

Edgar Lawrence Doctorow; a Political Novelist?

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Abstract: *Edgar Lawrence Doctorow is generally regarded as a postmodern historical novelist who mingles the marvelous with the real. His novels are mainly set in the American past. The novels are greatly indebted to historical events and personages but engagement with documentary history is not Doctorow's prime obsession. Critics are at odds in deciding upon the paradox in Doctorow's novels; whether he is a politically minded novelist or an aesthetically obsessed one. Acknowledging the strong political tendencies in Doctorow's novels, many critics claim his enthusiasm and passion for the act of writing finally outweighs the political inclination of the novels. Identifying Historiographic metafiction as Doctorow's favorite and repeated technique in virtually all his novels, the present reading wishes to observe the novellas from a contrasting perspective.*

Key words: *historical novel; American past; political; aesthetics; historiographic metafiction.*

1. Introduction

Long celebrated for his vivid evocations of nineteenth and twentieth-century American life, Edgar Lawrence Doctorow's fiction spans across his country's history during the twentieth century. Doctorow is widely acclaimed for his talent of evoking the past in a way that makes it at once mysterious and familiar. Although much of his fiction focuses on historical fact, Doctorow has stated his preference to fuse the marvelous with the real.

Doctorow was born on January 6, 1931, New York City to David R. and Rose Lenin, second-generation Americans of Russian Jewish descent. His fiction returns again and again to life in New York City during the early twentieth century, with specific focus on Jewish identity.

Doctorow graduated from the Bronx High School of Science "an institution filled with insufferably brilliant children." As he has stated in his non-fiction book *Reporting the Universe* (2003), Doctorow published his first literary effort, *The Beetle*, a short story, in the school literary magazine, *Dynamo*, under the influence of Kafka (33). It was also in the same school where he experienced his "epiphany" in life "those moments of inexorable moral definition that predict a life, a fate" (34). His "life epiphany" provides insight not only into his future career as a writer, but also the basic themes and concepts he employs in his future writing; having been assigned by his high school journalism teacher to go out into the world and conduct an interview, the young Doctorow hands in an impressive interview with a German Jewish refugee, Karl, a concentration camp survivor, and a stage doorman at Carnegie Hall. The teacher is so impressed with the work that she decides to have it published in the school newspaper. However, after she demanded a picture of the doorman to go along with the interview, Doctorow reveals that there is no doorman and that he made up the entire story himself. (34, 35)

Doctorow then attended Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, in September 1948: a place he found to be "a real college", where he benefited from a first-rate faculty including John Crowe Ransom the poet and Phillip Blair Rice, the philosopher. It was also in the same college that Doctorow met the poet Robert Lowell and the

short story writer Peter Taylor. Doctorow studied poetry in classes taught by Ransom, which he found "a kind of isolationist approach to literary texts that would nevertheless turn out to be invaluable training for a budding writer" (43, 44). He graduated with honors in philosophy in 1952. His philosophical training can be traced in his novels, when he tries to suffuse serious ideas into popular genres such as the Western (*Welcome to Hard Times*), science fiction (*Big as Life*), and detective fiction (*The Waterworks*).

Doctorow studied drama at Columbia University from 1952-1953, where he met and married a fellow Columbia drama student, Helen Setzer in 1954 and later became the father of three children.

Doctorow worked as a reservations clerk at LaGuardia Airport for a time and later became a reader of scripts for CBS Television and Columbia Picture Industries. In 1959, Doctorow became the senior editor for the New American Library (NAL) and worked there until 1964, when he became editor in chief for Dial Press (Bloom, 9) and where he published works by a number of authors including James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, Ernest J. Gaines and William Kennedy.

He has also held teaching positions at Sarah Lawrence College, the Yale School of Drama, the University of Utah, the University of California and Princeton University. He has received honorary degrees from Brandeis University and Hobart and William Smith College. He is currently the Lewis and Loretta Glucksman Professor in American Letters of English at New York University.

1.1 The Novels

Doctorow has received the National Book Award, two National Book Critics Circle Awards, the PEN/Faulkner Award, and the Edith Wharton Citation for Fiction, the William Dean Howell Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the presidentially conferred National Humanities Medal. With *The Book of Daniel*, his third novel, Doctorow emerged as an important American novelist with a strongly political bend.

Doctorow published his first novel almost "accidentally" (*Reporting the Universe* 59), while he was a professional reader at a film company. On his return from service in the Army occupation of Germany, he decided to write and found he could not. During the late fifties, westerns were very popular and he was given a multitude of western stories to read. The job required him to prepare synopses for the film executives. He was on the verge of quitting the job when he concluded that he could lie about the West better than any of the authors he was reading. Without a plan and governed by the "impulse to parody" (60), *Welcome to Hard Times* evolved into a serious novel and his first work.

With *Welcome to Hard Times* and *The Book of Daniel*, Doctorow established a solid reputation, but the avid reviews of *Ragtime* and the subsequent film and Broadway musical adaptations of the novel secured his place in contemporary American culture. *Ragtime* won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1976; *World's Fair* won the American Book Award in 1986; and *Billy Bathgate*—nearly as successful as *Ragtime*—won the 1990 National Book Critics Circle Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction the same year. Among the awards Doctorow has received for lifetime achievement are the 1996 Medal of Honor for Literature from the National Arts Club and the 1998 National Humanities Medal (Rollyson 374).

