Check for updates

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The sociology of novel – a few notes on methodology

[version 1; peer review: 2 approved with reservations, 1 not approved]

Goran Pavlić

University of Zagreb, Academy of Dramatic Art, Zagreb, 10000, Croatia

v1 **First published:** 28 Aug 2025, **5**:260
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.20779.1
Latest published: 28 Aug 2025, **5**:260
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.20779.1

Abstract

In her widely acclaimed book, The Sociology of Literature (2023 [2014]), Sapiro demonstrates her methodological approach, capable of eschewing usual aporiae in the never-ending battle between internalist and externalist analyses of texts. According to her, there are three axes that shape any serious endeavor in the sociology of literature. Research in the field must engage with material conditions of literary production; furthermore, one cannot escape the sociology of the works, that is, representations that literary artworks convey, and finally, the conditions of artworks' reception and appropriation are to be studied. If we accept these guidelines as applicable for the study of novels, particularly political novels, what criteria do we use to distinguish fictional works from political or sociological treatises? What epistemic value does we hope to discern from such works? Is the historical accuracy of given data about a particular political phenomenon sufficient to treat such novels as political? What narrative techniques make an artwork more politically credible? Starting from Felski's (2008) theses on the uses of literature and drawing on insights from Livingston (2005) on the nature of narrative, as well as Carroll's (2001) "narrative" definition of art, I will try to shed some light on these problems.

Keywords

sociology of literature, sociology of novel, political novel, Gisèle Sapiro

This article is included in the Horizon Europe gateway.

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ? ✗ ?

	1	2	3
version 1 28 Aug 2025	? view	✗ view	? view

1. **Agustina Multi Purnomo**, Djuanda University, West Java, Indonesia
2. **William C. Cockerham**, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, USA
3. **Pål Csaszni Halvorsen**, Nord university, Bodø, Norway

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

This article is included in the The Political Novel in Historiographical and Sociological Perspective: Structures and Analogies collection.

Corresponding author: Goran Pavlić (gpavlic@adu.hr)

Author roles: Pavlić G: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: This project received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No. 101094658 (CAPONEU. The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe).
The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

Copyright: © 2025 Pavlić G. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

How to cite this article: Pavlić G. **The sociology of novel – a few notes on methodology [version 1; peer review: 2 approved with reservations, 1 not approved]** Open Research Europe 2025, **5**:260 https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.20779.1

First published: 28 Aug 2025, **5**:260 https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.20779.1

Introducing the first chapter in his classic treatise on the phenomenon of tragedy, *Sweet Violence,* Terry Eagleton offers a short definition of its object as understood in common usage. According to this definition, tragedy is "something very sad" (1 on page 1). In approaching the object of my analysis, namely, the sociology of the novel, one could attempt to be as elegant (or frivolous) as Eagleton and propose a provisional definition according to which the sociology of the novel would be an interpretative or even scientific activity that *somehow* deals with society and novels. After all, even one of the most authoritative introductions to the giant field of sociology, Anthony Giddens' *Sociology* (6th revised edition from 2009), does not refrain from bold, although almost trivial definition of its object. According to Giddens, "sociology is the scientific study of human life, social groups, whole societies and the human world as such" (2 on page 6). Formally considered, this is not a proper definition because it does not contain *differentia specifica* to other disciplines with similar topics (such as anthropology or ethnology). However, Giddens, a real heavyweight in the field, found it appropriate for his project. Analogous to such a gesture, the previously suggested solution of scientific activity that *somehow* tackles society and novels and their mutual relations do not sound so nonchalant. As I will try to demonstrate, this "somehow" turns out to be of crucial importance because everything that humans do, including writing rather lengthy pieces of more or less fictional texts, is done through interaction with the author's surroundings, that is, society.

