

## E. L. Doctorow, *The Waterworks* (1994) – Focus Questions

MENG 6510, Eminent Writers, Fall 2017, Michael Wutz

### **The Artist**

Harry Wheelright seems to play an important role in the book, not simply because he is a friend of Martin Pemberton, and one of many of McIlvaine's sources, but for other reasons as well. Early on, McIlvaine notes that, "When not importuning dowagers for portrait commissions, Wheelright drew mutilated veterans he picked up off the street...with pointed attention to their disfigurements. I thought his drawings were the equivalent of Martin's tactless but informed reviews and cultural critiques" (4). Find additional passages that demonstrate Wheelright's possible functions in the book. Why would McIlvaine associate Wheelright's drawings with Martin's reviews? What kind of reality, or realities, does Wheelright represent? Why put in a visual artist into the verbal art of storytelling and novel writing? — You might also want to go onto the web and see what kind of artists did the kind of work Wheelright seems to be doing in the post-Civil War era.

### **Brevity & Rambling**

If telegraphy (which gave the *Telegram* its name) is a kind of technological shorthand for the truncated/cryptic dissemination of information, and if journalism is the art of communicating clearly, McIlvaine—the journalist—strays far off the mark. All his journalistic pretensions toward objectivity notwithstanding, he rambles on, finishes few sentences, and tells a story without a story—or so it seems. Doctorow creates a character who does not seem to live by the virtues of his profession: concision and brevity. I invite you think about why a novelist would create such a character and let him tell his story in such a disjointed, hopscotching fashion. What does the digressive nature of telling a/the story suggest about the story itself, its claim toward truth? How can readers, or the narrator, decide as to what is and what is not important to the story? What are some of the fundamental purposes of storytelling, more generally, regardless of whether it's told in linear/chronological or non-linear/disjointed fashion? What assumptions might readers make with a narrator who told his or her story in straightforward fashion?

### **Then and Now**

We've already suggested that novelists frequently reach back in history to make a point about contemporary conditions and issues in a culture. The very visible division between the (few) rich and (many) poor—perhaps with an ever thinning middle class—is just one of the issues that might have a parallel in the contemporary distribution of wealth in the U.S., and indeed in many western countries (including our recent dot.com millionaires). Find passages that invite comparison to issues and concerns in the present-day United States and ask yourself why Doctorow, or any other novelist, would reach back into historical precedent to highlight the

contemporary historical moment. To what degree, if any, can early 20<sup>th</sup>-century New York City be seen “as some panoramic negative print, inverted in its light and shadows” of the city in the 1870s (and the turn of the millenium.)

### **Bachelorhood, Men, and Women**

Throughout his investigative peregrinations, McIlvaine encounters numerous women that help him to unravel the mystery surrounding Martin and Augustus Pemberton’s disappearance. Emily Tisdale (Martin’s fiancée), Fanny Tolliver (whom McIlvaine considered marrying at one time), and Sarah Pemberton (Martin’s stepmother), among many others, contribute to our understanding not only of most of the male characters, but also to the way they seem to conceive of the female sex, more generally. Locate passages that show male impressions of women and see what conclusions you can draw (individually and/or as a group). What do the behavior and observations of males possibly suggest about the roles of and expectations toward women in the 1870s and beyond?

### **Orphans in the City**

Children, and particularly orphans, seem to be much in the mind of our childless (?) narrator. They appear as newspaper boys, flower girls, chimney sweeps, and in many other “professions”; they are the subject of abuse, abandonment, etc. As McIlvaine envisions Martin’s young step-brother Noah—after a protected childhood in Ravenwood—entering the city of New York, he observes: “I define modern civilization as the social failure to keep all children named. . . . Only where we have newspapers to tell us the news of ourselves . . . are children not assured of keeping their names” (ch. 11). What does Martin mean by that? Why would he be preoccupied with lost, runaway, and orphaned children, and why does he, at one point, describe them as “this surplus of a bustling democracy” (ch. 10)? Find passages in which Martin elaborates (usually, cryptically) on these issues.

### **Information Processing and Knowledge Production**

*The Waterworks* stages the building crisis in information processing and knowledge production following a booming post-bellum economy, and it offers sustained reflections (in, significantly, fictional form) on the continued epistemological role of narrative. Through the quixotic figures of a maverick detective and a fictionalizing newspaper editor, Doctorow opens a space that not only interrogates the slippery distinction between knowledge and information in a predominantly empirical culture; he also retraces the cognitive recalibrations of the human mind as effects of an urban data surplus. What evidence—in many forms—for this claim can you locate in the text?

Please come with two typed, substantial questions that invite your classmates to some further reflection. You don’t need not provide comprehensive answers to your questions, but should have given them some thought and be able to provide some perspective.