Doctorow has been a prolific writer, constantly expanding his fictional oeuvre. A brief survey of his novels reveals Doctorow's continuous interest in reconstructing history and contemplating the possibility of reflecting truth.

Doctorow has explored several genres of fiction: the western, science-fiction, and science-detection mystery. His novels are noted for their blending of fact and fiction, history and literature. Identifying with the downtrodden, immigrants, criminals, and political protesters, Doctorow has fashioned fiction with an ostensibly leftist orientation.

Doctorow focuses on stories, myths, public figures, and literary and historical forms that have shaped the American public and political consciousness. Even when his subject is not explicitly political—as in his first novel, *Welcome to Hard Times*—he chooses to comment upon the American sense of crime and justice. The western has often been the vehicle for the celebration of American individualism and morality, and yet

Doctorow purposely writes a novel in which he questions American faith in fairness and democracy. At the same time, he maintains the customary strong binary opposition between good and evil, between the "bad guys" and the "good guys," by constructing a simple but compelling plot line. Almost all his novels take as their settings critical turning points in the history of the United States.

Though written in the tradition of the western, the historical significance of *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960), his first novel, is in its representation of "the end of the frontier of the late nineteenth century" (Jameson 20). In this novel Doctorow parodied the genre of the western; echoing classical western films. The novel is an intensely bleak counterpoint to the genre in which Blue, the novel's narrator and historian, is obsessed with the possibility of recalling the town's history impartially.

The Book of Daniel (1971) is set in the 60s but hearkens back to the earlier 30s, 40s and 50s, and attempts to capture the transitional phase from the Old Left to the New Left, concentrating on communism and radicalism.

Doctorow next explored the genre of science fiction in *Big As Life* (1966), a futuristic satire set in New York City, but Doctorow was never satisfied with the work, which is why the book is out of print and less debated on.

In 1972 he published *The Book of Daniel*, nominated for the National Book Award which established his reputation. The novel is a fictionalized biography of the Rosenberg case, narrated by the fictional son of the executed couple. Daniel, the novel's protagonist and narrator, is obsessed with his family history and the possibility of knowing the truth concerning his parents' ordeal.

Ragtime (1975) received the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction and the American Academy and National Institute of Arts and Letters Award. The book depicts the early decades of the twentieth century, as historical and fictional characters and events intermingle, making it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. *Ragtime* has been seen as a panorama of the first two decades of the twentieth century with a critical perusal of the Progressive Era.

The eighties appear to be the most prolific stage in Doctorow's writing career. *Loon Lake* (1980) portrays the Great Depression of the 1930s, accounting for the struggles and endeavors of the fragmented protagonist, Joe Patterson, who becomes the walking embodiment of the American dream gone astray.

World's Fair (1985), a quasi-autobiography, received the American Book Award in 1986. Overall, the novel is written in the tradition of a bildungsroman, laying more stress on the process of the mental development of Edgar, the young artist. However several instances in the novel once more evoke Doctorow's concern with illusion and reality, and the capability of the artist in manipulating the border between them.

In 1989, Doctorow published *Billy Bathgate*. Narrated by Billy, the novel depicts the recollection of his boyhood experience with notorious gangsters and their world. The novel appears to be more conventional than his earlier works. It received the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pen Faulkner Award.

Doctorow sets *The Waterworks* (1994) within the historical context of William Marcy Tweed (1823-1878) at the height of his power in New York City. Though his earlier novels indict American capitalism and democracy one way or another, this novel is exceptional in that it attempts to subvert the regime of power. Unlike the bleak and sordid ending of the previous novels, this novel appears to end on a more optimistic note.

The City of God, published in 2000, suggests a renewed interest in philosophical studies. The narrator, who can be equated with Doctorow, is interested in contemporary issues including the debate between religion and science. Since this novel does not lay great stress on history, it has not been included in chapter two and three but is discussed in chapter four; it has been dealt with in detail due to its significant contribution to Doctorow's focal concern on the opposition between fact and fiction.

The March (2005) is a compellingly polyphonic novel, recapturing the spirit of General Sherman's great march South seen from the perspective of ex-slaves, union and rebel soldiers, southern citizens whose homes and plantations are destroyed by the army and even from the perspective of Sherman and his generals. The publication of *The March* established Doctorow as a master at portraying historical events,

while at the same time demonstrating the effect of history on the lives of everyday citizens. The book was awarded the National Book Critics Circle award for fiction and the PEN/Faulkner award.

In 2009 *Homer and Langley*, his most recent novel was published, and was named one of the best books of the year by The San Francisco Chronicle, The Chicago Tribune, The St Louis Post-Dispatch and The Kansas City Star and Booklist. Once again, the novel takes as its historical setting the Depression years, but here the focus is on the true story of two brothers, Homer and Langley.

