian self—one that is permanently scarred, perpetually conflicted, and ultimately adapting to the pervasive horrors of his world by leveraging its very mechanisms for personal survival, even if it means recognizing that nothing changed.

The Grand Narratives as an Archetype of Dystopian Regime:

A grand narrative, also known as a meta-narrative, is a type of story or belief system. In a dystopian regime, it can serve as the story of a dystopian regime itself an archetype for all dystopian societies to fit into. Grand narratives function as extremely totalizing, oppressive ideologies. In the most famous examples, grand narratives provide the universal truth or purpose that justifies the social and political institutions and practices of a power-holding government or ruling class that, because of this truth, inevitably ends up being oppressive and unjust. Dystopian fiction is a form of speculative fiction that deals with the negative consequences, often extreme, of any given society's attempt to reach an ideal that it usually holds. By the very nature of the genre, this ideal is most often realized as a deeply flawed, if not broken or corrupt, society, in which the government has extreme control over its citizens.

A grand narrative is the perfect dystopian tool by nature, as it is a society's totalizing ideology, with a strong focus on being universal in truth and its totalizing account of history and culture. Philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1984) is one of the most famous to theorize that these types of totalizing narratives can be used to subjugate power and control, or at the very least, that they can be used to squash or delegitimize alternative narratives and worldviews. Oppression and control of this type are key to the dystopian genre.

Let's take a look at the main features of a dystopian regime and show exactly how grand narratives fit all of them:

The source of the power of a ruling class that is oppressing its citizens. In dystopian fiction, it is always easy to see that the government or ruling class is corrupt and abusive.

Citizens of dystopian worlds are either severely controlled or subject to oppression. This is always through some means of censorship or propaganda (self-imposed or government-instituted) or harsh laws and invasive surveillance. Dystopian governments have some sort of unquestionable universal truth or justification for their control, which they spread through that censorship, propaganda, laws, and surveillance. A grand narrative of a dystopian regime is that universal truth. In Underground Airlines, the continued legality of slavery in the Hard Four states (Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and a unified Carolina) is the result of the historical grand narrative that enabled their legality in the first place. This is the Compromise of Crittenden of 1861, which made the Southern States agree to keep the Union, as "Union could still survive…only through negotiation and conciliation" (21). But this has been the source of the government's justification for slavery for the entirety of the story right down to its Bureau of Labor Practices (BLP), a regulatory agency in the Department of Agriculture, set up to establish a comprehensive regulatory framework over all plantations and their owners in the Hard Four. The Fugitive Persons Act (FPA), the act that all US citizens must follow in helping to track down and recover escaped slaves, even if "you've got no first-hand knowledge of it" and that is all of society in the south. The government's direct involvement and regulation of slavery is what normalizes it to the point that it becomes not just legal but an established, national institution.

Limits and controls on individual freedoms and personal autonomy. Citizens have few, if any, basic rights, and even in dystopian fiction, they are subject to varying types of controls

and surveillance, which can include curbs on their freedom of expression and privacy. Underground Airlines limits individual freedom almost to the point of total absence in Victor's extreme Faustian bargain as a former slave who, because of his particular skills, lives in the paradoxical state of bounty hunter for the US Marshals Service. His conditional liberty requires him to work for the USMS and to retrieve escaped slaves for the FPA at all times. But even Victor, a free man who lives under this constant threat of having his "conditional liberty" revoked, is not free. He is fitted with a tiny microphone in his spine that transmits his coordinates to his handler, Mr. Bridge, 24/7. This constant surveillance is an extreme and obvious example of the direct result of the government's control, backed up by the societal grand narrative that the tracking and recapture of "Persons Bound to Labor" (PBs) is the "Pillar of Freedom". The larger society's preoccupation with "Pigmentation Taxonomies", which is a system for determining skin tones used by the US Marshals Service in their quantification and control of the citizenry, is another example of the way in which individual identity has been stripped away by the larger grand narrative and is instead reduced to a dehumanizing number or colour on a scale.

Explanation/causes/justifications of a ruined environment, which can also include poverty, pollution, severe lack of resources, and generally limited technology. Dystopian societies are not always shown with some obviously ruined environment, but they are almost always featured as some sort of society that has either seen its environment or resources drastically decline or which suffers from the consequences of severe pollution or a limitation

on technological progress or innovation. Underground Airlines features the social and economic inequality that the society's grand narrative directly "causes". In Hard Four states, the economy is booming as a direct result of "economic insulation of permanently deflated labor costs", while in northern cities like Indianapolis, there is rampant poverty and an economy that is struggling to find its footing due to "America’s f***-up, piecemeal economy"(68). The Freedman Town a result of the cities' poverty where America’s dirtiest, laziest, least motivated industry has congregated to exploit poor black men blasted apocalyptic acreage or invisible city of America’s most forgotten who are "stuck there by poverty, by prejudice, by laws that keep them from moving or working" is shown to be there for a good purpose, that being the "est of the world to look and say, "Will you look at those animals? That’s what kind of people those people are" (118). It explicitly states the justification that the grand narrative brings in terms of racism and poverty in a societal system that has created a ruling class that benefits from their wealth, while poor people of colour suffer.