From its very beginning, sociology was conceptually divided into two co-existent, mutually not necessarily intertwined perspectives: macrosociology and microsociology. While the former addresses "large scale phenomena such as institutional systems," the latter deals "with smaller scale phenomena such as interpersonal behavior" (3 on page 2997). The sociology of the novel would meander through both fields, dealing with institutional arrangements, but also investigating the personal affective relations that members of a novel's audience develop towards the artwork. In both cases, literary experience is much greater than the solitary act of reading, and thus acquiring the artwork's meaning. With this in mind, the claim that creating novels is a social practice should be considered almost pleonastic.

Yet, significant, and the most prestigious approaches in literary theory, for most parts of the 20th century at least, formalism and structuralism insist on exactly opposite premises (for an early exhaustive overview, see 4). From these perspectives, literary artwork is self-sustained, and its first and last words determine the scope of legitimate interpretation. The task of a literary scholar within such an endeavor is to construct or reconstruct meaning from written material in front of her. We know from the history of literary theory in the last hundred years or so that such positions, controversial from the very onset, were seriously challenged many times, but the internalist paradigm (by which I mean a concept that incorporates all sorts of formalist and structuralist approaches) returns invigorated every time. Unlike original Kuhn's (5 on page 43–51) concept of paradigm, that denotes a radically new, incommensurable mode of understanding that principally excludes the former paradigm from the field of epistemic legitimacy, the internalist paradigm resonates with ever new audiences, that is, generations of enthusiastic readers and scholars unobstructed by insights of various externalist positions, that is, those who treat social concerns as a legitimate aspect of literary-theoretical investigation.

The underlying presupposition of internalist positions is a conviction that literature substantially departs from all other worldly practices and thus requires an autonomous analytical apparatus[1]. As Rita Felski states in the introductory lines to her manifesto, *Uses of Literature:*

> Separating literature from everything around it, critics fumble to explain how works of art arise from and move back into the social world. Highlighting literature's uniqueness, they overlook the equally salient realities of its connectedness. Applauding the ineffable and enigmatic qualities of works of art, they fail to do justice to the specific ways in which such works infiltrate and inform our lives. Faced with the disconcerting realization that people often turn to books for knowledge or entertainment, they can only lament the naïveté of those unable or unwilling to read literature "as literature" (6 on page 5)

This otherworldliness of literature, as a sort of *apriori* of every legitimate engagement with literature, is the object of pretty humble yet incisive Bourdieu's analysis in the preface to his *Rules of Art*. He asks: "is it true that scientific analysis is doomed to destroy that which makes for the specificity of the literary work and reading, beginning with aesthetic pleasure (...) For a good number of accredited writers and readers of literature (including Bergson, Heidegger or Gadamer) the case is already made" (7 on page xvi). In other words, no serious scholar could disclaim the uniqueness of the aesthetic experience provided by literature. By virtue of its uniqueness, it is not possible to treat it statistically, i.e. scientifically.

The title of Bourdieu's treatise – *Rules of Art* – sounds provocative: we take for granted that art and literature notwithstanding, is exactly that realm of human experience that defies rules. However, we tend to forget that this is a romantic heritage, the result of a century-long battle for protection of copyright, and not an intrinsic property of the art field[8]. Only a century earlier, one of the greatest poetic disputes in pre-modern Europe was the famous *Querelle du Cid*, a dispute among critics of Corneille's drama *Le Cid*, assembled and coordinated by Cardinal Richelieu, which strove to prove that written work that breaks so many rules cannot be treated as serious artwork[9]. This task was among the first great public gestures of the newly founded Academie Francaise. Thus, we can see that the establishment of the most distinguished literary institution on European soil is closely linked to the codification of rules for the proper creation of art. This implies that the concepts of

[1] Shklovsky's seminal paper "Art as Device"[10] demonstrates the first programmatic elaboration of the approach.

genius, originality, transgressiveness, and autonomy are not natural categories, pertaining to the very act of fictional writing, but historical inventions with their own material genealogy. However, as further history proved, this oblivion about the origin of uniqueness turned out to be extremely persistent. At the beginning of the 20th century, Neo-Kantian philosophers Dilthey and Rickert in the same fashion, but with new philosophical rigor, posited the insurmountable chasm between these two spheres of human praxis, classified as *Geistwissenchaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*, i.e. human sciences and natural sciences. The first group deals with natural kinds that can be objectively apprehended, analyzed, and explained, the other with spiritual/mental categories that can only be understood, but in principle, never fully explained (see 11 and 12).

