

**TRAUMA, GENDER AND ETHICS  
IN THE WORKS OF E.L. DOCTOROW**

María Ferrández San Miguel  
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197

María Ferrández San Miguel's *Trauma, Gender and Ethics in the Works of E.L. Doctorow* (Routledge, 2020) provides a fresh perspective on the work of a novelist who paved his way to be recognized as one of the most salient voices of contemporary North American literature. Over the last few decades, Doctorow's fiction has attracted considerable academic attention, giving rise to a good number of research monographs, edited volumes, and academic articles that approach the writer's work from different perspectives. His experiments with narrative form, as well as his socio-historical awareness, set him apart from other writers of his period, and have been the subject of scrutiny in many critical analyses of his work. Approaching Doctorow's fiction from perspectives as diverse as "historiography, sociology, postmodernism, psychoanalysis, Marxist criticism and deconstruction", critics have frequently focused their attention on the writer's postmodern narrative style, on his distinctive views on history and politics, and on his relationship with Jewish culture (Ferrández San Miguel 4). Taking the existing body of scholarship on the author as her point of departure, Ferrández San Miguel analyzes four of Doctorow's novels from the double perspective of trauma studies and feminist criticism, her ultimate aim being to prove that even if most studies so far have classified Doctorow as a postmodernist writer, his fiction shows an evident ethical engagement that "suggests a movement beyond postmodernism and toward the recuperation of faith in meaning and the possibility of truthful textual representation" (29).

## Reviews

198

After an enlightening explanation of her choice of corpus of analysis, Ferrández San Miguel moves on to sketch the main theoretical frameworks she uses to analyze the novels. This introductory section is informative and reader-friendly, and may be of use not just to those new in the fields of trauma studies and feminist criticism but also to experienced researchers. Thus, although the author states that it is not her aim to offer a fully detailed genealogy of trauma, she does provide a comprehensive overview of this critical framework from its origins to its most recent developments, laying special emphasis on its relationship with literary criticism. The author then provides a similar chronological overview of feminist criticism, explaining how the framework has progressively become “more complex, diverse and wide-ranging” as well as relevant to the field of literary criticism (20). Remarkably, as well as advancing some of the key analytical notions and issues that will be the focus of analysis in the different chapters, the author stresses in the introductory chapter the important role that close reading and narratology will play in her analysis. One of Ferrández San Miguel’s strengths is indeed her ability to offer clarifying explanations of her aims and methods as well as to let readers know what to expect in each of the sections and subsections of the book. Therefore, whereas narratological aspects tend to be disregarded in favor of thematic analyses in literary criticism, Ferrández San Miguel’s work ultimately proves that subject matter and narrative form are inextricably linked and should not be considered in isolation when analyzing literary texts.

The author also explores in the introduction the connections between trauma studies and feminist criticism, relating them to the ethical turn of the 1980s and 1990s. As she acutely points out, the aesthetic, the ethical and the political go hand in hand in both forms of literary criticism, and both frameworks share a wish to denounce and fight human suffering and injustice. That is why she believes that using them in combination to analyze Doctorow’s novels can help us draw innovative and thought-provoking conclusions. The last section of the introductory chapter explores Doctorow’s indebtedness to postmodernism and poststructuralism. Here, the author argues that in spite of including some postmodernist elements in his novels, the writer also moves away from postmodernism as he engages with “social, political and historical realities in an extremely meaningful way” (29).

Hence, the first chapter reads Doctorow’s debut novel *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960) as a text that both subverts and updates the thematic and narratological conventions of the Western genre. Focusing mainly on the female protagonist Molly Riordan —a victim of rape— and the male homodiegetic narrator Mayor Blue —who witnessed the violent scene but was unable to halt it— Ferrández San Miguel discusses how the novel articulates, mainly thematically but also formally, the notions of traumatic reenactment, acting out and working through trauma,

## Reviews

while also exploring feelings of guilt and shame associated to the traumatic experience. To this purpose, she draws on the work of some of the main theorists of trauma: Sigmund Freud, Dominick LaCapra, Cathy Caruth and Anne Whitehead, among others. Furthermore, the author contends that the novel blurs the distinction between the categories of victim, perpetrator and bystander and highlights the important role of storytelling and community in the overcoming of trauma. From a feminist lens, the author argues that the novel subverts traditional gender configurations and denounces female powerlessness and subordination. The character of Molly plays a key role in this respect, as she challenges and subverts the hegemonic model of gender domination and violence and her female voice hovers over the narrative, challenging Mayor Blue's narrative authority.