Sense of deep despair. If your society's totalizing story, which supposedly defines reality, is set in stone, and there is no going back from that, that alone is a powerful sense of hopelessness that characters in dystopian stories often feel as they struggle against the incredibly oppressive conditions they are put into. Victor, with all of his skills, is no exception, feeling it sometimes and voicing his awareness of it. This awareness of the power of the grand narrative that he lives under, which in part created those skills, comes through at multiple points in the story. Victor notes that there was so much public pressure over financial firms like

Millenium Trading buying blood money but ultimately, corporations like Townes Stores (the largest retailer in the United States) will find other loopholes and methods to continue participating and having skin in the game. They can pay the fines for trading in their blood, and have a bad quarter but in the end, this will not lead to any change. Victor has come to see "Nothing changed, not really"(158), even during abolitionist movements, in a past context, because the same system of grand narrative remains in place. It all leads up to the final horror of the GGSI revelation that the company is engaged in the active manufacturing of people using hybrid cells harvested from test subjects to create a new class of people with no bloodline, people with no past and no future, people with no claim to freedom. It is the ultimate dehumanizing move, the complete and utter erasure of a person's identity and future, and the despair of both the company's victims and those who are trying to save themselves and others like them is palpable.

In conclusion, a grand narrative, as it is used in a dystopian regime, is the basic code or operating system of a dystopian society. It defines everything about the society's perception of reality and its ability to control and justify its own reality and the realities of those within it. Grand narratives in dystopian regimes by other famous authors such as George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, or Ray Bradbury are just as easily analyzed. Underground Airlines is a masterwork that takes the "ultimate in evil" of America's foundational, structural compromise and grand narrative of "American tradition" to the next step. Slavery never ended in Underground Airlines because of the power and inescapability of the national grand narrative itself. It had to remain,

in a way, an adaptive, resilient, and totalizing account of history and culture to fit the needs of each new era. This is what fundamentally makes this an alternate reality dystopia that Victor lives in. His journey to track down and find Marianne is not just a literal journey across America. It is the symbolic path of a man who was made by the system to find the humanity within himself that is actively being denied by the same system.

From Compliance to Consciousness: the Dystopian Self Liberated:

Victor's decision to finally break free from the system is the result of his long-standing struggle with morality. When the novel begins, Victor is living in relative freedom as a bounty hunter, a former slave forced to track down runaways for the government. However, this "freedom is a Faustian bargain" that he has made with the government in exchange for tracking down Jackdaws. Victor's body is wired to a device in the base of his brain, which sends his location to his handler, Mr. Bridge, every day. As a result, his life is in constant limbo, his freedom limited by his own willingness to hold another man down at the behest of the government. This is in addition to the secret chain on his wrist as a result of his former life as a slave on Bell's Farm. Despite this, Victor's investigation into the Jackdaw case (Kevin) forces him to examine his actions, particularly when the case takes a turn toward uncovering a massive conspiracy, made up of government, corporate figures who all profit from slavery. After Kevin's death, Victor becomes determined to see the larger network dismantled while at the

same time ensuring his own real freedom. Victor chooses to use the hard drive Kevin has as the bargaining chip with Bridge and agrees to make a deal with Bridge in exchange for his own freedom, the chip being taken out of his brain, and a clean set of papers, a ruse to gather information on the government's secret service teams. At the time of the exchange with Bridge and the technician, Dr. Cormer, Father Barton, and the abolitionists led by Maris interrupt the exchange in the cornfield, resulting in a firefight where the technician is killed. Victor, still connected to the machine, is forced to order Bridge to perform the extraction procedure himself, after a violent struggle where Victor threatens to shoot Bridge: Doc Cormer's not coming back. I'll do it. Go. Now." Bridge performs the procedure and Victor describes the agony as it "rips free of me" and "bursting stars of bright pain fly out along my spine."(258). When Victor comes to after the procedure, Bridge is dead, and Victor is alone in the cornfield. The machine has been removed, and Victor has regained his freedom in the physical sense. He goes on to join Martha and her son, Lionel, while at the same time deciding to take action against the system that took Samson from Martha by combustion by targeting the Special Economic Zone.

Conclusion:

As a result, we can say that *Underground Airlines* embodies many features that strongly represent the dystopian world. the alternative history of the novel exposes the contradictions between democratic ideals and oppressive realities. Victor’s divided identity and his struggle for freedom illustrate the psychological burden of living under systemic control

and racial injustice. By analyzing Victor's resistance, we have found that his fragmented self reflects the conflict between oppression and freedom. This reflection highlights that slavery's legacy still exists in a dystopian condition.

Chapter Three: Slavery Narratives Disrupting through Ben Winters' Underground Airlines

Introduction:

This chapter discusses several key aspects of Ben H. Winters's Underground Airlines. It begins by examining Victor as a symbol of postmodern resistance against the grand narratives, then moves to reimagining history and the complexity of power dynamics. The chapter also explores how the novel questions freedom and agency before concluding with an analysis of identity and complexity as central concerns in the text.

