

An Analysis of Welcome to Hard Times Based on New Historicism

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Abstract: Edgar Lawrence Doctorow is one of the most eminent American post-modernist writers. He is acclaimed for his unique writing style which encompasses an innovative narration, rich detail and a seamless weaving of fiction with historical facts. In 1960, he published his first novel *Welcome to Hard Times* which is set in the 19th century American West, a period usually romanticized in literature and culture. The novel imbued with the 1960s' sense of alienation and questioning of traditional narratives, subverts the traditional genre trope and portrays the harsh realities of a life on a frontier town. This term paper aims to analyze *Welcome to Hard Times* by examining the reciprocal relationship between the novel and its historical context, employing the new historicist's principle of historicity of text and textuality of history as articulated by scholar Louis Montrose. This paper finds that Doctorow's novel not only provides a window into the historical period it depicts but also into the period in which it was written, thus embodying the reciprocal nature of literature and history that is central to new historicist thought.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to Doctorow and *Welcome to Hard Times*

Edgar Lawrence Doctorow (1931–2015) is an American novelist, editor, and professor, best known for his works of historical fiction. His debut novel, *Welcome to Hard Times*, signaled the start of a prolific career in writing. His works often weave together real historical figures with fictional characters, set against the backdrop of significant historical events. This blending of fact and fiction become a hallmark of his style.

Welcome to Hard Times is Doctorow's first novel which was published in 1960. It marks Doctorow's debut into the literary world and sets the stage for his prominent career as a writer of historical fiction. Shen You, a Chinese scholar contends that *Welcome to Hard Times* which was published in a stage when American counterculture movement was in full swing could be dubbed as one of the best work to question American history^[1]. Unchecked by the times, Doctorow's fiction is a "demonstration of his ethical concern for the other, the suppressed and the marginalized voice"^[2]. The novel is a significant departure from the traditional Western genre, offering a more critical and complex portrayal of life in the American frontier. According to Doctorow himself, this particular Western is contingently inspired after reading lots of unsatisfactory Western screenplays while working as a script reader for Columbia Pictures. Although as a New York dweller he never went to

the West. Specifically, the novel is set in the fictional town of Hard Times, a small, struggling settlement in the Dakota Territory during the American frontier period. This setting is pivotal as it reflects the harsh realities of frontier life, far from the romanticized vision often depicted in Western lore.

The story begins with the brutal destruction of the town by a malicious character known only as “The Bad Man from Bodie”. The narrative follows the efforts of the town’s mayor, Blue, as he attempts to lead town people to rebuild the community amidst fear, despair, and the constant threat of the Bad Man’s return. The narrative of *Welcome to Hard Times* is not just a story of survival against odds; it is an exploration of the human condition, a study of how individuals and communities navigate the trials and tribulations of a hostile world. Through the lens of a small, struggling town, Doctorow crafts a powerful and enduring tale of the American frontier experience.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

New historicism is a literary theory that originated in the 1980s and developed as an opposition against earlier movements like New Criticism, which emphasized a close reading of the text itself, without considering its historical and cultural context. New critics treat the text as a “well-wrought urn”^[3] which means that they consider literature to be self-contained and separated from external factors. New historicists question the demarcation of boundaries between literature and history that the new critics uphold in response but instead propose a reciprocal relationship between the text and the time it was written. New historicists not only believe that the era in which an author lives leaves an indelible mark on their work, shaping its themes, characters, and overall worldview, but they also argue that the act of writing is inseparable from the historical context. Literature, in this view, is not a static or isolated artifact but an active participant in the unfolding of history. The creation of a literary work contributes to the discourse of its time, reflecting and influencing the social, political, and cultural currents, thereby becoming an integral force in shaping historical narratives and future developments.

One of the phenomenal figures of new historicism is Louis Montrose. In his essay *Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture*, Montrose summarizes the core idea of new historicism as “a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history”^[4]. The term “the textuality of history and historicity of text” he proposed was a fundamental concept of new historicism. The concept of the textuality of history posits that history is akin to a narrative, woven and shaped by the historians and narrators who record it. This narrative construction inherently carries the biases, cultural backgrounds, and subjective viewpoints of its authors, much like a literary text reflects its writer’s perspective. On the other hand, the historicity of texts refers to the intricate and profound ways in which a literary work is shaped by its historical context. This concept goes beyond the idea that the setting or period in which a story takes place merely provides a backdrop for its characters and plot.

2. Historicity of Text: Historical Setting of the Novel

Set against the backdrop of the American West in the mid-to-late 19th century, E.L. Doctorow’s *Welcome to Hard Times* immerses the reader in a period of profound transformation and challenge. This era, marked by the fervor of the Gold Rush and the relentless drive of westward expansion, forms the vibrant tapestry upon which the novel’s narrative is intricately woven. The geographical setting, characterized by vast, untamed landscapes, from desolate plains to rugged mountains, becomes a defining force in the story, shaping the lives and destinies of its characters.

