

REPURPOSING ‘DISREPUTABLE GENRE MATERIALS’: E.L. DOCTOROW’S SUBVERSION OF HEGEMONIC GENDER CONFIGURATIONS IN *WELCOME TO HARD TIMES*

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ABSTRACT

Welcome to Hard Times (1960) is not a conventional Western. The novel constitutes E.L. Doctorow’s first attempt to turn what at the time was considered “disreputable genre material” into a work of fiction that could yield relevant meanings for contemporary society. This is crucially achieved through the subversion of hegemonic gender configurations in the novel. Hence, the purpose of this article is to assess the extent to which *Welcome to Hard Times* demythologizes traditional views of the West, as portrayed in the classical Western. The focus will be on the representation of gender, highlighting Doctorow’s preoccupation with identity and its artificial configuration. Thus, this paper will explore the novel’s representation of alternative models of masculinity and manliness. I will also examine its transgressive attitude towards femininity and the female voice, both at a thematic and at a structural level, as well as its denunciation of gender violence.

RESUMEN

Welcome to Hard Times (1960) no es un ‘western’ convencional. La novela constituye el primer intento por parte de E.L. Doctorow de convertir lo que en aquella época era un género desacreditado en una obra de ficción capaz de general significados de gran relevancia para la sociedad contemporánea mediante la subversión de configuraciones de género hegemónicas. Así pues, la finalidad de este artículo es evaluar hasta qué punto *Welcome to Hard Times* desmitologiza las perspectivas tradicionales sobre el Oeste Americano que el ‘western’ viene representando. La atención de este artículo se centra en la representación del género, destacando la preocupación que Doctorow muestra con cuestiones de identidad y su formación artificial. De este modo, este artículo explorará la representación que la novela hace de modelos de masculinidad y virilidad. También examinaré la actitud transgresora que la novela muestra hacia la femineidad y la voz

femenina, tanto a nivel temático como estructural, así como la denuncia de la violencia de género.

Perhaps one of the features most widely associated with the Western by the popular imagination is the representation of the male protagonist as a violent, rugged individual hero. Its female counterpart is in turn articulated as a refined, virtuous and determined defendant of love, peace and community, whose vulnerability, nevertheless, requires the use of violence by the manly hero to guarantee her protection and the continuation of life in the frontier. Weary of what he probably perceived as naïve oversimplification, E.L. Doctorow took it upon himself to turn what at the time was thought to be “disreputable genre material” (Morris 77) into a work of fiction that could yield meanings relevant to contemporary existence. This, he achieved with outstanding literary sophistication in his novel, *Welcome to Hard Times*, which inaugurated what has been termed as the ‘New Western’ or ‘Post-Western’. Published in 1960, *Welcome to Hard Times* is E.L. Doctorow’s debut novel. It has been called a minor work by some of Doctorow’s critics, probably dazzled by the bright success of later works. However, most have failed to see the novel’s extraordinary ideological and narratological value.

At its simplest, *Welcome to Hard Times* is a historical fiction set in the Dakota Territory in the 1870s, right after the discovery of gold. It deals with the destruction, rebirth and final eradication of a small frontier settlement during the colonization of the West. However, in spite of its classical setting, *Hard Times* is a highly crafted, socially-committed novel masquerading as a Western. The novel contains tales of tremendous struggle, suffering and pain, to the extent that it becomes an all-encompassing critique of individualism and selfishness. It narrates the ruination of a prostitute who suffers rape and tremendous injury at the hands of a ruthless outlaw, leaving her indelible physical and psychological scars. It relates the struggle of an old man to overcome his shame and guilt who finally sees all his hopes of building a community wrecked and faces death alone, surrounded by post-apocalyptic ruin. It depicts the physical destruction of a town that is wiped off of the surface of the earth by its own moral corruption and lack of sense of community. Most interestingly, the novel manages to convey all these stories in a well-crafted narrative style that both updates and subverts the conventions of the classical Western in order to send an important message for contemporary society, anticipating the ethical turn in literature that would take place in the late 1980s and 1990s.

This article focuses on *Welcome to Hard Times*’ representation of and attitude towards gender. The purpose is to assess the extent to which E.L. Doctorow’s novel succeeds in subverting traditional gender configurations, as portrayed in the classical Western. In what follows, I consider Doctorow’s preoccupation with the representation of alternative models of masculinity and manliness. I will also examine the novel’s transgressive attitude towards femininity

and the female voice, as well as its condemnation of gender violence and oppression.