Victor as a Symbol of Postmodern Resistance Against the Grand Narratives:

Ben H. Winters' Underground Airlines take the reader to a harrowing alternative reality, in which slavery remains a part of the social fabric of the country to the present day. The story of Victor, the main protagonist, a former slave, who has now made a career as a federal bounty hunter, is both tragic and illuminating. Through his conflicted journey, Underground Airlines explores the postmodern sensibility, represented in Jean-François Lyotard's works, particularly his concept of "incredulity toward metanarratives." Victor's character arc of submission to rebellion embodies the deconstruction of monolithic master narratives about freedom, progress, and justice. The intimate fracture of his social identity serves as an allegory for the dismantling of the consoling illusions about the univocity of the American national history.

At the beginning of the novel, Victor is in a way "fully postmodern," as he is already suspended between states of being and non-being. On the one hand, he is a federal employee, tasked with locating escaped "Persons Bound to Labor" from the Hard Four states and returning them to their "owners." In this role, Victor is fully compliant, as well as a loyal and efficient member of the Bureau, hunting down his racial equals. On the other hand, he is a fugitive, who made his way from one Point of Safety to another. He has "no name at all," when he is on a job, "not a person but a mechanism — a device" for processing PWLB (Winters 26). Victor's dual positionality is the effect of the state's legislation and law enforcement on the one hand and his own erased identity on the other. His new job as a bounty hunter is the outcome of the Crittenden Compromise of 1860 and the Fugitive Persons Act of 1871, which were designed to keep the legalized slavery in the former Confederate states and legitimize the mistreatment of African Americans. The legislative acts and enforcement policies work, in the novel, through the construction of the national narrative of "compromise" and "Union." They are embodied in Mr. Bridge, Victor's contact in the Marshals Service, and his hard rhetoric and cold, "iron" voice. Bridge's repeated reminder to Victor about the conditional character of his emancipation, purchased with full compliance to the federal order, is the verbal manifestation of the grand narrative.

Victor's dutiful service to the Bureau is, however, complicated by the fact that, at the same time, he is being haunted by his memories, recollections, and images. They are mostly associated with Bell's Farm, where he was enslaved as a child, and where the most violent cruelty of the slave system was to be found. The barn on the farm "smelled of cattle and blood," and on summer days "the air seemed to solidify" around Bell's (Winters 35). The Past provides an experience, which does not correlate with the Present. It is in Victor's flashbacks that the "true" sounds of slavery can be heard. The realities of the factory farms and the history of the

farm workers who were kidnapped by the Farm Patrol as it happens with Reggie present a counter-narrative to the post-Civil War official state version. Victor feels guilt and self-loathing for each person that he has to capture and bring back to slavery. The scenes with Father Barton, a white abolitionist, further confound the emotionally fraught already reality of the slave catcher. Barton is a metonym for the slave hunters' common enemies: the network of abolitionists, who coordinate the undercover operatives across the country. At the same time, the fugitive slave catcher feels anger and hostility toward Barton, even resentment for his pity. Barton, like the system that Victor works for, attempts to construct him as a slave in a way that he is reluctant to become. Therefore, Victor exists in a state of ambivalence toward the system as much as toward those who oppose it. This is the most vivid example of his postmodern non-credulity.

Victor, however, slowly starts to get suspicious and come to his senses. The incentive to the process of Victor's self-definition, Victor's becoming who he is, is the Jackdaw case, the job, which he is assigned to complete. At first, he is cynically overconfident about the immutability of the state of things: "I could see the future… and what would happen was nothing" (Winters 108). He also remembers failed promise to end racism once and for all by such monumental figures as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. In the end, it turns out that the fugitive Jackdaw is Kevin, a high school student, who volunteered to perform as bait for undercover operatives of Garments of the Greater South (GGSI), a human-trafficking ring. The ruse had been intended to ensnare GGSI operatives and collect evidence of illegal activity. The discovery of Jackdaw's photograph, showing a shy, unassuming, delicate young man, makes Victor see a person in front of him, and not just a file.

As Victor uncovers the details of the case, it gets only more sinister. The so-called "package" in Kevin's possession turns out not to be a financial dossier, but a series of vials of experimental hybrid cells, harvested from mixed-race slaves with white parents. In this context, this appalling discovery serves as the evidence of the level to which the state will go in order to dehumanize enslaved persons, to "prove" that they were "not technically… people any longer" (Winters 138). The experiment, as it is further revealed, is meant to reduce the need for repeated breeding of human property. The unscrupulous exploitation of human life on its most grotesque is the metonym for the system, which Victor is a part of, and to which he has been made to comply with for so long. This new information breaks Victor, who cannot any longer reconcile this with his lingering belief in "humane slavery." It also shows him, that he is just another tool, which both his adversaries and his allies are trying to use for their own ends. Barton, who leads an underground railroad, attempts to make him help in the big strike. Bridge, his handler, makes him believe that if he makes the right call, he will be free for good. Faced with such betrayal on both sides, Victor has only himself to rely on. He calls himself a "double agent" and attempts to barter the truth he has found out, to trade it for his own freedom. When he says to Bridge: "I've got layers. I go way down," he is referring to this reconfigured understanding of his own social identity (Winters 144). Victor, who has made a choice to take control of his life, who has become who he is by opting out of the system he has been embedded in, is resistant in the postmodern sense.