2. Doctorow and the Critics

The fiction of Doctorow is most often observed by critics as a political and cultural critique of American culture and identity. In his fiction, critics have found searching and subversive questions concerning perceived national values. Fredrick Jameson regards Doctorow as a contemporary leftist American novelist who re-examines received ideas, transforming them under contemporary postmodernist narrative modes. Discussing *Ragtime*, and generalizing his comments to encompass Doctorow's other works, Jameson, along with many other critics, asserts Doctorow as the quintessential postmodern novelist. Doctorow can only represent the past in such a way that reflects the present:

E. L. Doctorow is the epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past, of the suppression of older traditions and moments of the American radical tradition: no one with left sympathies can read these splendid novels without a poignant distress that is an authentic way of confronting our own current political dilemmas in the present. (Jameson 23,4)

Concurring with Linda Hutcheon on the political content and meaning of *Ragtime*, Jameson is willing to classify the novel as a postmodern practice:

The novel's action disperses the center of the first and moves the margins into the multiple "centers" of the narrative, in a formal allegory of the social demographics of urban America. In addition, there is an extended critique of American democratic ideals through the presentation of class conflict rooted in capitalist property and moneyed power. (Jameson 21)

While Jameson identifies Doctorow as a novelist whose "books are nourished with history in the more traditional sense," (20) he cannot help but acknowledge the "crisis in historicity" and the "disappearance of the historical referent" which reflect the untraditional nature of his writing. (23, 4)

Doctorow is cited as principally concerned with delineating the unjust and harsh aspects of the historical events as well as the system of governance of his country. To oppose what he views as unjust behavior in the history of his country, Doctorow endeavors to employ a style of writing which resists traditional modes of narrative construction.

Upon identifying postmodern modes of narration in his works, critics observe his writing as a form of resistance. Doctorow makes extensive use of parody, a technique widely said to be employed by writers entrenched in the postmodernist camp. Consequently, this creates an inevitable paradox; on the one hand there is the necessity to make extensive use of actual historical facts, on the other hand, such apparently factual documents must be transgressed. This dilemma demonstrates the paradoxical nature of postmodernist texts in their simultaneous rejection of and anxiety for a pattern and structure.

Commenting on the text of the Constitution in *Reporting the Universe*, Doctorow criticizes American culture from different perspectives, but what appears to lie at the heart of his assault, is the divergence from original "words written down on paper by ordinary mortals" (101).

Doctorow is typically considered a leftist political writer concerned with the shadowy border between history and myth, as well as a writer who utilizes postmodern modes of narrative. At the heart of his narration,

as most critics have come to acknowledge, there lies a seemingly irresolvable tension and different critics have ventured to deal with this tension from different approaches.

While acknowledging the existence of political implications in Doctorow's fiction, citing from interviews and lectures by Doctorow, Carol Harter and James Thompson in their extensive research struggle to wring out from Doctorow's words an apolitical program for his writing, believing that Doctorow does not infuse his novels with political convictions. They emphasize Doctorow's statement on the accidental way each of his novels have been initiated. Quoting from an interview with Doctorow asking him whether he brings a preconceived notion to a novel's creation, Harter and Thompson are content with his answer:

Doctorow draws an interesting analogy: his manner of composition is not a terribly rational way to work, he admits: "it's hard to explain ... it's like driving a car at night. You never see further than your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way. The novelist begins and, sometimes, ends in uncertainty." (6, 7)

The fundamental paradox in Doctorow, according to Harter and Thompson is that "the intensely held social convictions of the man inevitably collide with the imaginative realizations of the artist" (9).

Harter and Thompson are more inclined to interpret Doctorow as a writer obsessed with the power of art and writing, rather than discussing his politically leftist leanings and postmodern experimentalism. Harter and Thompson argue that even if in most of his fiction Doctorow portrays a world in which human life is tragically problematic at both the social and cosmic levels, "solace in perception and joy in creation"(11) are Doctorow's victorious achievements. Observing variety and downplaying politics in his fiction, Harter and Thompson perceive Doctorow's ability in redirecting the reader to a "complex reality", rather than obscuring it. Incapable of mastering the absurd world outside, Doctorow makes use of whatever artistic strategies he can invent to control it since "in an absurd world the understanding achieved through art is the only control possible for the writer, whatever the activist's belief might be" (12).

Harter and Thompson find in Doctorow variety and unevenness. No two books resemble each other in any overt way. The only common point between them, they observe, is an insistent obsession with the American past. However if this is what connects all the novels together, how can one neglect the political background which informs Doctorow's fiction? Surely, the aesthetic aspects of the novels require adequate attention, but if Doctorow simply intended to reflect upon the responsibility of the author to impose order and harmony through artistic creation, he did not need to return repeatedly to the history of the United States.

John G. Parks, whose critical overview of Doctorow was also among the first full-length studies on Doctorow's fiction, observes Doctorow's style as embodying both elements of "postmodernist experimentalist and traditional social realist" (11). Although Parks observes tensions in the novels, yet his ultimate inference observes the novels as coming to a teleological ending governed by happy endings, balance and success; "His work is rich and varied, not easily falling into the common classification applied by critics of contemporary American fiction. He is neither a postmodern experimentalist nor a traditional social realist, but his work has features of both." Parks' reading is heavily shadowed by his Bakhtinian approach to the texts, regarding the context of the novels as a locus in which divergent, peripheral and even conflicting voices are permitted temporary liberty. But the problem with Parks' approach is a key contradiction which surfaces from his own statements and generalizations.