The tension between the two does not seem to wane, and Felski does not need serious effort to recognize this still existing rift. She declares that her manifesto "strikes a path away from the dominant trends of what I will call theological and ideological styles of reading. By 'theological', I mean any strong claim for literature's other-worldly aspects, though usually in a secular rather than explicitly metaphysical sense." Many diverging approaches share these methodological assumptions despite their obvious differences in everything else. "(...) What they share, nevertheless, is a conviction that literature is fundamentally different from the world and our other ways of making sense of that world, and that this difference – whether couched in the language of originality, singularity, alterity, untranslatability, or negativity – is the source of its value." (6 on page 4).

In short, the literature is not of this world, so the usual methods to comprehend this world do not apply. The scientific task of literary theory worthy of its name, as envisaged by Russian formalists, involves constructing an autonomous theoretical apparatus capable of grasping the specificity and alterity of this non-worldly phenomenon. My aim here is rather mild in its theoretical ambition. Keeping in mind a wide spectrum of qualitative and quantitative sociological methodologies, I would like to stress how some sociological approaches enhance our understanding of some literary phenomena, namely political novels. I do not advocate for the replacement of internalist readings or claim the superior capacity of sociological approaches. I would like to sketch out some aspects of literary production that cannot be treated thoroughly without input from sociological methodology.

***

The sociology of art, as a distinct research field, has developed rather late. Although we can find more than a few hints in the works of European sociologists and social theorists in the 1930s and the 1940s (most notably the Frankfurt School), it started to blossom somewhere from the 1970s onward (Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* was published in 1979, and Howard Becker's *Art Worlds* in 1982). In the narrower field of sociology of the novel, the first giant step was undertaken by Lucien Goldmann in 1964 in his essay *Introduction to the sociology of the novel*. In it, heavily influenced by Lukacs's and Girard's theories of novel, Goldmann offers a Marxist account of the poetics of novels, mainly employing an extremely fashionable critique of commodity fetishism (probably most known from Debord's classic *The Society of the Spectacle*) and trying to understand novel as an expression of the underlying generative principle that structures all of society, and that is capitalist dynamics (13). Although expressed in more sophisticated verbiage than vulgar reflection theory, this basic social philosophy of art boils down to the reconstruction of the artwork's meaning from the social surroundings within which any particular novel arose. Although some of the formal traits of artwork can be analyzed using such an approach, its totalizing tendency, more often than not, leaves too much out of the focus, thus depriving us of many significant insights relating to the object in question.

In order to specify the appropriateness of some sociological tools, I will first try to define, or at least provisionally operationalize, some key concepts that will be used to strengthen my advocacy of sociological approach(es) in analyzing novels as aesthetic objects. "Narrative" and "fiction" seem to be essential features of any fairly lengthy written material that we acknowledge as a novel, so a finer elaboration of these concepts follows.

In his contribution to the *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* Paisley Livingstone, one of the most ardent proponents of intentionalism in the interpretation of art, elucidates the importance of narrative for understanding art executed through the medium of narrativity. For him, narrative is interchangeable with story, and there are several conditions dominantly present in theoretical accounts under which we may recognize a particular expression as a story. For the purpose of my argument, I will only emphasize some of them. First, text must have at least one event, that is, a change of situation from one state of affairs to another; second, there must be at least two actions that form a coherent whole of purposeful activity, with beginning and resolution; third, there must be at least one narrator who tells the story; and finally, the text must possess the **aim to convey a particular point by organizing a material in particular order** (14 on page 279; emphasis mine). The latest aspect departs sharply from the first three. While the first three refer to the structural properties of the text, the last includes authorial intent, which is an extrinsic property of the text. Structural traits are not merely there to form a whole and provide aesthetic pleasure, but they tend to produce an effect on the recipient: to convey a point, that is, to communicate a message. Considering this capacity, we may say in Brechtian fashion that neatly organized narration always functions as the essence of bourgeois ideology. While the manifest aim was to provide a nice story, its latent intention was to convince readers of the non-conflicting nature of the order of things appropriately represented in a straight-forward course of events. No wonder then that novel, in Moretti's words "found the nation-state. Being the only symbolic form that could represent it, it became an essential component of our modern culture" (15 on page 137).