Victor's postmodern character arc of hesitation and ultimate rejection of the state's grand narrative are emblematic of Lyotard's postmodern sensibility, represented in his theoretical works. Victor has experienced the full force of state power, trauma of enslavement, and the horror of racialized violence. These lived experience, however, do not tally with the state's vision of "regulated, humane slavery," promoted in his own time by figures like Ralph

Abernathy. The official state narrative about blackness and what blacks are being reduced to is put into question by Victor's images and the practices in the SEZ facilities, in which fugitives and their sympathizers are subjected to what is in essence forced conversion. The optimistic abolitionists' narrative of the coming storm and "revolution" is similarly called into question by Victor, who is dubious about whether the wave of public opinion will be able to overturn the order of things.

Victor cannot subscribe to any one grand narrative. Instead, he opts for the strategy of self-preservation, on his own terms, for himself. His act of resistance at the end of the novel is, therefore, an individual one. In his rejection of the state's script of "loyalty" and "service," in his embrace of his own selfhood, Victor is not a simple hero or martyr. He is only a man who was forced into being and who simply refuses to buy into the univocal, one-dimensional vision of liberty, morality, and freedom. Underground Airlines shows that resistance is individual, fragmented, and, by necessity, morally ambiguous. It is a form, in which is experienced, firsthand a world, in which history is never finished and freedom has always to be earned, and then, all over again.

Reimagining History and the Complexity of Power Dynamics In Underground Airlines:

Ben H. Winters' Underground Airlines stands out as a significant work in the dystopian genre because it restages the past. In this present, slavery is a legal and active institution within the country. As a result, the complexity of the power relations characterizing all human societies is amplified, with the government, police, corporations, and even abolitionists working to control the powerful public narrative about past, present, and national identity. The

way the author uses the reimagined timeline to amplify current problems can be said to align with postmodern thought by rejecting the idea that history is a neutral fact. The narrative is thus recontextualized within the text, again corresponding to postmodern ideas, to show how history is a constructed and continuing battle over collective and individual stories, belonging, and the right to be remembered.

Winters' first move in restaging the past is introducing the Crittenden Compromise of December 18, 1860, presented to Congress by the State of Kentucky's Senator John J. Crittenden and approved on May 9, 1861. The text makes clear that Crittenden's Compromise did not end slavery but made it a part of the "Hard Four" of the South by "Six amendments and four resolutions, preserving slavery where it was", plus an "Eighteenth Amendment, the one making them permanent and everlasting" (Winters 60). The nation's origin story, in other words, included a "compromise" that codified and normalized injustice. As this new national story formed, people like Abraham Lincoln and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were recontextualized. Lincoln, the archetypal "Great Emancipator," was reduced to "Abraham the Martyr" (Winters 239). Ironically, instead of his death freeing the slaves, his death actually helped to close the deal on the Crittenden Compromise. Dr. King, also not working to end slavery in this present but to move people to "legislated abolition in Tennessee", also died to no avail, shot "outside his hotel room" in the same way as Lincoln (Winters 267). In other words, the postmodern critique of progress is implicit within this act of restaging the past, as are postmodern ideas that history is a biased narrative that those with power and wealth repackage and rewrite.

The alternate timeline rigorously exposes power relations through the institutions of government, law enforcement, abolitionists, and the people they interact with. The U.S. Government and police are first among them as the primary institutions actively upholding the institution of slavery. The U.S. Marshals Service is actively policing the "Fugitive Persons

Act" (FPA), or what was "passed in the ancient year of 1793" and "updated repeatedly: strengthened in 1850, reinforced in 1861, revised and strengthened a half dozen times since" (Winters 177). This not only speaks to the power relations within the text of the government and police working together to solidify their power over the people but also to the way that such power is exercised and reformed through the manipulation of laws and how seemingly benign "humane" regulations such as those the "Bureau of Labor Practices" (BLP) introduces are immediately shown to be toothless by Victor's comments about "Guards get[ting] carried away. Workloads get dangerous. Franklins get bribed" (Winters 175). The government and law enforcement, as represented by Victor, directly control not just "bonded labor" but also bodies considered to be "free" by methods such as the inspections at "the Fence" by federal Internal Border and Regulation (IBR) agents. As an agent, Victor, who often uses aliases, most notably Jim Dirkson, is the direct tool of state power. This is most apparent by the fact that his own "freedom" was a "bitter compromise forged through a government deal" (Winters 38, 210). In other words, he is part of that power structure because of the way that he, in his work as a marshal, has a glimpse into the structures beneath that directly support slavery, like the "clean hands" narrative.