The second chapter focuses on Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971), a novel that shows Daniel Isaacson's desperate attempt at working through his psychological trauma and to redeem himself from his guilt. The reasons behind the protagonist and narrator's psychological fragmentation are the imprisonment and execution of his communist parents—a fictional representation of the Rosenbergs—at the hands of the US government and his sister Susan's subsequent suicide attempt fifteen years later, which makes him reenact his traumatic memories. Ferrández San Miguel's analysis of the novel from the double lens of trauma studies and feminist criticism shows that, as happened with *Welcome to Hard Times*, Doctorow successfully leads readers to reflect on the causes and consequences of psychological trauma, while also problematizing the victim-perpetrator binary. In this last respect, the author skillfully contends that Daniel's sexually violent and abusive behavior towards his wife Phyllis, together with his refusal to incorporate female voices in his narrative, may be best understood as attempts on the part of the protagonist and narrator to regain agency and control once the mechanisms of trauma have rendered him helpless and arisen in him intense feelings of shame and guilt. Ferrández San Miguel's thorough analysis of the narrative strategies used by Doctorow to represent formally the workings of Daniel's traumatized mind also stands out as one of the strengths of the chapter. Thus, drawing on the work of well-known theorists of trauma such as Laurie Vickroy and Anne Whitehead, the author provides detailed explanations of how, by means of introducing some narrative strategies that are typical of trauma narratives—more specifically, leaps in time and space, shifts in focalization and narrative voice, and repetitions—Doctorow awakens readers to the dangerous psychological consequences of prolonged and extreme suffering.

The third chapter analyzes Doctorow's bestselling novel *Ragtime* (1975), a work that captivated readers worldwide while also generating great academic interest, and that helped consolidate Doctorow's reputation as one of the main contemporary

## Reviews

200

North-American literary figures. The story, which is set in New York during the Ragtime Era, portrays the lives and hardships of three New York families—one African-American, one Jewish immigrant, and one WASP. As Ferrández San Miguel acutely argues, while the novel shows many features in common with Doctorow's previous fiction—thus, it also deals with the devastating effects of trauma on the human psyche—it drifts away from them in some respects. One of the novel's specificities is, according to the author, its renewed interest in social issues and, more specifically, in the collective traumas of some social groups that have traditionally been marginalized or oppressed in North-American society. Besides, as Ferrández San Miguel argues, Doctorow portrays in *Ragtime* characters who, in spite of being discriminated against for reasons of gender, race or class, are capable of developing survival strategies and/or channeling their negative experiences into creative energy. In this way, the novel mirrors the more recent shift in trauma theory from an emphasis on the "inescapability from the effects of trauma" towards a belief in "the possibility that traumatic experiences may have of generating resilience" (110, 108). In this last respect, Ferrández San Miguel's discussion from a feminist lens of female bonding as allowing the characters to develop coping mechanisms to overcome insidious trauma is also particularly enlightening. Lastly, from a narratological perspective, Ferrández San Miguel argues that it is by making use of irony and social satire, as well as by introducing shifts in focalization—*Ragtime* represents in fact Doctorow's first attempt at granting female voices a significant role in the narrative—that Doctorow provides critical commentary on the discrimination to which the above-mentioned social groups were subjected in turn-of-the-century New York, while also directing readers' attention to the contemporary state of affairs.

The fourth and last analytical chapter deals with *City of God* (2000), a novel that Ferrández San Miguel describes as "Doctorow's most philosophical novel" (162) and which represents the writer's "first attempt to engage with the Holocaust in writing" (152). *City of God* is a polyphonic text that features several different storylines—dealing with topics as varied as World War I and II, the Vietnam War, or bird-watching—which are brought together by an underlying preoccupation with (in)justice. Nevertheless, the author argues that Doctorow's engagement with the Holocaust is what ultimately leads his readers to rethink their own beliefs regarding their attitude towards the others. That is the reason why she places it at the center of her analysis. Ferrández San Miguel's compelling examination from the perspective of trauma studies of how the novel fictionalizes recent criticism on the problems and dangers associated with Holocaust memorialization and representation is particularly praiseworthy, as is her analysis of the novel's self-reflexivity. Regarding the novel's engagement with gender, the author aptly claims that even though gender issues are by no means Doctorow's central preoccupation

## Reviews

in the novel, the writer does indeed manage to subvert traditional gender configurations and to show a strong commitment toward gender dialogue.

*Trauma, Gender and Ethics in the Works of E.L. Doctorow* ends with an illuminating discussion in which the author locates Doctorow's novels within a trend of "ethically oriented postmodern texts" that includes novels such as Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). The author then summarizes critical debates on the topics of narrative empathy and reader response and puts forward the claim that Doctorow's fiction ultimately invites readers to confront emotionally and intellectually the devastating effects of injustice. According to Ferrández San Miguel, by asking his readers to bear witness to a wide range of traumatic experiences —while making sure we never manage to fully identify with the victimized characters in his novels—Doctorow invites us to respond empathically to the pain of the Other while also maintaining certain intellectual distance. Ultimately, E.L. Doctorow's fiction and Ferrández San Miguel's thorough and well-rounded analysis share an underlying concern with literature's ability to foster social change and to prevent the repetition of past mistakes.

201

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