I

I would like to start by quoting the first few words of *Welcome to Hard Times*:

The man from Bodie drank down a half bottle of the Silver Sun's best; that cleared the dust from his throat and then when Florence, who was a redhead, moved along the bar to him, he turned and grinned down at her. [...] Before she could say a word, he reached out and stuck his hand in the collar of her dress and ripped it down to her waist so that her breasts bounded out bare under the yellow light. (3)

As the reader opens *Welcome to Hard Times*, he or she is forced to confront a scene of sexual harassment. Such a first encounter with the text is deeply unsettling, leaving a rather bitter taste in the mouth and acting as a promise of immense violence. However, this opening scene is also highly relevant from a structural point of view because it establishes a number of relevant themes from the perspective of feminist literary criticism. Such analysis will hopefully offer interesting insights into the novel's ideology and function.

Welcome to Hard Times engages into discussion of gender models and roles, which as I will argue, becomes a key element in Doctorow subversion and reworking of the genre of the Western.¹ This becomes particularly evident, first of all, through the conflicting references to masculinity and maleness that pervade the novel. Hearing Florence's screams while she is being savagely raped, the men who are gathered in the saloon can only marvel at the Bad Man's sexual prowess, and mistaking her wails for orgasm they jealously wonder "what kind of man it was who could make her scream" (4). As this quote suggests, masculinity is measured by most of the male inhabitants of Hard Times in a man's ability to make himself respected through the use of force, hold his liquor and perform sexually. Such views of masculinity effectively place the saloon and its prostitutes at the center of male life in the Frontier.

A similar attitude seems to be held by Molly Riordan. Molly is the other prostitute in the old saloon, and by the end of the first chapter she will have been savagely raped and burned almost to death by the Bad Man, becoming one of the only survivors left in the town, together with the narrator Blue, the newly orphaned boy Jimmy, and the supposedly deaf-mute Native-American John Bear. Molly represents the most visible and overtly polarized attitude towards masculinity in the novel. For her, bravery and the skillful use of weapons are the only features that

¹ Numerous critics have focused on the novel's successful subversion of the traditional western (see for example, Bakker 1984 and 1985; Bevilacqua 1989 and 1990; Freese 1987; Kusnir 2004; Jaupaj and Shumeli 2012). However, none of them has focused specifically on how the novel deploys issues of gender representation and oppression as a further tool to subvert the classical conventions of the genre.

qualify a man as such. It is, in fact, worth pointing out that, in her understanding of gender identity, manhood—the state of being an adult male—and masculinity—roughly the set of socially-constructed attributes, behaviors and roles generally associated to men—amount to having the courage to defend women, or roughly what has traditionally been termed “manliness”. And so, when the barman Avery forces her to go to the saloon to get rid of the Bad Man for him, she complains to Blue in such terms: “[h]e’s some man, isn’t he Blue?” (9). Paradoxically, for Molly the only real *men* in town seem to be the Bad Man, and later on the shooter Jenks, whose arrival in *Hard Times* becomes the perfect excuse to tease Blue for what she perceives as his previous cowardice: “‘I thank you, Mr. Jenks’, Molly said looking my way, ‘It’s good to find a man in these parts. I wish the Lord my husband knew the gun the way you do!’” (74).

It is precisely through humiliating comments like those that Molly exerts her revenge against Blue for his failure or unwillingness to spare her the suffering at the hands of the Bad Man. Interestingly, however, she perceives it as his duty not because of their shared humanity, but because of his biological sex. Thus, throughout the narrative, Blue dutifully reports Molly’s constant rebukes, in which she associates his supposed cowardice not with a defect in his ability to empathize, but with a defective maleness: “Christ that Bad Man’s the only man in town! [...] using a lady, for God’s sake, marching brave behind a lady’s skirts” (16).

In short, the different attitudes towards masculinity that the inhabitants of *Hard Times* deploy correspond to a very traditional view of gender models, a view that was certainly the hegemonic one at the time of the narrative, remained so at the time of the novel’s publication, and arguably is still in force in many circles nowadays.