With such a broadened, as it were "socialized" definition, we may see significant widening of the understanding of that which is written and conventionally called novel. It is no longer only a configuration of arbitrarily scattered signs, as (post)structuralists would have them, but a vehicle to exit the plateau of literariness and step into the world. And the world is full of protocols and procedures that cannot be grasped with regular tools of literary theory.

In the already mentioned Routledge Anthology, David Davies tries to elaborate on the conditions under which we may speak of fictionality. One important aspect of fictionality is, as Davies stresses, that it does not necessarily correlate with true/false distinction, as many commentators have observed (16 on page 264). We may confront a voluminous text full of true statements about the outer world, and still treat it as fictional (as is the case with Littell's novel *Les Bienveillantes*), or engage with pseudo-scientific discourses such as astrology or homeopathy that are not fictional, albeit full of utterly false theses and suppositions. This distinction has significant implications for our understanding of novels, since it saves us a lot of trouble when deciding upon the status of some highly influential recent novel-esque endeavors, such as Édouard Louis's or Knausgård's recollections of their childhood. Or even more conspicuous in the case of Annie Ernaux, particularly her diary of love affair *Getting Lost* which genre-wise and fiction-wise would not fit even the most flexible criteria for being a novel, and yet, it is commonly received as one. Here, we come to the next condition for discerning a fictional text that Davies proposes after removing the true/false alternative. He claims that the fictionality of a narrative may be a *matter of how it functions* or *how it was designed to function* (16, italics in the original). What matters is the function conferred on a narrative by users. Again, we have some authorial intent, strictly speaking a non-literary parameter that enters the formula for specification of fictionality, but even more, we have a third factor: the recipient is willing to invest her imaginative powers to treat the text as fictional. For this to function, there must be publicly recognized conventions that the author employs, and the audience can automatically or easily discern and make-believe. Now, fictionality is not a property of the sole text, but relational dynamics between the three instances. From an ideal, formally organized object, we come to a socially mediated transaction that is fiction. We will now come a bit closer to the social nature of the novel as an art form. This stance is further corroborated by Caroll's insights.

In his investigation of the ontology of art, Carroll, one of the most meticulous philosophers of art, stressed three dominant perspectives that permeate aesthetic thinking within the field of analytic philosophy. In essence, these three approaches boil down to (17 on page 64):

1) Stage one essentialism: It consists of finding essential features of all objects of art (these may be the specific form, capacity to build affective communities, and capacity to arouse particular feelings). All these traits can be discerned from an outer perspective, as if art objects were natural kinds and not the output of human production.

2) Open concept approach: This defies stage one attempts to specify necessary and sufficient reasons for some objects to be deemed as artworks. Because art is, by its historical genealogy, the field of innovation, novelty, and originality, no fixed set of criteria can meet the versatility of practices that pretend to the status of art. Proponents of the open concept approach rely on Wittgensteinian family resemblances as reliable mechanisms for discerning art from non-art.

3) Institutional theory of art as articulated in George Dickie's work, in which an object can be regarded as an art object only if it is legitimized as such by someone from the art world and generated by the right process and that is an institutional process. More precisely, there are no inherent formal criteria for judging objects as artistic or possessing aesthetic value. If an object is presented by the artistic authority of any kind (that may be a critic, curator, theoretician, art historian, art seller, programmer, or fellow artist) as worthy of being included in the category art, the consequence of such a procedure is a sort of transubstantiation, jumping from the category of mere objects into art objects.