In his work as a marshal, Victor has access to those covert political and corporate elements that keep the institution of slavery alive. As a simple case, Jackdaw is a runaway from Garments of the Greater South, Inc. (GGSI), a textile plantation business with "4,232 Persons Bound to Labor" (Winters 96, 89). However, as he looks through documents about Jackdaw and GGSI, Victor begins to see evidence of such power: "redacted rectangle[s] on the plantation map of Route 54" and the "fact that the dagger in that file was pointing to nothing" (Winters 98). In other words, the state actively withholds and obscures. The most important discovery, however, is that GGSI and other corporations like Townes Stores are involved in "long-term, systematic violation" of "Clean Hands laws" by harvesting "hybrid cells… from

human subjects", the slaves, for scientific "experimentation", with the hopes that they can make people enslaved "not technically… people any longer" so as to resolve "constitutional issues" (Winters 168, 177). In other words, the ultimate goal is to take away the enslaved people's last claim to freedom and humanity, that they are, in fact, human. Thus, the more direct power relation is one of profit by the corporation, which then incentivizes political and scientific activity. By continuing to use the labor of the enslaved, the "slave states prospered, protected by the economic insulation of permanently deflated labor costs" (Winters 77). This relationship exposes the more extreme dehumanization that the corporate model can incentivize through its direct connection to the political and scientific spheres. The existence of the "slave states" and other fundamental power institutions is also challenged by the competing narratives of abolitionists and the people in general. Abolitionist organizations like the Underground Airlines that Victor works for understand their cause as one where the revelation that corporations like GGSI are "involved" will "shake the very foundations" of slavery and "change the world" (Winters 169). Father Barton, the head of the Underground Airlines, presents this vision clearly. Victor, on the other hand, having been scarred by his research, as well as his personal history, of the repeated failure of historical moments, like the ending of the Crittenden Compromise and the Civil War, believes that "Nothing changed, not really" after the deaths of Lincoln and Dr. King (Winters 266). Thus, even those working together against slavery, an important sign of power within the text, have power relationships between them, with white abolitionists ignoring or unconsciously endorsing a "Mockingbird mentality" of "the white man is the saver, the black man gets saved" (Winters 43). This imbalance is also why the Underground Airlines is, in fact, a very specific type of power narrative or tool, the smaller, more idealistic work of "piecemeal; small-group action" that is dependent on "paperwork" and the "forging of documents" rather than being a "grand, organized sense" (Winters 57, 232). Thus, even "Freedman Town", the manumission pen for manumitted people,

is also a symbol of the dominant power narrative and those it creates. They design this pen in particular to solidify the prevailing ideas about poverty and poor people: "Create a pen like that… and then people get to point at them and say Will you look at those animals?" (Winters 149). The more direct power, in other words, is the control of the narrative, or the idea of what a community and country look like, not just through propaganda but through space, place, and even poverty.

Thus, as a postmodern text, Underground Airlines reflects some ideas that are common to the movement. The past, the fundamental origin story, is constructed and controlled rather than neutral or a simple fact. This is Winters' own act of restaging the past, as the timeline of the novel itself directly challenges this. Victor also uncovers the fact that "two realities out here, overlaid one on top of the other" exist, one true one officially, and the other artificial and violent (Winters 114). The powerful feeling that even this much information will not change things in the world, because "Nothing changed, not really", also speaks to postmodernist ideas that large, totalizing ideologies of progress are either oppressive or simply false (Winters 267). This deep cynicism of Victor, even after his discoveries, forces the reader to question their own connection to the past and present, amplifying the message and mirroring how Victor was so impacted by his interaction with the hidden aspects of American society.

Questioning Freedom and Agency:

Underground Airlines by Ben H. Winters forces the reader to question the ideas of freedom and personal agency in a world with legalized slavery. Victor's experiences in the novel challenge the concept of freedom itself, pushing the audience to shift from seeing it as a state or right, to seeing it as negotiable and manipulated. Victor's attitude towards his situation progresses from accepting that his freedom is conditional to realizing it is never his own. This mirrors the postmodern suspicion of universal truth; Victor learns that freedom is neither a

universal human right, nor an objective state, but a contested, constantly negotiated, and sometimes illusory experience.

Victor's attitude at the start of the book positions his freedom as a "bitter compromise forged through a government deal". While he is "free since I was fourteen years old" and outside the "Hard Four" slave states, his examples of freedom and the power to "live in public" include "walking out of a restaurant with leftovers" or "reading the newspaper", which he holds so tightly he is "afraid I'll drop it". Despite his unique position as an African American marshal who tracks and recaptures "Persons Bound to Labor" (PBs) under the "Fugitive Persons Act", the irony of his position darkens the color of his freedom, leaving it tainted, compromised, and ultimately, conditional. He is also always in character: Jim Dirkson, Dudley Vincent, Kenny Morton. He explains his role necessitates this chameleonic approach, as he lives undercover. Victor is also both physically free to leave and forced to stay put by "a device inside of me, right up at the place where the top of the spine meets the base of the brain" that "talks to a satellite in the sky" (19). This describes the "microchip" the government implanted in him that "marks" him "like a steer" and makes him "tethered tight" (182, 264). His movements are closely monitored by his handler, and his position requiring him to "partner with slave catchers" and "kidnap my own people" renders him morally compromised. This early conception of freedom is really a very restricted, conditional type of servitude only due to Victor's own acquiescence to the state.