Parks believes Doctorow is erroneously labeled a political novelist, because of his concern for social justice. The label, Parks believes, implies that Doctorow has a specific "agenda, a program, or an ideology to promulgate in fiction." Parks states that "Doctorow's politics do not function in systematic or programmatic ways in his fiction. As a critic of America's failures to fulfill its dreams and founding convictions, he does not advocate new political systems, but rather provokes the reader to a radical reassessment of the American experience in essentially moral terms."(11)

The major problem with Parks is that while he rejects the existence of a pattern and system in Doctorow's fiction, he sets out to detect as many systematic principles as possible, producing the impression that Doctorow's novels do share commonalities. By attempting to recount a common thread of repeated themes

and motifs in his fiction, Parks draws out the specific historical background of Doctorow's novels. Through this, Parks contradicts his own statement rejecting a systematic pattern in Doctorow's fiction.

Parks observes a tension in Doctorow's political consciousness that he does not try to resolve. Like Harter and Thompson, he brings evidence from Doctorow's familiarity with radicalism in the family, reminding us that Doctorow's grandfather was an atheist. Parks also refers to contemporary views on the fluid nature of truth and the potentiality of fiction in conveying more truth than fact. Parks cites Foucault's famous lines on the impossibility of separating the power of truth from "regimes of power," bringing forth evidence from contemporary linguistics on the fluid nature of meaning. According to Foucault, since meaning cannot be pinned down via language, Doctorow's postmodern style of narrative benefits and helps the liberation of history from fact, replacing it with a fiction which embodies more truth. Foucault's project then, Parks believes, "describes well Doctorow's concerns in his fiction." (18)

One of the central concerns of the present research is to evaluate the extent which Doctorow pursues or has managed to succeed in this approach. Has he managed to detach history from fact? Is this supposed detachment his final objective? Do his novels ultimately reveal the impossibility of such a separation in American society with a capitalist system of governance? Hence one of the objectives of the present research is to challenge Parks' bold statement:

Thus, the narrative of fiction is the locus of battle, as it were, for freedom. It is the place, or rather, the process or event where the "regimes of power," as Michel Foucault says, may be challenged. The task of narrative is to disrupt or dismantle the prevailing "regimes of truth," including their repressive effects. As Foucault writes "it is not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time." Such a project describes well Doctorow's concerns in his fiction (18).

Parks embarks on Bakhtin's notion of polyphony in the novel as a means to subvert the regime from establishing a monological control over culture. Hence Bakhtin's theories help Parks defend his vision of Doctorow's fiction as instances of freedom from a monological regime since his novels are an embodiment of polyphonic voices, including the lives of individuals and families from different social classes, races and cultures. In his paper "The Politics of Polyphony: The Fiction of E. L. Doctorow", Parks compares Doctorow's novels with Hawthorne's historical romances, stating that Doctorow challenges the power of the regime with the power of freedom inherent in discourse and narrative:

Doctorow, as an artist, is committed to challenging the power of the regime with the power of freedom. The principal arena of that engagement is in discourse, in narrative, the range of discursive practices with their cluster of rules and codes which govern writing and thinking. The goal is to disclose and challenge the hegemony of enshrined or institutionalized discursive practices in order to make available new possibilities of thought and action. Doctorow's fiction shows a willingness to take risks, to counter the tendency of a culture to monopolize the compositions of truth with polyphonic and heteroglossic narratives. (460)

But to what extent has Doctorow managed to truly disrupt the regime from monopolizing the composition of truth and establishing a monological control over culture? Where does Doctorow locate the monopolizing regime of truth? Does he believe in the necessity of change? If so, where and why should this change take place? Does he support or reject the country's Founding Fathers' conception of how the country should be governed?

Michelle M. Tokarczyk ventures to demonstrate how Doctorow's fiction can oscillate between a passionately politically committed Jewish author and a writer who is highly skeptical of politics. The result is a

fiction which seems to be equally drawn to two sides; being politically committed and at the same time skeptical of political action and indeterminate. According to Tokarczyk, Doctorow has employed a variety of literary techniques and genres to represent his politically conscious mind, not only charging his fiction with political overtones but also influencing and provoking other political writing.

Tokarczyk sums up the major issues of Doctorow's major novels as raising the question regarding the artist and social and political concerns, the possibility of progress and the meaning of being committed. Like many other critics, Tokarczyk also regards Doctorow as a postmodern writer, yet he does not believe Doctorow himself favors uncertainty. He asserts that Doctorow takes a detached stance regarding his relationship with his narrative. Though his novels are heavily political, Doctorow strives to maintain his detachment, refusing to boldly assert his political position and keeping a distance from political matters. Tokarczyk attempts to locate the reason for this distance in Doctorow's preference for writing, rather than political issues, and even more significantly his belief in the impossibility of making a difference.

Tokarczyk identifies two major political trends in Doctorow's time as being the major reasons for his detachment; the first was McCarthyism which resulted in the destruction of many lives by politicians, and second, Tokarczyk classifies Doctorow as belonging to "the so-called Silent Generation" (3). This was also a time during which news of Stalin's atrocities and other revelations about Russian Communism which shattered the vision of some leftists that Communism embodied true democratic ideals.