Interestingly for the purposes of the present article, the characterization of the novel’s narrator and protagonist actively rejects such hegemonic understanding of masculinity. Thus, in a classical Western Mayor Blue would naturally stand for the novel’s hero and main representative of Good who will ultimately be forced to fight Evil as embodied by the novel’s villain, The Bad Man from Bodie, in order to defend the main female protagonist, Molly, and assure the supremacy of civilization on the Frontier. But that is certainly not the case in *Welcome to Hard Times*. When confronted with the crucial frontier crisis—civilization threatened by the wilderness and Good threatened by Evil, a crisis here represented by the arrival of the Bad Man—Blue is unable to respond according to the ethos of violent heroism. Unlike the prototypical hero, he lacks skill in handling guns, shows fear, and runs away, abandoning Molly to her fate (Bevilacqua, “Revision” 84).

In opposition to the traditional manly hero of the classical Western, Blue represents a much more ambiguous, problematic or even enlightened attitude towards gender models, voicing the novel’s preoccupation with gender categories and their artificial social articulation. And so, Blue actively confronts Molly’s and

the rest of the town’s views of hegemonic masculinity: “[w]ere you any good with a gun Mayor maybe you could teach the boy some manliness’. ‘That’s not Manliness’” (153).² Thus, Blue’s rejection of weapons and the violence they stand for may be interpreted as a symbol of his progressive view of masculinity. Major Blue seems to be convinced that it is possible to build a community in the wilderness without the use of violence, by means of cooperation, communication and neighborly behavior. He maintains that only a harmoniously functioning community based on ties of respect, empathy, and mutual help can engender social health for the town as well as protect it from outside threats. This can be seen in Blue’s attempts to educate Jimmy into his own values and save him from Molly’s obsession with revenge: “‘probably your Pa did only one shameful thing in his life and that was to rush in after Turner.’ [...] ‘That was the one time he was no example to you. He went in there to get himself killed’” (165). Jimmy, however, in spite of his age, has already internalized the dominant image of masculinity, becoming Blue’s greatest failure in the novel. As a surrogate father, Blue regrets having missed his opportunity to imprint his progressive and anti-essentialist views of gender into the mind of *Hard Times*’s only child. Jimmy makes the deadshot Jenks his role model instead, and consequently ends up becoming “another Bad Man from Bodie” (211).

It is also worth pointing out that Blue stands for the artist/writer/historian in the novel, a figure that will recur throughout most of Doctorow’s oeuvre.³ Not surprisingly, there is much emphasis in *Welcome to Hard Times* on Blue’s ease with words and ability to influence, or even manipulate, people. It is with words that he manages to coax several potential settlers to stay and help him rebuild the town, which he achieves by means of what he calls “some powerful talking” (82). His greatest success, however, is with Molly, who frequently asks him to take her away before the Bad Man returns and whom he coaxes with empty promises of safety until she eventually surrenders to her fate: “[o]h lord’ she wailed, ‘Oh Jesus God, spare me from this man, this talker—’” (150). As a result, Blue may be said to represent a view of masculinity that rejects the use of weapons in favor of communication, which is tightly connected to his preoccupation with building a community.

² The phallic symbolism of the gun, which has traditionally been perceived as an extension of the penis and thus a mark of manliness, could not have escaped E.L. Doctorow through his early knowledge of Freudian psychology. Such association also brings to mind Lacan’s notion of the masculine “parade” of virility—the male equivalent of the feminine masquerade (see footnote 6)— through which men attempt to approximate the phallic function, and how such display may force them into an overidentification with the male function, with the image of their sexuality (Dean 83).

³ In fact, as it happens with most of Doctorow’s novels, we are supposed to be reading the account of the events that the narrator Blue has written at his deathbed. The novel’s self-reflexive concerns have been explored by a number of critics of the novel, most remarkably by Bevilacqua (1989) and Jaupaj (2008).

However, this alternative view of masculinity that Blue represents and strives to defend is not stable or unproblematic; after all, it is only madmen and visionaries who succeed in going against the pervasive ideology of their society. It becomes apparent as the narrative progresses that Blue is tormented by the shame of being what everyone else considers a coward, unable to use his gun and face the Bad Man. As he puts it, “now the saying is common that Sam Colt made men equal [...] Colt gave every man a gun, but you have to squeeze the trigger for yourself” (32). Even with his gun drawn, he is perceived as harmless by the inhabitants of Hard Times, which vexes him deeply. Blue’s shame is tightly connected to the guilt that he feels for not being able to confront the Bad Man and save Molly. In short, in *Welcome to Hard Times*, Doctorow is extremely critical of the ways in which patriarchy teaches men to pursue unhealthy, hegemonic expectations of masculinity that are harmful not merely to women, but also to men in perhaps less obvious ways. The novel also denounces the role that many women play as necessary collaborators in the perpetuation of hegemonic patriarchal configurations.