Victor's attitude towards freedom changes as he becomes aware of his own manipulation and begins to see that "both of these people are playing [him]". Victor first begins to question the nature of freedom when he observes the government and the abolitionists are using him for their own ends. While Victor's handler Mr. Bridge initially appears professional and orderly, Victor eventually comes to the conclusion that "the truth of Bridge, of me and him had unexpectedly shown itself right up close where I could see it. It had always been violence"

(238). Bridge had lied to Victor about the Jackdaw file for months, clearly putting the idea of withholding information above Victor's safety or justice for Jackdaw's family. The "dagger pointing to nothing" file exposes intentional gaps and deception in official records.

Victor also sees the similar methods of manipulation used by the abolitionist Underground Airlines and Father Barton. Barton brings Kevin (Jackdaw) to Victor under "hopeful, lunatic words" that proving corporate complicity in human trafficking will "shake the very foundations" of slavery, a "moving, a great churning, a shuddering, of the entire world" (220). However, given Victor's cynicism about historical claims to freedom ("They'd been talking about freedom in Old Abe's time, but then they shot Old Abe, and what changed? Nothing changed") (318), he does not really believe exposing the truth will make any difference, even if they are successful in their mission. Barton is shown as exerting power over Kevin through Kevin's continued calls for help, with Victor describing this as the "Mockingbird mentality", a position where "the white man is the saver, the black man gets saved" (282). The Underground Airlines, or "U.S. Air", is also not a "grand, organized sense" but rather "piecemeal; small-group action", with both Kevin and Victor citing the role of "paperwork" and "logistics" as a major factor in the efficacy of resistance (68, 219). In both cases, Victor's superiors use him as a pawn, withholding information and using their power to influence events according to their limited ends. Victor becomes acutely aware of how little his own freedom matters to the major powers, and that there is no absolute truth or universal solution.

This realization of manipulation helps Victor to see freedom in a postmodern sense, as a state that is highly fragmented, negotiated, and often illusory. There is no absolute freedom to be had, and there is no single heroic act that will universally set people free. He internalizes this while speaking to Ada in the South, when Ada challenges his notion of Northern freedom as universally and obviously superior: "Y'all hear shit about down here, people in the South.

We hear shit about up there too" (292). Black people still risk being "Get pulled over every time I'm driving? Get shot by some cop, walking down the street?" even in a free state like Illinois, and "Freedman Town", the supposed enclave of Northern black freedom, is exposed by Victor as an "invisible city, floating like a dead island", in the air "for the good purpose of keeping that prejudice in the rest of the world" (168, 221). Even this free space is part of a system that oppresses people, and freedom is still constantly being negotiated and defined.

In response to this fragmentation, Victor also reclaims his own agency by exploiting this fluid state of affairs, by playing both sides. "I have been subverted. I am a double agent now. I work for the enemy", Victor declares early on in his mission (206). Victor has abandoned his earlier goal of freedom and subversion as a means to a vague collective liberation, and instead has an explicit, individualized one: the envelope of "hybrid cells… harvested from human subjects", or slaves, is not to "shake the very foundations" of slavery, but his "ticket to freedom" (220, 223). The tactic of feeding back this crucial piece of evidence, the "proof positive" of corporate complicity, is to play each side, creating uncertainty for both, to demand and buy his own "clean and clear" papers as "Wilson Teller" (383). His last-minute decision to sacrifice his ticket and pay Martha $29,500 to "Get that boy out of America" and free her as well shows the same local, individualized extension of agency as the earlier case of Victor saving another PB instead of following orders. His own agency is still prioritized, but here Victor shows he is not blind to the postmodern reality; agency is a tactical choice, not a universal human right.

Exploring Identity and Complexity:

Ben H. Winters' Underground Airlines offers a postmodern take on identity by destabilizing and fragmenting it into a set of fractured, fluid, and conflicted multiplicities. This dystopian work posits identity not as an essence but as a construct shaped by trauma, power

dynamics, and survival strategies. Victor's journey interrogates the concept of identity itself, with his many names, suppressed humanity, psychological struggles, and final rejection of a unified self. Victor's dehumanized role as an agent for the state, his fractured identity, and his journey from an isolated pawn to an agent with free will and individual agency become the most salient targets of critique in this novel.

Victor's identity, from the beginning, is a highly fractured construct. He begins, "I had a lot of names. Or, more precisely, it was my practice at the beginning of a new job to think of myself as having no name at all. As being not really a person at all… I was not a person but a manifestation of will. I was a mechanism—a device. That's all I was" (p. 9). He is not simply Jim Dirkson, Dudley Vincent, or, after leaving "the Line," Kenny Morton. His personae are fully constructed, documented by "paperwork… and three more complete sets on three other names, all of it comprehensively backstopped, every phone number connected to a real phone, a real person who knew what to say if somebody called" (p. 8). He even describes this shapeshifting as "costumed and posing, turning and turning myself, like changing the channels on a television set" (p. 12). His identity is a postmodern destabilization of the self, a performative and strategic masking as a tool for his subversive, spy role. The state's highly taxonomized racial identity imposed on its citizens, "Pigmentation Taxonomies" or "taxonomies of skin tone" listing "172 varietals of African American skin tone," including "moderate charcoal, brass highlights, is designed for surveillance and control, which Victor circumvents by being a shapeshifter in many senses.

