

BOOK REVIEWS

EVA PELAYO SAÑUDO

Universidad de Cantabria

Trauma, Gender and Ethics in the Works of E.L. Doctorow

María Ferrández San Miguel

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María Ferrández San Miguel's *Trauma, Gender and Ethics in the Works of E.L. Doctorow* (2020) constitutes a monograph about the prolific and critically acclaimed E.L. Doctorow by particularly concentrating on four of his novels: *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960), *The Book of Daniel* (1971), *Ragtime* (1975) and *City of God* (2000). Unlike other book-length studies previously published about this Jewish American author, Ferrández San Miguel has approached his work not just from a specific framework of analysis but combining analytical tools from trauma studies and feminist criticism with a view to discern an underlying ethical concern. Through this hypothesis of the so-called "ethical impulse" (5), the study also sets out to prove the social projects involved in the profession of writing literature. This undoubtedly contributes to validating its power in healing human suffering due to pressing problems of oppression and violence such as in the historic Holocaust but also against women as well as 'other' races or social minorities. After the close-reading analysis of each of the four chosen novels that establish the corpus, a final chapter retakes the discussion about the ethical and political implications of literature, which again highlights the overarching focus as it expands the results from a perspective considering also reader response.

The book is based on an enlightening research of core notions relevant to the fields of trauma and feminist studies, using a theoretical framework which both exposes the denunciation of victimization and intersectional oppression (suffered by gender, race and class minorities) and offers a space for resilience and healing. It also presents the growing relevance of literature as a tool of social and cultural analysis, and particularly in the case of Doctorow's work for the expression or representation of trauma experiences that are otherwise difficult to articulate. Hence the focus on traditional trauma categories of the victim, perpetrator and bystander. These concepts are particularly refreshed by shifting attention to the question of "insidious trauma" (6), with the tentative claim that this is intimately related to the identity issues reflected in the works analyzed. In this respect, one of the most salient aspects of the research is the author's introduction and her proficient exposition of the fields of study supporting literary analysis, perfectly summarizing for the (un)familiar scholar the keystones and evolution of trauma theory and feminist criticism, including postmodernism and poststructuralism as key subjects in which Doctorow's production has been mostly interpreted.

Ferrández San Miguel's study also provides a clear structure that makes it easy for readers to follow since the book is neatly structured into separate sections, each corresponding to one of the novels discussed. The first chapter, "*Welcome to Hard Times: The Frontier Reconsidered*," deals with the relationship between trauma and gender identity as reflected in Doctorow's debut novel. One of the main traumatic experiences discussed is precisely rape, set in a context of further physical violence and sheer destruction of life. Particularly interesting is the analysis of "the victim-bystander-perpetrator

figure” which goes “beyond binarism” or problematizes traditional trauma categories (52). Ferrández San Miguel shows how character description relies on the ambiguity of subject positions and hence traumatic notions. In other words, one cannot easily pinpoint responsibility or identify victims and perpetrators since the issue of collusion, for example, challenges the illusion of innocence and makes it difficult to ascribe the degree of participation in the experience of trauma. At the same time, this uncertainty is linked to the reversal of traditional gender roles typical to the genre of the Western in that the male and female characters are simplistically depicted as the perpetrator of violence and the vulnerable victim respectively.

The second chapter, “*The Book of Daniel: A Memoir Gone Awry*,” similarly addresses the complex aftermath of trauma that can lead to the paradoxical condition of a victim becoming a future oppressor. Here a traumatic childhood for the murder of his parents is understood as the explanatory event that turns the main character into a perpetrator of gender violence. Although the literary analysis focuses more on memory, repression and reenactments of traumatic violent scenes, the fact that fictional Daniel tends to victimize everyone in general does not preclude the explicit denunciation of gender violence. Particular episodes of sexual abuse are analyzed in connection to reader response, pointing both to the necessity as well as dangers of bestowing this kind of representation. One troubling effect is how witnessing violence through the act of the imagination can produce “ethical hesitancy” (95) as feelings of disgust or even voyeurism may entail engendering undesired answers and foreclosing attempts for the reader to act. Hence, the effectiveness of the critique could be downplayed.

The third chapter, “*Ragtime: Remembering the Future*,” discusses the experimentation of form and how Doctorow’s innovative style relates to the adamant representation of social issues, moving from trauma to resilience, from the individual to the collective, and from the reflection of violence against women to that caused by intersecting forms of oppression such as racism or socio-economic exploitation, among others. All in all, this section delineates a sharp scrutiny of US society and its manifold accounts of traumatic or violent experiences going beyond physical abuse or overt discrimination and including institutional oppression and the power of cultural norms that also serve to uphold the hegemonic status quo.

The last analytical chapter, “*City of God: With Eyes Past All Grief*,” returns again to memory and the crucial question about the possible limits or problems of representation, now in relation to the trauma caused by the Holocaust. Nonetheless, Ferrández San Miguel addresses the crucial concern of equally representing or giving voice to a female perspective as she is particularly aware of the fact that critical analyses of the so-called genre of Holocaust fiction “tend to overshadow a number of relevant aspects with regard to gender” (162).

On the whole, *Trauma, Gender and Ethics in the Works of E.L. Doctorow* is a remarkable and exceedingly well-researched study that reads E.L. Doctorow’s literature through an innovative and intricate lens. Apart from the exquisite writing style, one of the book’s greatest virtues lies in its theoretical exuberance, which constitutes an essential tool to navigate the analysis and understating of the novels discussed. It is a brilliant study offering compelling and insightful material that should prove to be of great interest to lovers of literature and specialists in the fields of feminist and trauma studies.