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MENG 6510

2 November 2017

Bad Romance: Popular Romance Fiction and E. L. Doctorow

It has been noted by many that critical readings of Doctorow’s novels are few and far between, mostly confined to book reviews by trade publications and major newspapers. Adam Kelly, writing for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, explains:

Whence the disparity between a plethora of writerly and popular interest in E. L. Doctorow’s fiction on the one hand — testified to by consistent sales, widespread reviews, and numerous prizes, even before this outpouring on the occasion of his passing — and a seeming lack of scholarly interest on the other? There may be many answers, but I’ll hypothesize one in particular: that the root of this disparity lies in Doctorow’s style. (“E. L. Doctorow’s Postmodernist Style”)

My own reading of four of Doctorow’s novels (*Ragtime, The Waterworks, City of God,* and *Andrew’s Brain*) confirms that Doctorow’s style, if not his language, is playful and curious, and the constant movement between ideas and modes perplexes static readings. Adam Kelly’s argument relies on Frederic Jameson’s claim that Doctorow and other postmodernists employ pastiche, rather than parody, in their adoption of different modes and styles. Pastiche, according to Jameson, is “the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language” (qtd. in “E. L. Doctorow’s Postmodernist Style”). Kelly complicates Jameson’s claim, and I tend to agree with him, but I believe Jameson has correctly identified Doctorow’s tendency to try on “genre” fiction as a costume. In and of itself, playing with genre tropes isn’t pastiche or parody, but I will argue that the way Doctorow borrows popular romance fiction tropes swerves sharply into troubling pastiche and cultural appropriation.

Referring back to Jameson and Kelly, critics have noted that Doctorow, unlike many literary fiction authors, isn’t averse to playing with elements of other genres. To understand the tacit disapproval in Jameson’s argument, one must understand the decades-old debate between what has been called “literary fiction” and “genre fiction.” Genre fiction consists of science fiction, fantasy, romance, mysteries, etc., while literary fiction is somewhat more generalized and realistic in subject matter (with the exception of magic realism) and very concerned with style (form, style, experimentation). That being said, the distinction between literary and genre fiction is sometimes arbitrary and sometimes condescending. In the New Yorker, Joshua Rothman asks “What is it, exactly, about genre that is unliterary—and what is it in “the literary” that resists genre? The debate goes round and round, magnetic and circular—a lovers’ quarrel among literati” (“A Better Way to Think about the Genre Debate”). Rothman’s observation is especially true for those books that show interest in style, language, form, as well aselements of genre. However, I’d argue that Rothman’s generosity doesn’t extend to genre works that focus more on telling a good story than in creating language that can be written about. The majority of popular romance fiction, pejoratively called bodice-rippers, fits the latter category. Defending the merits of *true* genre fiction isn’t within the scope of this paper; however, a recognition of popular romance’s status as a publishing juggernaut with a robust community and culture around it is necessary to understand my argument.

Before reading *The Waterworks* I was alerted that the novel played with several genres: mystery, detective story, and romance. Being a reader of romance and a popular romance scholar-in-training, naturally I was excited to read Doctorow’s interpretation. *The Waterworks* was both an enjoyable read and an exciting critical exercise. The idea that Doctorow played with romance tropes didn’t hold up, at least not in the way that I define genre romance. This was my misunderstanding—Doctorow is truly playing with the idea of Hawthornian romance, not bodice-rippers. American romance, championed by Hawthorne, is, in a nutshell, a story that connects the past with the present to effect timelessness and subtle morality (Hawthorne 13–16). Doctorow adheres to these principles, creating stories that feel historical but timeless, allegorical rather than didactic. However, whether consciously or not, Doctorow’s novels do include notions of modern romance—the domain of popular romance. Boy meets girl; boy and girl fall in love; boy and girl get married. It’s in these plotlines specifically that the pastiche turns into appropriation.