II

Another way in which traditional gender configurations shape the world of *Welcome to Hard Times* and are subverted by it is through the depiction of gender oppression and violence in the Frontier. The most evident perpetrator of gender violence in the novel is Clay Turner, dubbed the Bad Man from Bodie. As explained above, the very first glimpse that the reader has of Hard Times is a scene of sexual harassment against the saloon girl Florence, which before long will result in her violent death. And so, the reader is forced to witness the image of “Florence bent over the upstairs railing, bare, with her arms dangling and her red hair falling down between them” (17). Molly too is subjected to extreme violence at the hands of the Bad Man, barely surviving brutal rape and severe burns all through her body. Towards the end of the novel Mae, one of the new prostitutes, will have become Turner’s new victim, and the reader will be once again forced to witness a scene of extreme violence: Mae’s body “lying across the table, her dress pulled up around her neck. Her skull is broken and her teeth scattered on the table and on the floor” (211).

However, it is not merely at the hands of Turner that the female characters suffer violence; many of the male members of the community soon reveal themselves to be cruel agents of female oppression. When the Bad Man takes over the saloon during his first coming, Molly is forced by her “employer” Avery to go back there and try to get rid of him in order that she saves his business, knowing that she is most likely going to get “ripped open” (9). To convince her, Avery does not hesitate to use violence, and knowing that Florence has just been killed, he forces Molly to face a similar fate: “we heard Avery yelling with a laugh in his voice. ‘Molly! Moll-y-y! [...] Molly where are you, gentleman here wants to see you’”

(15). Even Blue to a certain extent, by refusing to help Molly escape and by pushing her through the saloon doors, in effect becomes Turner’s accomplice and collaborator.

Such unsympathetic attitude towards the female sex is brought to the extreme by the character of Zar, a Russian pimp who rides the Great Plains looking for a town to establish his business. His only interest is profit and his experience has taught him that the most profitable goods in the West are alcohol and women, to whom he refers as “beef”:

Frand... I come West to farm... but soon I learn, I see... farmers starve... only people who sell farmers their land, their fence, their seed, their tools... only these people are rich. And is that way with everything...not miners have gold but salesmen of burros and picks and pans... not cowboys have money but saloons who sell to them their drinks [...] So I sell my farm... and I think... what need is there more than seed, more even than whiskey or cards is need for Women (63-4).

Thus, Zar represents an attitude towards the female body as a mere commodity that may be bought and sold.⁴ He becomes a *de facto* owner of his women, since he holds the money that the prostitutes make, ensuring their dependence. In the case of one of Zar’s women, a teenage Chinese girl, this is literally so, since we learn that he bought her from a man who pretended to be her father, and later allows one of the miners to take her as a wife for the sum of \$300 and a promise to find another woman as a replacement in the saloon. Therefore, it is no wonder that he refers to his prostitutes as his “prize herd” (40) and is consequently disappointed when Blue refuses to accept sexual intercourse with them in exchange for Zar’s use of the town’s well water. After all, “the ladies were his stock in trade” (40). This is precisely the kind of agreement that he reaches with the shooter Jenks, exchanging the animal flesh that he hunts for the human flesh of his prostitutes.

In addition, Zar’s women are subjected to a humiliating treatment that reinforces their submission and powerlessness. And so, the reader is admitted to spy into the saloon on a Saturday night, while the Chinese girl offers drinks to the miners on her knees to their delight (50). On top of that, Zar does not hesitate to use violence to subdue the prostitutes: “‘I say what we do, no one else!’ Zar was shouting. And to make his point he was kicking Mae as she tried to get up” (57). In fact, references to violence towards them pervade the novel: “[t]he Russian was drinking up his own stock and it made him mean. He knocked a tooth out of the tall girl Jessie’s mouth and on one occasion Miss Adah had to put him to sleep with a stick, he was going at the Chinagirl so” (108). Women are, therefore, presented as having no other choice than to comply. This seems to be the case of Mrs. Clemens,

⁴ A similar point has been relevantly made by Tokarczyk, who connects Zar’s opportunism with the Marxist concept that capitalism supports itself on the creation of false needs (50).

the “sad grey-haired woman, full of sags” (135) that is brought to replace the Chinese girl. Mrs. Clemens is presumably an old widow, who finding no other means to support herself in the inhospitable West is forced to find the “protection” of a pimp and become a prostitute in exchange for a bed and food. It is worth pointing out that the prostitutes do not submit without fighting; but their attempts to have their opinions considered and their rights respected inevitably end up in physical violence against them, which assures their passivity.