The sharpest criticism that Carroll delivers to this position focuses on treating art as an institution analogous to that of law or religion. There are no strict rules that organize the art field, and the rigidity of rules is what makes a conglomerate of versatile human practices an institution. Therefore, after carefully examining all the flaws of the major approaches, Carroll proposes his interpretation of art as a cultural practice. In his words, **"**The sense of cultural practice I have in mind here is that of a complex body of interrelated human activities governed by reasons internal to those forms of activity and to their coordination" (17 on page 66). Alternatively, in less cryptic articulation, thinking of art as a cultural practice presupposes that:

> the means for identifying a new object as part of the corpus of art are internal to the practice of art, and, furthermore, are related to the reproduction of the practice as a self-transforming tradition. The means of identification, here, are rational strategies rather than the types of rules that are, for example, identified with stage-one essentialism. That is, given a new work of art, we do not have a rule or set of rules to determine whether it deserves inclusion in the order of art; rather we have several strategies for thinking about the object and for justifying its acceptance in the tradition (17 on page 67).

This, obviously, is a procedural definition and not object-oriented, so to speak. It includes several actors (not only persons)–that is, several instances that are themselves products of historical genealogy – and these are authors, cultural producers,

and audiences. The relationship between these instances cannot be grasped through an aesthetic apparatus in a narrow sense. Their understanding necessitates the use of concepts and tools dedicated to the analysis of human interactions, that is, those that only sociology can provide.

***

Gisele Sapiro in her already pretty influential *Sociology of literature* (18) defines the discipline as an approach that "considers literature to be a social activity that depends on conditions of production and circulation and sees it as something closely linked to values and a 'worldview'" (18 on page 8). Although pretty basic and clear in its sociological impetus, her position strongly correlates with Carroll's understanding of art as a cultural practice, since production and circulation, values, and worldviews notwithstanding, stay dynamically embedded in the network of more or less socially determined instances.

Sapiro offers an extensive overview of the entire field, staying dominantly within the Bourdieusian paradigm. She divided her presentation into three main topics: i) social conditions for the production of literary works, ii) sociology of literary works, and iii) sociology of reception. Continuing on the aforementioned categories, we must ask ourselves in every instance of analytically approaching a particular novel or group of novels: How are the novels produced? What meaning do they convey? What kinds of relationships do various audiences establish towards them? As we have seen earlier, traces of analytical endeavors of this kind stem from the 1930s, but only Bourdieu's field analysis offers appropriate tools that manage to eschew trappings of biographical illusion, where the value of the work derives from the unique singularity of a writer, or those of vulgar Marxist reflection theory, which sees the artwork as a mere reflection of the underlying economic dynamics. Beyond mere representation, it turns out that for the sociological analysis work of formalization (*Mise en forme*) is crucial. How do particular genres arise and amid what circumstances? What social conditions contribute to the consolidation of particular literary fashions? A famous example of such a problem would be Jameson's dictum that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism; hence, the flood of dystopian fiction in literature and movies. More importantly, however, the Bourdieusian perspective gives us the opportunity to explore what social and literary schemes for representing the world stand at the authors' disposal. What genres and models for structuring the narrative prevail in particular periods, and how do they affect writers' choices? All these questions directly pertain to the cultural practice of producing novels and not solely to the imaginative processes inside authors' minds.

However, the relationship between the social properties of participants in the production of novels and aesthetic choices they make is not direct; it is mediated by the space of possibilities and one's position in the literary field. The same goes, *a fortiori*, to a political novel. This position not only goes against the grain of Ranciere's (19) definition of political literature as one that disrupts the order of things by its particular enunciation; it also delegitimizes any direct, straightforward explanation of the politicality of the novel. From such a Bourdieusian perspective, we may say that Ranciere structurally repeats the gesture of biographical determination, or that of thematic focus on the novel's content, only substituting one originary trajectory for the other. However, in both cases, we have one source that warrants the political status of the novel. In such circumstances, we are involuntarily forced to operate within the logic of discovery and not that of analysis - there is a truth to this situation, and it only needs revelation.