With this thought in mind, I re-examined my reading of several of Doctorow’s novels, and came up with a puzzling observation: in four of Doctorow’s novels, a main protagonist—male—ends up marrying one of the few female characters, even if no meaningful relationship has developed between them. To readers of popular romance fiction, the lack of a developing relationship and reasoning for two characters to get together is the antithesis of romance. A good romance novel traces the surprising yet inevitable union of the hero and heroine—the reader wants to know *why* two characters end up in love, not just that they do…somehow. In the last chapter of *The Waterworks,* McIlvaine describes a happy ending. The debacle of Sartorius’s experiments ends and two couples are wed. The first is the wedding of Martin Pemberton and his childhood friend and longtime fiancé Emily Tisdale, and the second is between Detective Dunne and the widow Sarah Pemberton. McIlvaine spends the first ceremony “circumspect in [his] examination of the bride’s figure…When the bride said ‘I do,’ her voice cracking in her joy, [his] heart…was broken forever (247). No mention is made of Martin’s emotional state during his wedding. The reader only remembers that while Martin is missing and McIlvaine visits Emily Tisdale he learns that the status of their engagement was in question since they were having a “difficult time” (9). Martin treats Emily poorly, even yelling at her for her faithfulness (101). But it isn’t a mystery why Emily stays with him—her joy at the wedding indicates how much she loves him. The romance between Emily and Martin is conveyed in shorthand, however. To be defined as a romance novel in modern publishing terms, a novel must have

[t]wo basic elements… a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending. A Central Love Story: The main plot centers around individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work. A writer can include as many subplots as he/she wants as long as the love story is the main focus of the novel. An Emotionally Satisfying and Optimistic Ending: In a romance, the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love. (Romance Writers of America).

Doctorow uses shortcuts in the relationship between Martin and Emily, skipping over the couple “struggling to make the relationship work” and “lovers who risk and struggle for each other.” The result of the shorthand is a romance subplot that doesn’t satisfy the romance fan’s need for the love story to be explicated and that never complicates the idea that the wedding between Emily and Martin is a thing to be celebrated…which it is decidedly not. The happy ending is hollow. Martin may have been returned safely to his family, and the story may end with two marriages, but the ending is anything but happy when Emily is given to Martin as a trophy, a willing sacrifice It’s not just that this ending doesn’t satisfy a romance reader, but that it does such a great disservice to one of the novel’s few female characters in treating her as an object to be awarded to Martin for good behavior. Judith Fetterley comments on women as tools and pawns, even trophies: “When men invest women with the significance of ultimate possessions, they make them the prime counters in their power games with each other” (83). This troubling relationship between Doctorow’s male and female characters is rarely subverted.

Beyond Emily and Martin, Tateh and Mother in *Ragtime* and Andrew and Briony in *Andrew’s Brain* are thrust together in the same way. The romance exists by virtue of the fact that characters marry each other. (Briony and Andrew’s courtship is narrated, yet Briony’s reasons for marrying Andrew are murky.) Yet, all the allegorical and ahistorical meaning in Doctorow’s writing clearly fits the definition of Hawthornian romance. Doctorow’s privileging of Hawthornian romance over Austenian romance (a term I believe I just made up; however, the female-authored *Pride and Prejudice* fits the RWA’s definition of romance and is perhaps the basis of the definition) mirrors the lack of meaningful romantic development in these three examples—the man’s side of the romance is always represented, but the female’s rarely is. The RWA—an organization mostly comprised of female authors—is considered an authority on romance fiction, but is often shunted to the backseat by male authors. Why do the academy and creators of literary fiction privilege the definitions of romance given by male authorities over female authorities? No doubt this is unintentional on Doctorow’s part, and he certainly shouldn’t be vilified for it. However, his novels serve as evidence that women and romance are as marginalized as ever in the fiction community.