Thus, with *Welcome to Hard Times*, Doctorow arguably inaugurates a complex engagement with gender violence and oppression. The novel paints an extremely bleak picture of the model of production and consumption in the frontier where the physical exploitation of women is the primary and most profitable economic activity.⁵ Finally, the novel presents a model of gender interaction that is characterized by unlimited male control over, and disregard for, female liberty and well-being, to the extent that there seems to be a refusal to extend the recognition of shared humanity to women.

III

The question now is whether there is enough evidence to support the claim that the novel’s depiction of gender oppression and violence has an ethical grounding; in other words, whether it is possible to argue that *Welcome to Hard Times* seeks to denounce such model of gender domination and does not merely depict it for the sake of dramatic effect. This task is somewhat more complex to accomplish than demonstrating how the novel debunks hegemonic views of masculinity, as argued above, because none of the characters engage into open criticism of gender violence and commodification of the female body, as arguably is the case with Blue’s open questioning of traditional views of masculinity. However, it is this article’s contention that the model of gender subordination and violence depicted in the novel does not go unchallenged, and it is precisely through the character of Molly that such criticism is achieved. In what follows I will attempt to show how.

To begin with, it is worth highlighting the fact that the character of Molly in no way resembles the virtuous heroine that would frequently appear in the classical Western. She would traditionally be a sophisticated easterner or a spirited rancher’s daughter who would exemplify the virtuous morals of the good community (Bevilacqua, “Revision” 85). Adopting a discourse of love and forgiveness, she would speak out against violence and against the idea that human conflicts can only be solved by the use of force. She would also be the representative of communal

⁵ Many critics have understood the novel’s revision of the western as a critique of capitalism and its individualistic ethos, even though none of them focuses explicitly on the subordination of women as a necessary dimension of it (see for example, Shelton 1983; Bakker 1985; Gross 1983; Cooper 1993; van der Merwe 2007; Jaupaj & Shumeli 2012).

solidarity, and of peaceful life on the frontier. As explained above, clearly diverging from such characterization, Molly is a prostitute whose violent encounter with the Bad Man causes her to sustain long-lasting physical and psychological scars. Molly's traumatic experience transforms her into a mean, cruel, manipulative woman whose sole reason to live is taking revenge on the man who caused her such tremendous pain, regardless of what harm her desperate need for retribution may bring on others. This leads Blue to acknowledge that "the woman in John Bear's shack was no longer Molly. What had happened in Avery's saloon could never be undone" (36). In addition, far from representing the values of community, her previous traumatic experience also impairs her capacity to relate to those around her, rendering her incapable of ever establishing normal affective communal bonds: "[s]he would take no part in the life on the street [...]" (151); "It was as if each person coming to town was taking away a little more of her air to breathe" (157).

Granted that just as Molly participates in the perpetuation of hegemonic views of masculinity, she paradoxically becomes a key collaborator in the oppressive gender system of which she is a victim. In that sense, it is worth examining Molly's willing endorsement of her role as Blue's wife to begin with. After the first coming of the Bad Man, she becomes Blue's common-law wife and is accepted as such by the new settlers. This change of social status places her in a completely different position to that of the newly arrived prostitutes, who upon learning that she is Blue's wife, quickly go from calling her names like "Madam Bitch" and "Lady Bacon Ass" to sympathizing with her suffering: "poor woman, gettin' burned that way it's no wonder she ain't herself" (62). As Blue ponders, "[...] there is nothing that a whore will respect more than a married woman" (60-1). Molly, on the contrary, scorns the new prostitutes and treats them deplorably, mirroring male oppression. She is clearly oblivious to her own previous status and indifferent to their shared condition as women in a deeply patriarchal society.