Hence, Doctorow chose detachment and withdrawal from the political world and as a result Tokarczyk generally identifies Doctorow's stance and vision as skeptical:

The postmodern vein in Doctorow's fiction and in essays such as "False Documents," widely commented upon, might be seen as a skeptic's position— the belief that true knowledge or knowledge of a particular area is uncertain; hence, one adopts an attitude of doubt or disposition toward incredulity."(4)

However, despite this skepticism towards certainty, Tokarczyk notes Doctorow's desire towards certainty and his acknowledgement of the dangers of uncertainty. According to Tokarczyk Doctorow remains suspicious of definite answers and more importantly, of the possibility of knowing but he is also suspicious of "radical uncertainty and passionately committed to certain idea and causes" (4). His fiction, Tokarczyk believes, reflects the "trinity of oppression" (race, class and gender). It appears that Doctorow sympathizes with the weaker sides; those of low economic status, colored peoples and females implying an essential sense of justice.

Doctorow himself favors a detached speaker, one detached from official institutions, as he mentions "independent witnesses ... not connected to the defense of any institution, whether it be the family or the Pentagon or God" (Levine "Writer" 69). Tokarczyk sums up the central issues of Doctorow's major novels as the question of the artist and social and political concerns, the possibility of progress and the meaning of being committed.(5)

On the whole, Tokarczyk observes a contradiction in Doctorow's ideology which he does not strive to resolve. What position does Doctorow finally adhere to? Certainty or uncertainty? Dedication or indifference?

Broadly speaking, Doctorow's stance towards the politics of his country is unclear; is he in favor of radicalism or is he a conservative? Some critics including Parks have been highly optimistic in observing Doctorow's fiction as entirely optimistic. Others such as Harter and Thompson have evaded the problem by suggesting Doctorow's artistic and aesthetic concerns as overriding his political intentions. Tokarczyk observes both Doctorow's skepticism and his commitment but cannot make a compromise between the two.

The present research intends to study Doctorow's novels to examine what the author believes to be the truly "radical" and "leftist" nature of the works. Does Doctorow finally subvert the dominant authorities/ideologies? Can his novels be regarded as instances of dissidence? Most of his novels apparently indict American capitalism by depicting how at crucial turning points in the history of the country, the system has failed. Does he fully believe in the failure of the system? Does he delineate a similar picture for the future

of his country? In order to answer the above questions and to contribute to this ongoing debate, the present research suggests observing Doctorow's fiction under the light of metafiction.

Doctorow's fiction is overtly self-reflexive. The narrators of all his novels deal with events that have happened in the past. Addressing the reader consciously, they continuously comment upon the act of writing and reconstructing history, involving the reader in their contemplations. Since self-reflexivity and rewriting history are two outstanding elements in all his novels, the questions mentioned above, dealing with historical and political matters, can be studied under the light of metafiction.

3. Metafiction: The Historical Background

The sixties was a time of intense disillusionment and startling recognition for the American nation. A combination of political and social factors in the 1960s in the US led to what is commonly called a spirit of "regeneration." The presidency of John F. Kennedy had at first sparked rays of hope in the hearts of numerous Americans who voted for him. However, the war in Vietnam and widespread protests against it, the advent of the civil rights movement and the rise of black power and an alarming increase in violent murder and gun crime throughout the decade, all helped to bring about the rise of a counter-culture which had already begun with the Beat Movement of the 1950s, and generally developed into a disbelief and distrust of authority and official power. As noted by Bran Nicol:

The pervasiveness of corruption, violence, scandal, and cover-up in American politics, exemplified by the assassinations of John Kennedy, and his brother Robert and the civil rights campaigner Martin Luther King, and the Watergate scandal which brought down the by-then President Nixon in 1973, convinced cultural figures in America that reality, even history, was not transparent, but a kind of 'front' for the *real* story which was unfolding behind the scenes. (74)

The result of this disillusionment with the political and social matters of their country greatly influenced fiction writers of the time and has been recaptured in both popular and serious art. Metafiction was then used as a means through which previously cherished American beliefs, traditions, values and myths were deconstructed. The forceful impact of this disillusionment resulted in the transformation of political matters into literary ones and writers employed parody to challenge whatever had previously pertained to reflecting reality and truth in American history and culture.

Although metafiction had already been employed by earlier writers across the world, at this point in the history of America it became an appropriate technique for translating social and political matters into literary ones. In *Twentieth-century American Novel* (2005), John Whitley traces the new themes of the American novel, reflecting its necessary political nature in the 60s and 70s. Whitley provides examples of novelists including Doctorow, who wrote with a conscious awareness of the necessity to intermingle fact and fiction, which was made easier through the development of the term *metafiction*. Authors who decided to exploit this technique permitted themselves to question the nature of reality. Unsurprisingly, this was an immediate response to the spirit of the age:

The determination to explore fictionality in the 1960s, Nicol believes, was motivated by a sense that everyday reality was always already fictionalized, either because of its sheer absurdity, or by the power of the media in shaping it and presenting it to the viewer, or because it was being actively manipulated by unseen hands (75).

However, by employing this technique, writers did not all share the same view point. The writers of this tradition of American literature can be roughly divided into two broad groups; those who as Patricia Waugh put it practiced "aleatory art" (12): a totally random art, which its practitioners believed to be the best way to

reflect the chaotic, frenetic and frenzied contemporary world. Outstanding literary figures that practiced aleatory art include William H. Gass, Robert Coover, John Barth, and Donald Barthelme, who produced fiction which was principally about fiction itself with no extrinsic reference to the outside world. Authors writing in this tradition produced fiction within fiction; endless tales and tales within tales. As an instance of such innovative metafictional work, William H. Gass's *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife* (1968) makes use of a variety of visual devices including different colors for different sections of the book rather than pagination, different typefaces, coffee stains, and a variety of other innovative techniques to draw the attention of the reader to the text and language.