Doctorow’s novels’ rocky relationship with feminism has been remarked upon, but never in regard to appropriating other female literary forms and spaces. Marshall Bruce Gentry remarks in his essay on feminism in Doctorow’s and Roth’s novels that “Doctorow’s tendency to idealize feminine traits may even go too far” (513) and that “several of Doctorow’s major female characters nearly disappear by the end of their novels, as if they must be hidden from view so that their flaws, too, may be hidden, so that what is positive in their portrayals may be preserved, as with Emma Goldman in *Ragtime*” (514). Doctorow’s trampling over a female-centric genre is based in good intentions—in *The Waterworks* the two main female characters end up happy and taken care of. However, Gentry reminds the reader that Doctorow’s focus on “gender issues…as a form of politics” implies that “one of the goals of his writing is to release society from ‘paternalistic distortions,’ a claim also found in his famous distinction, in the essay ‘False Documents’” (514). Unfortunately, this goal can’t be wholly reached because one common “paternalistic distinction” is to take credit for the work of women and femmes. Feminism is an understanding that institutional power is applied in such a way that not all people are equal—but that they should be. With that comes a recognition that in the literary tradition, men are privileged over women, and even well-meaning men can carry with them unconscious entitlement to what women have created. *The Waterworks* has taken something culturally significant to a large group of women, stripped it of its meaning, and used its appeal to attract attention.

The romance genre is also subject to feminist critique. Feminist criticism of the romance genre can’t be summed up in one sentence—nor should it be—but one thing stands out for how often it appears. Popular romance fiction is primarily a genre for women by women. It is unique in that regard. (Side note: this fact alone doesn’t make the genre feminist. A lack of diversity in both the characters and creators plagues this genre as it does most others.) The novel has long been a battlefield for sexism. Beyond genre romance, the bestselling novels in the Western canon are often written by women (Austen, the Brontes, all of the Gothic novels), but the majority of the canon of Western literature is dominated by white men. Yet, 34% of fiction sold in the United States is romance (more than any other single genre). Romance publishing is a billion dollar industry (RWA). Men often want to write romance novels—whether it be because the genre is the most lucrative fiction genre in America, or because they simply want to write a love story—but often the men in question don’t know anything about the genre. Only 16% of romance book sales are to men (RWA). The most popular male “romance” author is Nicholas Sparks, and even then he doesn’t always comply with the rules of RWA (which is fine—but those books without happy endings aren’t capital “R” romance). The two elements that define genre romance are a double-edged sword. From an outsider’s perspective, these rules are the reason that popular romance fiction is derided as formulaic, bad writing. But from the inside, *those rules ensure a narrative that is at least as female-focused as it is male-focused and that is generally optimistic about the lives that women, who are marginalized, can lead*. (While this paper mostly refers to heterosexual romance, similar promises are made in queer romance as well). The inclusion of "bad romance”—meaning romance depicted in bad faith or without an understanding of the genre informing it—is problematic because of how it erases women, both the characters and the readers. It’s hard for a woman to see herself in the female half of the romantic relationship if her perspective never shines through the male narration, as is the case with the relationship of Emily and Martin in *The Waterworks*. Romance is a tool borrowed and then used against its creators. The definition of cultural appropriation is “the act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture” (Cambridge English Dictionary). Unfortunately, that is precisely what is happening in *The Waterworks*.

The idealized, perspective-less female characters read as flat to many readers, myself included. Add on appropriation—taking without understanding the significance or giving credit—and a situation is created that must be remarked upon. Doctorow’s novels are important works of art, not to be cast aside. Like Marshall Bruce Gentry said “this pattern in [his] works does not give us reason to condemn” (535). Appreciating Doctorow’s novels can coincide with criticizing a tendency that many have, not just Doctorow, to appropriate. Future writers, inspired by Doctorow, may inadvertently emulate the ignorant way that he employs romance tropes (the Happily Ever After marriage, for example). Imagine, instead, books whose writers have learned to respect the contributions of popular romance fiction to the literary tradition. Such novels would be imbued with female perspectives as well as allegorical significance, and the state of fiction would be enriched.

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