Beneath Victor's superficial fluidity is a caged, submerged humanity and an enduring, destabilizing psychological battle. Victor's identity is deeply conflicted, compounded by his task of hunting down and returning "Persons Bound to Labor." He acts in the "bitter irony given his own history as a former slave". This duplicity is a "devastating" "mental toll… he paid for being Wilfred Banks, an endless cycle of self-loathing and moral ambiguity".

Memories of Bell's Farm, "a livestock slavery," mar him with "miserable fucking memories, the terrified lowing of the cattle and the ka-thunk of the bolt gun" (p. 296). Trauma from his past, including Castle's panicked acts against rebellion documents, contributes to an internal mental space where "those old bad times were hard to quiet" (p. 306). Victor attempts to "shove it all away with a violent act of mind," repressing and compartmentalizing that authentic, suffering self. He regards himself as "invisible man" or a "ghost," or sometimes "completely alone in the presence of myself… like a blank screen… a dead television. I was myself. I was nothing" (p. 27, 126). Victor's journey from dehumanized machine to self-aware agent and protagonist is prompted by the discovery of Jackdaw, although initially he fulfills his role as agent with postmodern efficiency and dehumanization. "Doing this part of a job," Victor states, "I really was not a person. I was neither black nor white. Just action. Just work. A machine" (p. 132). However, the humanizing details of Jackdaw's file photo, "sadness… and sensitivity" in his eyes as opposed to other "coldly furious" or "dead-eyed" fugitives, haunt and humanize Victor. He experiences, "empathy rose up in me. I was him. I was that man huddled in there, waiting, holding his breath, terrified by the small approaching light" (p. 127). The shifting loyalties of Victor mirror his constructed identities. He maintains a tenuous, performative loyalty to his governmental handler, Mr. Bridge, to whom he reports but also exhibits internal rebellion: "Yes, Massa. Sho' nuff." He also allies with abolitionist Father Barton, creating an invented backstory for himself with a slave wife called Gentle to win Barton's trust. However, he discovers duplicity from both Bridge and Barton, when Bridge omits information from his handler and Barton offers Victor "hopeful, lunatic words" and acts "on the basis of a lie" about the paper's truth. Recognizing manipulation, Victor forcefully tells Bridge, "I have been subverted. I am a double agent now. I work for the enemy" (p. 373). His evolving loyalties and subsequent self-actualization represent his postmodern rejection of any fixed, unifying grand

narrative or loyalty in favor of a fragmented, multi-layered identity: “I’ve got layers, Mr. Bridge. I go way down” (p. 373).

Identity in Underground Airlines is thus not fixed, but highly mutable, formed by trauma, power dynamics, and strategies for survival. Victor, in the end, uses the evidence to negotiate personal freedom and buy a new, completely clean and clear identity in the form of Wilson Teller and new papers. His character arc from a conflicted individual to a vanguard of justice is not about adhering to a new grand narrative of freedom or abolition. Rather, it is an act of self-authorship, self-creation, and self-direction, to make individual choices in a world that unceasingly seeks to surveil, track, and control him. Underground Airlines thus postulates a fluid, shifting identity shaped by dystopian forces and internal resistances in oppressive dystopian societies.

Conclusion:

To conclude, according to the criteria and analysis presented in this chapter, it seems reasonable to consider Ben Winters’s *Underground Airlines* as a significant dystopian work. By imagining an alternative history where slavery persists in modern America, the novel destabilizes the grand narratives of freedom and progress that dominate Western historiography. The dystopian elements are revealed through the constant surveillance, systemic oppression, and the commodification of human lives, which reflect the fragility of freedom and the persistence of racial injustice. Furthermore, the psychological struggles of the protagonist illustrate the weight of inner trauma, repression, and identity, which align with dystopian archetypes of alienation and control. Ultimately, *Underground Airlines* serves both as a dystopian warning and as a critical intervention in the discourse on slavery, history, and morality.

General Conclusion

The chosen dystopian text to be analyzed is Ben Winters' Underground Airlines. The novel challenges American grand narratives of slavery – which present slavery as a thing of

the past, an accomplishment left behind in a completed process of history – by offering a counterfactual history of modern America where slavery has not ended. Dystopian fiction, in general, offers an excellent way to discuss how novels can counter-canonize history; by its very nature, it is "counter-factual" and thus destabilizes "grand narratives." An analysis of Underground Airlines as dystopian will employ the postmodern concept of the "incredulity toward metanarratives" and the theory of counter-history to show how the novel works as a counter-narrative that disrupts dominant narratives about slavery, freedom, and identity. Reading Underground Airlines as a postmodern dystopian text can demonstrate its ideological positions, how it revises history, and how it can reorient the present-day readers' perception of identity, slavery, and freedom.

The postmodern theoretical frame to be employed in this analysis is the concept of "incredulity toward metanarratives". This theory positions dystopian fiction as a counter-history which meticulously deconstructs dominant narratives about slavery, freedom, and identity. Lyotard defined postmodernism as a condition of modern culture where the grand narratives lose their credibility, their claim to universal application. Postmodern theorists stress multiplicity, diversity, pluralism, suspicion, and ironic re-interpretation of experience and social and historical reality. In the context of postmodernism, Underground Airlines is a direct challenge to any complacent idea that slavery is safely a historical event.