The second group of metafictional writers consists of those whose works are initially bound to conventions. Such writers will not, like practitioners of aleatory art, pull the rug out from under their readers' feet by engaging in innovation straightaway. Rather, authors of this camp use familiar themes and conventions but then abuse them for the sake of innovation. By laying bare the device of composing fiction and the truths of the fictional world, these writers intend to *deconstruct* the truths which has structured the real world (Waugh 12).

Lyotard's assumption that narratives can never be natural or innocent in representing reality and that they are partial, selective and relative reflects the approach taken by postmodern critics and writers toward narrative. One of the grounds of attack directed towards "realist" modes of writing which postmodernists strive to debunk is the illusion that writers, writing in the realist tradition, strive to show their narratives unfold naturally and effortlessly. By shattering this illusion, postmodernists, including the practitioners of metafiction, wish to show how narratives are constructs which the authors build and are therefore partial, selective and relative. The technique they employ to communicate this point is a self-reflexive method which continually disrupts the traditional progression of the narrative, to draw the attention of the reader to the act of composition itself.

Metafiction is the most distinctive characteristic of postmodernist fiction, to the extent that Linda Hutcheon, the Canadian critic, regards postmodernism and metafiction as identical (301). Metafiction reminds the reader that what he is reading is fiction, and that narrative is made up of words which do not reflect the outside world, but are related to other texts.

Metafiction may not seem a novel technique, as many early texts can be found which draw attention to their fictive quality. Patricia Waugh has clarified that as a postmodernist technique, what is important in metafiction is what it does through uncovering the fictional status of the narrative, it signals to the reader the constructed, mediated and discursive nature of the external world. Unlike realist and modernist writings, metafictional works do not pretend to provide the reader with insight into the real world. Postmodernist fiction reminds us that the fictional world is not a simple and stable world, and that narratives are loaded with functionality.

Patricia Waugh and Linda Hutcheon are two important figures who have attempted to establish a "poetics of postmodernism". These two theorists have had the most significant impact upon the theories of postmodernism in fiction. While providing instances of how postmodernist fiction works and what is distinctive of post-war writings, Waugh and Hutcheon do not confine their practice to the fiction of this era. According to these two critics, postmodernist fiction does not do anything that fiction has not done before. The only perceptible difference is that certain elements receive more attention.

The irony Hutcheon observes in postmodernist fiction is therefore, not new. It has been inherent in earlier fiction as far back as in the works of Shakespeare. The irony is the simultaneous existence of the conformation to norms and traditions and a desire to shatter and rebel against them. Only by looking back at norms and stable traditions can postmodernism be successful in breaking them. This irony which is not unique to postmodern art is now "obsessively recurring" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* xi) in contemporary art, which is what makes it different from previous works. Contemporary art is simultaneously referential when looking back to realist traditions and self-reflexive by shattering the very same traditions. Patricia Waugh had also proposed that in order for the metafictional narrative to be accepted by readers, they must

begin from a familiar plane and then move on to a new, unfamiliar terrain; "The forms and language of what is offered to it as creative or experimental fiction should not be so unfamiliar as to be entirely beyond the *given* modes of communication, or such fiction will be rejected as simply not worth the reading effort. There has to be some level of familiarity"(64).

For Hutcheon, postmodern art combines both theory and practice. She regards postmodernist fiction as an aesthetic object which both amuses us and makes us ponder about what we are deriving pleasure from. This aspect of her theory is clarified when she describes "historiographic metafiction" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 106). According to Hutcheon, postmodernism could not have existed without modernism. It neither totally accepts nor totally rejects realism. Hutcheon observes the ideology of postmodernism as paradoxical because it both relies upon and contests that which it derives from.

3.1 Recognizing Frames in Fiction

The effect of metafiction is principally to draw attention to the frames involved in fiction, which are frequently concealed by realism. According to Waugh, frames have become invisible in realist writing. Framing means that the author has already decided upon the material and the perspective of his/her narration. A practical example of frames in art is the actual frame of a realist painting of a landscape. The first function of the frame is to show the reader what is presented in the painting. But the frame also functions to limit the amount of landscape we are permitted to observe. Applying the same to the world of fiction, we can infer then that what we see in both the painting and the world of fiction is only a small portion of a wider spectrum. Therefore framing is not totally objective but it is a technique which permits the author selection, preference, and privilege. Therefore any narrative will necessarily involve some degree of framing.

The significance of recognizing framing in fiction is that it makes us realize what we see in the fictional work is there because we have been permitted to see it by the author. In order to make this possible, the author has employed artificial devices or techniques. The reason why artificiality is emphasized is to set it against the realist tradition which claimed to provide a naturally realistic picture of the world and life. In fiction, the frame is the narration of the text which provides a portal for the reader to enter the world of fiction, making the fictional world of the author accessible to the real world of the reader.