In contrast, the Bourdiesian analysis advocated by Sapiro works more slowly, taking into account more variables and warrants nothing. It is, technically speaking, original in every instance of its application, painfully aware of the complexity of the relations at stake. As such, it offers less spectacular insights but more nuanced accounts applicable in every moment in history for every actor in the field.

Besides these epistemic advantages over competing paradigms in the field, it manages to eschew ontological aporiae that arise when we take any artistic format, such as political novels, as given. Following Carroll's suggestion, our analysis should strive not towards the discovery of some essentialist properties of the artworks in question, but towards the reconstruction of internal procedures of the artistic field that allow some objects to be treated as artworks of particular kind, such as political novels. It goes almost without saying that such multivariate analysis offers more versatile insights, and what is more important, of a sort that cannot be grasped with any formalist approach whatsoever. The global phenomena of J. K. Rowling and E. L. James offer little to no material whatsoever for formalist literary analysis; yet, their influence and significance for the book market and for the transformation of various audiences are undeniable. An analytic approach capable of shedding light on these mechanisms deserves to be treated as a part of literary studies.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

No data associated with this article.

References

1. Eagleton T: **Sweet violence. The idea of the tragic**. Blackwell Publishing, 2003.
Reference Source
2. Giddens A: **Sociology, 6th Edition**. Polity Press, 2009.
Reference Source
3. Turner J, Markovsky B: **Micro-macro links.** In: *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology.* edited by George Ritzer. Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
Publisher Full Text
4. Jameson F: **The Prison-House of language: a critical account of structuralism and Russian formalism**. Polity Press, 1972.
Reference Source
5. Kuhn TS: **The structure of scientific revolutions**. The University of Chicago Press, 1996.
Reference Source
6. Felski R: **Uses of literature**. Blackwell Publishing, 2008.
Publisher Full Text
7. Bourdieu P: **The rules of art. Genesis and structure of the literary field**. Stanford University Press, 1995.
Reference Source
8. Woodmansee M: **The author, art, and the market. Rereading the history of aesthetics**. Columbia University Press, 1994.
Reference Source
9. Carlson M: **Theories of the theatre: a historical and critical survey, from the Greeks to the present**. Cornell University Press, 1993.
Reference Source
10. Shklovsky V: **Art as a device**. In: *Theory of Prose.* Dalkey Archive Press, 1990.
Reference Source
11. Mantzavinos C: **Naturalistic hermeneutics**. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
Publisher Full Text
12. Rickert H: **Kulturologija i prirodoslovlje**. **[Cultural Sciences and Natural Sciences].** Matica hrvatska, 2008.
13. Goldmann L: **Towards a sociology of the novel**. Tavistock Publications, 1975.
Reference Source
14. Livingston P: **Narrative**. In: *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics.* edited by Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes. Routledge, 2001.
Publisher Full Text
15. Villari E: **Between history and theory. The novel form in the work of Franco Moretti.** *New Left Review.* 2024; **148**: 133–144.
Reference Source
16. Davies D: **Fiction**. In: *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics.* edited by Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes. Routledge, 2001.
Publisher Full Text
17. Carroll N: **Beyond aesthetics. Philosophical essays**. Cambridge University Press, 2003.
Reference Source
18. Sapiro G: **The sociology of literature**. Stanford University Press, 2023.
Reference Source
19. Rancière J: **Politics of literature**. Polity, 2011.
Reference Source

Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ? ✗ ?

Version 1

Reviewer Report 12 January 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.22482.r61110

© **2026 Halvorsen P.** This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

?