Firstly, the novel vividly represents the tremendous West Movement which was a significant and transformative era, marked by diverse groups such as miners, ranchers, outlaws, merchants, and

settlers coming to the West and converge, each seeking their version of the American Dream. The protagonist Blue is a perfect example. His words “All my life I have been moving along. I have trailed cattle from Texas to Kansas, I have whacked bulls for Russell and Waddell, I have placer mined for myself through the Black Hills, I have moved from one side of the West to the other”^[5] poignantly reflect the relentless quest for a new horizon. On top of Blue, Molly the barmaid from Kentucky, Ezra the storekeeper from Vermont and so on. They all come to the West in pursuit of a better life. Another aspect of the narrative that stands out is the rich ethnic diversity such as John Bear, an Indian doctor, Zar, a Russian merchant and the Chinagirl. The novel successfully illustrates the West as a melting pot of cultures and backgrounds, all united in their journey towards hope and opportunity. We can find its echo in real history that this period also saw an influx of immigrants from Europe and Asia, seeking escape from poverty or persecution in their homelands, and hoping to find opportunity and freedom.

Secondly, the novel captures the essence of a time driven by the pursuit of prosperity. In the mid-19th century America, numerous prospectors went to the vast and seemingly promising West lured by the siren call of gold and the potential for immense wealth, epitomized by the California Gold Rush of 1849. In the novel correspondingly, the allure of gold and the promise of land lure characters into desperate, often morally ambiguous pursuits. For example, the bad man from Bodie is one of them attracted by the gold. After he set a fire to the town, “he was well up on the trail toward the lodes, lighted for a moment by the fire down below him, picking his way through the stone and not even looking back”^[5]. Lastly, Doctorow’s portrayal of the environment itself as an unforgiving, often majestic landscapes of the West plays a crucial role in the novel. It graphically represents the real and harsh American West in the 19th century. In the first chapter of the novel, the narrator depicts Hard Times as a town located in Dakota Territory, “east, south, west—there is nothing but miles of flats”^[5]. The environment is not merely a setting but a character in its own right, influencing and interacting with the human elements of the story.

3. Textuality of history: The conflict between myth and reality

Doctorow’s *Welcome to Hard Times* serves as a poignant exploration of the textuality of history, a concept that suggests history is not merely a collection of factual recollections but a narrative shaped by human perception, bias, and cultural context. This novel, set against the backdrop of the American West, offers a fertile ground for dissecting [two pivotal aspects of this concept: the conflict between myth and reality, and the unique narrative style.

Doctorow’s depiction of the American West challenges the conventional, romanticized narrative of this era. The West is often mythologized in traditional culture and literature as a land of opportunity and adventure. For example, James Fenimore Cooper, the founding father of American frontier novel, depicts the West as a land of vast, untamed frontier, ripe for exploration and settlement especially in his *Leatherstocking Tales*. It was seen as a new world, full of natural resources and unclaimed land, offering endless possibilities for those willing to brave its challenges. The West is also a land of economic potential. From fur trading to farming, it offered new economic opportunities that were not available in the more established East.

In Doctorow’s *Welcome to Hard Times*, the West is stripped of its idyllic portrayal as a land of promise and instead emerges as a harsh and inhospitable environment for human habitation. The very name of the town, Hard Times, is emblematic of the struggle and suffering faced by its residents. “You can’t settle the coyotes, you can’t make a society out of sand. I sometimes think we’re worse than the Indians ... What is the name of this place, Hard Times” (Doctorow 247). Despite their immense effort and toil, the townspeople find their expectations unmet, leading to a gradual erosion of their faith in the West. As Doctorow poignantly illustrates, “Truth is, if the

drought don't get you and the blizzards don't get you, that's when some devil with liquor in his soul and a gun in his claw will ride you down and clean you out" ^[5]. This bleak outlook is further echoed in a conversation between Ezra and Blue, where Ezra expresses a desire to abandon *Hard Times*. He nostalgically recalls his hometown, Vermont, describing it as a place where "Water flows from the rocks, game will nibble at your back door, and if you're half a man you can make your life without too much trouble" ^[5]. Through Ezra's words, Doctorow conveys a profound sense of disillusionment with the West, as well as the looming possibility of a return to the East.

4. Conclusion

In combining these two approaches, *Welcome to Hard Times* is seen not just as a historical novel about the American West but as a text that engages with the history of its own time. It reflects the complexities and contradictions of both the era it portrays and the era in which it was written, making it a rich site for New Historicist analysis. This dual perspective underscores the novel's role in shaping and being shaped by the narratives of history, illustrating the interplay between literature, history, and culture.

References

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