3.2 Frame-breaking

Recognizing frames in fiction is not the end in metafiction. What metafictional narrative strives toward is to perceive the way such frames function in fiction;

Contemporary metafiction, in particular, foregrounds 'framing' as a problem, examining frame procedures in the construction of the real world and of novels. The first problem it poses, of course, is: what is a 'frame'? What is the 'frame' that separates reality from 'fiction'? Is it more than the front and back covers of a book, the rising and lowering of a curtain, the title and 'The End'?" (Waugh 28)

Waugh cites from the sociologist Erving Goffman the notion of frame-breaking where the frames which traditionally construct narrative are dismantled and shattered. The most outstanding instance of this frame-breaking is when the author intrudes upon his own fiction, moving from the external world of the author to the internal world of fiction or vice versa.

Frame-breaking thus involves laying bare the devices of composing fiction. Since all fiction have been constructed via frames, frame-breaking is not unique to postmodernism and can be observed not only in seventeenth and eighteenth century fiction, but in modernism as well. Two outstanding pre nineteenth-century novels worth mentioning for the metafictional parody are Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605; 1615) and Laurence Sterne's novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-67)

In *Don Quixote*, narrative strategies such as digressions, references to other works by the author (Cervantes) and the developing story, discussions of characters within the narrative about rules and traditions of writing fiction, all draw attention to the narrative frames which have made the story possible for the reader. In *Tristram Shandy*, the narrator continuously disrupts the chronological progression of events of the hero's life-story.

Writing at a time when the novel had not yet fully developed as a genre, the two novels employ parody. Both novels do what metafiction in postmodernism later did; drawing the reader's attention to the difficulty of representing reality in fiction and the unnaturalness of narrative progression in a chronological manner. If metafiction as an unraveling strategy in the novel had been employed even before the genre had properly begun, how can we consider it as the distinctive feature of postmodernist fiction?

Waugh provides an adequate response to this problem. If metafiction lays bare the traditional norms of fiction writing in the postmodern novel, the aim is to make the reader ponder not only about the aesthetic aspect of metafiction, which is the process of constructing fiction, but also involves the theoretical part which means that the external world, the world the reader inhabits is also composed of frames and similar composing elements and that discursive frames construct the realities we live by.

Waugh demonstrates that what some critics have come to regard as the "playfulness" of metafiction in narrative is not to mark the end of the novel but is in fact an approach which strives to delineate the history of the novel. It makes more sense to observe metafiction as not merely playing with the possibilities of self-conscious fiction for its own sake, with specific regards for the historical setting of the technique in the US, but rather to observe it as Nicol does:

to see the turn to innovative non-realist techniques as the result not of a kind of private domestic battle kept within the family of literature but the literary contribution – albeit a rather displaced, esoteric, one – to the widespread counter-cultural conviction that social reality was becoming disturbingly fictional. (75)

4. The Postmodern historical novel

According to Linda Hutcheon, in the postmodern historical novel we can observe the return of plot and the question of reference. Unlike earlier metafictional narratives in which plot was no longer a composing element of the story (such as Barths' *Lost in the Funhouse*-1968- and Coover's *Descant*-1969), postmodern historical fiction, which Hutcheon terms as "historiographic metafiction" still contains many of the traditional elements of novels written in the manner of nineteenth-century realism. Since historiographic metafiction makes use of many of the traditional realist elements, it has enjoyed a wider spectrum of readership, and has become the "accepted face of postmodernism". It makes use of both realism and postmodernism: "work of 'historiographic metafiction' (her label for postmodern historical fiction) is still committed to telling a long and involving story, full of believable characters, which can be enjoyed by the reader in the manner of nineteenth century realism" (Nicol 99).

Metafiction is a self-conscious fiction which reminds us that fiction is a construction, so that we realize the reality we live by is also a similar construction. Historiographic metafiction makes us realize that history is also a construction, and does not necessarily equate with the past, just as reality does not equate to truth. Like narration, history is built from documents and other material which are themselves narratives about the past.

The "accessibility" of historiographic fiction (Nicol 98) has made it difficult for contemporary critics to place this branch of narrative alongside other postmodern fiction; the realism which permits readers to enjoy the narrative, brings it closer to early nineteenth-century histories. As mentioned before, self-reflexive historical fiction is a strong characteristic of the 1960s postmodern fiction. Nineteenth-century historical novels sought to provide the reader with a real picture of the life at the times. As Hutcheon and Hayden White have mentioned, during the nineteenth century, history and fiction were not distinct, because fiction, heavily influenced by realistic modes and principles, was supposed to give a realistic picture of life, therefore fiction had the same status as history.

Postmodernism also posits the equation between the two, stating that history is dependent upon fiction; without fiction history could not exist. According to Nicol, historiography claims to be a science, one that can analyze its object of study impersonally, and objectively. The problem according to Hayden White is that it finally ends up producing a narrative which means the approach fails both at the theoretical and methodological level. "A discipline that produces narrative accounts of its subject matter as an end in itself", he contends, 'seems methodologically unsound; one that investigates its data in the interest of telling a story about them appears theoretically deficient (White 1). In other words, the author ends up focusing on the story, rather than facts. As the examples from Doctorow's fiction will prove, while the author employs postmodernist and metafictional techniques, the realist tradition of focusing on the story (content) of his narrative receives greater force than the postmodernist indulgence with the process of storytelling (form).