Pål Csaszni Halvorsen
Nord university, Bodø, Norway

The article brings a necessary and fresh look at the sociology of the novel and argues convincingly for the need of sociology in order to “enhance our understanding of some literary phenomena”. Particularly, the author is interested in “the political novel”, which, in line with the opening of the article, seems to be treated as fiction that “somehow deals with something political”. The abstention of defining the political novel upfront aligns well with the methodological arguments made in the article.
Part one reads as an introduction to the field and to Sapiro’s book and the trait that many others also have pointed out: that it might be said to be structured around a dichotomy between internalist and externalist analysis. The reception of *The Rules of Art* where Bourdieu attempted at transcending this opposition itself falls within these lines, where some find the analysis successful and others find it too deterministic in its reading. Part two connects the first part to a discussion of the sociology of art and thus brings in important theoretical insights about artworks. Part three is where the argument is made, and it is done in opposition to Rancière. The argument poses that the approach advocated by Bourdieu and Sapiro “warrants nothing”, whereas Rancière’s definition becomes predisposed.
While the article is modest in its aim, the title invites big expectations (maybe it should be put the other way around: “Some methodological notes concerning the sociology of the novel”?) and it contains some sharp claims. Reflection theory receives particularly harsh mentions, which in its “vulgar” form might be justified, but most often it appears in a more nuanced version, such as in the works of Wendy Griswold. On the other hand, Bourdieu is often criticized for warranting more than nothing, namely reproduction or some connection to power (treating culture/the novel as “a dependent variable”) and thus become a sort of reflection theory. The article would thus be more convincing if it went into dialogue with criticism. As the article builds upon Sapiro’s book one idea could be to start with Jan Váňa’s (2024) review where he finds that the book “operates as a consecrating authority that confuses Bourdieusian framework with the discipline as such.” The article would also improve from considering the act of reading into methodological considerations, since it has a longer tradition within literary studies than sociology and might be relevant for the opposition between internalist and externalist analysis.
The article’s methodological reflections could be strengthened by incorporating secondary

sources in order to become more specific. Since E.L. James is mentioned, Eva Illouz' (2014) study could be one idea. Santana-Acuña's (2020) study of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* could be another.

References

1. Váňa J: Book Review: The Sociology of Literature. *Cultural Sociology*. 2024; **18** (4): 560-561 Publisher Full Text
2. Muñoz Sánchez A: Ascent to glory: how One Hundred Years of Solitude was written and became a global classic. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*. 2022; **9** (2): 254-257 Publisher Full Text

Is the work original in terms of material and argument?
Partly

Does it sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature on the topic?
Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Partly

Is the argument persuasive and supported by evidence?
Partly

If any, are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
No source data required

Does the research article contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: sociology of literature

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 16 October 2025

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.22482.r61107

© 2025 Cockerham W. This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

William C. Cockerham
University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, USA

There is much to like about this article summarizing and critiquing literary views on methodological approaches to the study of the sociology of the novel, specifically the political novel. The article is essentially a review of Sapiro's *Sociology of Literature* book, but does offer some original insights on methodology. An example of how the author's methodology applies to a particular political novel would be useful information.

Unfortunately, the analysis from a sociological perspective is not current and some relevant sociological sources on the arts are missing that would have informed the author, such as Victoria Alexander's book on the *Sociology of the Arts* (2021) and some of analytic features of the literature discussed in its pages.

The author also cites Gidden's definition of sociology in his 2009 6th edition, rather than the more recent 2021 9th edition, and while saying the brief definition is "almost trivial" and falters because it does not compare sociology with similar academic disciplines, overlooks the fact that Giddens discusses his definition in considerable detail for an entire chapter.

Additionally, the old macro versus micro division in sociology is revisited, with the author asserting that the two levels of society are "co-existent, mutually not necessarily intertwined perspectives." Theoretical discussions in sociology today have moved on from macro-micro debates (see Ritzer and Stepnisky [2021] on "Micro-Macro and Agency-Structure Integration") and are focused instead on the relative influence of "structure" and "agency" that, to cite British critical realism theorist Margaret Archer (1995:65) "are intertwined" and "nonetheless analytically distinct." It is the interplay between the two over time that shapes social behavior, with one or the other possibly being dominant in the interaction that takes place. In all instances, however, as another British theorist, Graham Scambler (2018:95) says: "There is never a non-structured social world." All of which gets us away from the methodological individualism that dominated sociology during the latter part of the 20th century. In sum, the author's analysis would benefit in many respects from considering the structure-agency perspective and then applying it to the study of the novel.