Victor is the protagonist of the novel and he is very much broken, his various aliases indicate the change in his perception of himself, which shifts from method to paraphernalia, to a mechanism, to a device. His character arc is shown through his changing identity, and it also tells us about the ways in which an individual subject can and must resist oppressive systems.

The world of Underground Airlines is reimagined in such a way as to counter the triumphalist idea of American history. The Crittenden Compromise, which let four states retain the right to slavery, is established as the true and historical version of events, and through it,

Winters has shown that slavery was by no means a settled issue after the American Civil War. Power is critiqued in its every manifestation, from the State to corporations. The extensive economic exploitation of black people and the domination over their lives and labor are shown to be utterly linked to technology, bureaucracy, and the development of systems of psychological conditioning. Authentic freedom and selfhood are also false and precarious, and agency exists only as limited by the presence of guards and informants and a persistent state of observation and a state of conditional freedom. The horror of man-making corporation which manufactures people with no bloodline, people with no past and no future, people with no claim to freedom is the ultimate example of the structural attack on identity.

This novel can make people re-evaluate slavery, identity, and resistance. Slavery is not past or completed, and it is a condition and not just an institution that has found new life and multiple new forms in our present, an example of structural injustice that has not been addressed. Underground Airlines shows the ways in which literary strategies can work to oppose the grand cultural narratives, making the past not past, not settled, but unstable and open to contestation. Underground Airlines' dystopian strategies make a most important statement for its readers: identity is a site of permanent struggle; freedom is not given or naturally occurring and must always be fought for; and the systems of power which seek to define and control us must always be resisted.

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الملخص

لقد شكّلت العبودية هياكل ثقافية وسياسية واقتصادية عميقة، تاركةً إرثًا لا يزال يؤثر على المجتمعات المعاصرة. وقد نوقش دورها المحوري في إعلان الحرب الأهلية الأمريكية (1861–1865) على نطاق واسع لقرون .يبتكر بن ايتش وينترز في روايته *الخطوط الجوية تحت الأرض* (2016)تاريخاً بديلاً حيث لم تُخض الحرب الأهلية الأمريكية. تتبع الرواية سعي البطل نحو الحرية في إطار ديستوبي خالص، مسلطة الضوء على قضايا الهوية والحرية والعنصرية والاضطهاد. يدرس هذا البحث كيف يمكن للأدب الديستوبي أن يزعزع السرديات الكبرى المتعلقة بالعبودية والتاريخ. يرتكز العمل نظرياً على الأدب الديستوبي ضمن سياق ما بعد الحداثة، مستكشفاً مفاهيم مثل "الريبة إزاء السرديات الكبرى" والتشكيك في التاريخ، بالاعتماد على المنهج الوصفي والتحليلي. أما المعطيات المعتمدة فهي ذات طبيعة وصفية، جرى تحليلها وتفسيرها في ضوء الرواية. وفي النهاية، تجادل هذه الأطروحة بأن رواية *الخطوط الجوية تحت الأرض* تمثل نصاً ديستوبياً قوياً، وفي الوقت نفسه تدخلاً نقدياً في خطاب السرديات المرتبطة بالعبودية. فمن خلال تخيّل تاريخ بديل، يدعو وينترز القرّاء إلى إعادة النظر في استمرارية الظلم العنصري وهشاشة مفهوم الحرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

أندرجراوند إيرلاينز ؛ الرواية الديستوبية؛ ما بعد الحداثة؛ السرديات الكبرى؛ العبودية؛ الظلم العرقي؛ الحرية؛ الهوية؛ التاريخ البديل؛ الحرب الأهلية.

Résumé

L'esclavage a profondément façonné les structures culturelles, politiques et économiques, laissant des héritages qui continuent d'influencer les sociétés contemporaines. Son rôle central dans la déclaration de la guerre de Sécession (1861-1865) est largement débattu depuis des siècles. Dans « Underground Airlines » (2016), Ben H. Winters crée une histoire alternative où la guerre de Sécession n'a jamais eu lieu. Le roman suit la quête de liberté du protagoniste dans un contexte purement dystopique, abordant des thèmes tels que l'identité, la liberté, le racisme et l'oppression. Cette recherche examine comment la fiction dystopique peut perturber les grands récits de l'esclavage et de l'histoire. Ce travail s'appuie théoriquement sur la fiction dystopique au sein du postmodernisme, explorant des concepts tels que « l'incrédulité envers les métarécits » et le questionnement de l'histoire, en s'appuyant sur des approches descriptives et analytiques. Les données recueillies sont de nature descriptive, analysées et interprétées à la lumière du roman. En définitive, la thèse soutient qu'Underground Airlines constitue non seulement un texte dystopique puissant, mais aussi une intervention critique dans le discours des récits de l'esclavage. En imaginant une histoire alternative, Ben Winters invite les lecteurs à reconsidérer la persistance de l'injustice raciale et la fragilité de la liberté.

Mots-clés:

Underground Airlines ; Fiction Dystopique ; Postmodernisme ; Grands Récits ; Esclavage ; Injustice Raciale ; Liberté ; Identité ; Histoire Alternative; La Guerre de Sécession