The historian and the fiction writer can never be impersonal. Both make selections and preferences which they then impose upon the reader to accept. Historiography calls attention to the very frames through which history has been constructed and attempts to break them. History as a thing of the past really did exist, but our only access to it is through documents and texts whether written, oral, or even pictorial. Since history itself as Fredrick Jameson has mentioned is ". . . *not* a text, for it is fundamentally non-narrative and non-representational," (Jameson 82) our conception of history can never be accurate and complete. The technique historiographic metafiction provides is to shatter what is believed to be the illusion that history can be recaptured accurately within texts, be they factual or fictive.

5. Historiographic Metafiction

Historiographic metafiction strives to uncover the alleged unbridgeable gap between real history and the fictional representation of history. History is constructed in texts via language and as structuralists have demonstrated, language does not mimic the real world, but is governed by its own structures and rules and only attempts to give a theoretical version of the world.

According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction is the same as postmodernism. McHale criticizes Hutcheon for this, however, and demonstrates how Hutcheon's anxiety for grand narratives finally entraps her. The double side to Hutcheon's theory is that historiography is at once real and fictional. According to Hutcheon, the reader is permitted freedom of interpretation but this freedom is only possible once there is a firm ground from which to move. So metafiction must primarily employ realism according to Waugh; "In metafiction it is precisely the *fulfillment* as well as the *non-fulfillment* of generic expectations that provides both familiarity and the starting point for innovation"(64). This is what creates the openness of such texts, in contrast to earlier closed versions of historiography. This opening up, according to Hutcheon, is what makes history political because history then becomes an open concept rather than a closed, teleological entity (110). What historiographic metafiction does in the end is not just playful parody, poking fun at history. It reminds us of the presence of history in our own lives, how we are the products of that history. Its ultimate objective is to make us ponder over how we are affected by history, and how we know what we know about the past.

As a political instrument, metafiction works by altering and heightening the consciousness of the individual reader. By both displaying the constructedness of the reader's vision of social reality and allowing the reader to participate in the construction of an alternative fictional reality, metafiction attempts to debunk the social ideologies that inform the reader's conception of society and offer the reader the opportunity to liberate himself from them. In addition, this expansion of the reader's conception of the world and his place within it put him in a position to make more informed decisions about how he should think and act. The problem is that being informed involves history and history is only a narrative.

The works of Robert Scholes, Hutcheon, and Waugh have effectively defended metafiction against the accusation that it is a frivolous and self-indulgent exercise in art for art's sake. They have laid the groundwork for a political study of metafiction, locating the potential political viability of metafiction in its capacity to force the reader to confront and examine the constructedness of his own experience of reality

5.1 Doctorow and Metafiction

Since history and fiction are the two major poles of his work, the link between the history of the United States during the specific years he sets his novels and the postmodern narrative style he employs require thoughtful consideration. Though Doctorow attempts to deconstruct the history of his country by obscuring the border between fact and fiction, his works appear to fall prey to a dominant pattern.

Doctorow employs self-conscious narrators who are obsessed with knowing the truth through recounting incidents of their past lives and simultaneously through their writing. Since both cases require a construction on behalf of a necessarily partial and subjective speaker/narrator, metafiction has served well Doctorow's ideology of the impossibility of disentangling fact from fiction.

Doctorow's application of historiographic metafiction, with a specific concern for the reason he has repeatedly employed metafiction throughout his writing career requires investigation. Doctorow challenges the reader to question the nature of historical truth. This is observed once we realize the intertextual relationship between the fictive world of his novels and the history of the US as it is recorded and documented by historians. Primarily, it might appear that each novel is an individual representation of the spirit of the specific age which it has taken as its background, reflecting and indicting the unjust system. However, a closer scrutiny of the novels unveils a coherent pattern running through all his works. Though it may seem that Doctorow is an avid supporter of change, his narrative communicates the impossibility of change and betterment of conditions for the marginalized members of the American society, which provokes suspicion regarding the author's condemnation of his country's policies in the first place. Questions also remain about how the painful conditions of marginalized people are historically confirmed through historiographic metafiction.

6. Conclusion

E.L. Doctorow is mainly considered a postmodern writer. While critics had no problem observing postmodern techniques of narration in Doctorow's texts, they could still identify enough evidences to position him in the realist tradition of historical novelists. Some critics including Hutcheon have primarily identified this irony as an inherent nature of historiographic metafiction, which initially requires to base narrative contexts on a firm historical grounding, then deviating from this firm grounding. Other critics including Parks, Harter and Thompson believe Doctorow's aesthetic intentions finally overcome his political convictions. The intentions of this paper have been to suggest an alternative reason for this.

Doctorow's texts place a greater emphasis on the content (story) rather than the form (techniques which violate realism) which as we have observed, is an indispensable aspect of historiographic metafiction, the technique Doctorow has employed for most of his narratives. His novels have benefited from different literary genres including the western, science fiction, bildungsroman, and science-detective. But what remains constant in the novels is the specific historical context in each.

Doctorow's political agenda is extended through all his writing oeuvre, a point also remarked by Bawer. But the nature of that politics is a much contested debate among the critics of Doctorow. The present research has been an attempt to suggest a possible perspective from which to observe the novels, contributing to this ongoing debate. Rather than being aesthetically concerned, Doctorow is a partial author whose political mentality has strongly influenced his writing career.

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