Is the work original in terms of material and argument?
Partly

Does it sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature on the topic?
Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by evidence?
Yes

If any, are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
No source data required

Does the research article contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to state that I do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.

Reviewer Report 12 September 2025

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.22482.r59436

© 2025 Purnomo A. This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

?

Agustina Multi Purnomo
Djuanda University, West Java, Indonesia

Article Summary
The article *"The Sociology of the Novel – A Few Notes on Methodology"* develops Sapiro's idea that the sociology of literature rests on three principal axes: the conditions of production, the representations contained in the work, and the modes of reception. Rather than treating novels only as isolated texts or as direct mirrors of society, the author suggests reading political novels that avoid the old split between internalist and externalist perspectives. The paper raises several guiding questions: how political fiction can be distinguished from sociological or political tracts, what kind of knowledge readers may (or may not) gain from novels, to what extent historical accuracy matters, and which narrative strategies help sustain political credibility. These issues are examined in dialogue with Felski on the uses of literature, Livingston on narrative, and Carroll on the narrative character of art, showing how cross-disciplinary approaches can enrich the sociology of literature.
The first part functions as a broad introduction. It redefines what "sociology of the novel" can mean while revisiting the long-standing tension between formalist approaches that stress autonomy and sociological approaches that emphasize context. Citing Felski and Bourdieu, the author challenges the idea of literary autonomy, pointing out that it is historically constructed rather than an inherent quality of literature. This supports the argument that novels, including political ones, must be studied as social practices.
The second part develops the framework's conceptual tools. Davies, Livingston, and Carroll's perspectives are linked back to Sapiro's three axes and used to begin addressing the abstract questions from the introduction. Although the discussion remains theoretical and does not yet turn to detailed case studies, it establishes a foundation for analyzing political novels as cultural artifacts and social practices.
The third part places Sapiro's Bourdieu-inspired methodology at the center. The author examines the politics in the novel that emerges not simply from the author's intentions or the presence of

political themes, but from the interplay between production, representations, and reception. The author also contrasts this framework with other perspectives (Rancière's narrow definition of political literature and Jameson's interpretation of dystopian fiction as responses to capitalism). The author provides fewer concrete examples of political novels and only reviews a few references to illustrate how markets and genres shape literature. The lack of case studies is acknowledged, but this is consistent with the article's modest aim: to propose methodological reflections rather than to deliver empirical findings.

Is the work original in terms of material and argument?
Partly: The argument is original in that it attempts to critique Sapiro through the lens of Felski, Livingston, and Carroll, but materially it is more of a theoretical review (secondary reading) than new primary research.

Does it sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature on the topic?
Yes: The broad discussion mentions Sapiro, Bourdieu, Rancière, Jameson, Felski, Livingston, Carroll, etc. Therefore, engagement with the methodological literature is quite strong.

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Partly: The argument structure is present (1: theory mapping, 2: deepening, 3: Sapiro), but the title and abstract can confuse first-time readers, and the flow is slow to reach a sharp critique.

Is the argument persuasive and supported by evidence?
Partly: Persuasive in theoretical logic, but not yet rich in concrete evidence (e.g., an in-depth analysis of a particular political novel).

If any, are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
No source data required: This is a theoretical paper, so no empirical data must be disclosed.

Does the research article contribute to the field's cultural, historical, or social understanding?
Yes: Its contribution is to broaden the methodological discussion on the sociology of literature, particularly in reading political novels, thereby enhancing cultural and social understanding.

Is the work original in terms of material and argument?
Partly

Does it sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature on the topic?
Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Partly

Is the argument persuasive and supported by evidence?
Partly

If any, are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?

No source data required

Does the research article contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: sociology of tourism, urban sociology

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.