Similarly, after symbolically achieving the status of a married woman, Molly's behavior reflects her own hegemonic understanding of how to perform gender roles and her illusory sense of empowerment. This manifests itself in a number of attitudes, such as a new embrace of religion and her artificial assimilation of "ladylike" manners: "[s]he held up her hand, very ladylike, and smiled and shook her head. She had drunk her share in the old days [...]" but it gave her more pleasure to refuse, it set her apart from the ladies although she knew them better than they thought she did" (103). Finally, Molly's desperate obsession with securing the protection of a manly man that will save her from the Bad Man, in effect constitutes a reaffirmation of the traditional understanding of women as 'the weaker sex' and a reinforcement of the dichotomies masculinity-femininity / strength-weakness that pervade the cultural imagination of this fictional town.

Nevertheless, and this is the key issue, the character of Molly at the same time constitutes the novel's most important tool to challenge and subvert the

hegemonic model of gender domination, which is achieved in three different ways. First of all, it is through Molly's change of status from prostitute to wife, through her self-delusion, that the implied author forces us to reflect on the intrinsic similarities between both roles, particularly in terms of power. Her sense of empowerment is nothing short of chimerical, since as a wife she has not really achieved independence—economical or otherwise—and cannot even decide her own future, despite wanting to leave *Hard Times* as soon as she recovers. What Molly fails to understand is that her willing progression from the position of the prostitute to that of the wife does not necessarily constitute an act of empowerment; she has merely moved to the other possible slot allotted to women in her society, thus remaining trapped in the patriarchal system of production and consumption that supports itself on the submission of women and that has been imported into the Frontier by the settlers. As Blue ponders: “she turned, little by little, so compliant, that I felt I was some duplicate Bad Man taking his pleasure” (158). Thus, in such understanding of gender relations in the West, the novel highlights the fact that there are few differences between the ways in which a client, a rapist and a husband *use* the female body in patriarchal societies based on female submission and disempowerment.

Secondly, Molly's artificial adoption of the manners and attitudes that she understands befit a married woman—that is, her artificial performance of femininity—suggests a far from innocent representation of sexual identity in the novel as mimicry, as a masquerade.⁶ Such depiction points to Doctorow's understanding of gender models as culturally shaped rather than biologically determined, thus anticipating later developments in gender theory that would expose femininity as a social construct that may be performed regardless of biological sex.

Finally, in spite of Molly's apparent conservative attitude towards gender and her willing submission to the capitalistic model of sexual domination that the novel depicts, it is paradoxically undeniable that she shows a defiant and resolute attitude towards men. This is particularly evident in her abusive relationship with Blue after the town starts to grow again, as well as through her skillful manipulation of Jenks and especially Jimmy, turning them all into instruments to achieve her final revenge on the Bad Man. Indeed, Jimmy is completely bewitched by Molly's influence, to the point of being “doggish” to her; after a thorough training for the Bad Man, he becomes “a proper mount for her own ride to Hell” (160). Blue, cowed by Molly's never-ending scorn and his own guilt, acts as “Molly's final fool” (202)

⁶ We owe the concept of the mask to Jean Riviere's psychoanalytic paper “Womanliness as a Masquerade” (1929). Riviere was the first to present femininity, which she calls “womanliness”, as a mask that may be worn by women, an idea that was later on taken up by Lacan as part of his exploration of female sexuality in “The Signification of the Phallus” (583). A similar understanding of gender was defended by the French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir, whose formulation in *The Second Sex* that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (267) was subsequently reconsidered by feminist critics such as Judith Butler (1990) to forward an anti-essentialist view of gender as a cultural performance.

by going after the Bad Man during his second coming, thus forsaking his rejection of the use of violence and his enlightened understanding of its futility. Finally, Jenks is presented as nothing short of a puppet, ready to risk a sure death at the hands of Turner over Molly’s sexual promises: “Jenks, get him for me, you’ve got to get him, you have a hankerin’ don’t you Jenks, I’ve seen it, a woman can tell. Get him and I’ll go with you anywhere, I’ll be your natural wife, anything you please, I swear—” (186). Thus, Molly uses her sexuality as a tool to achieve her aims, which paradoxically may be seen as a reversal of the traditional model of sexual domination. Some clarification seems in order at this point. A statement such as this may no doubt appear controversial in the light of many feminist critics’ problematic attitude towards women’s deployment of their sexuality for particular purposes, which has been generally perceived as an instance of self-victimization or self-submission. Yet, it is possible to claim that in a society like the one depicted by *Welcome to Hard Times*—where women’s sole value is in their sexuality (as prostitutes or mothers)—sexuality paradoxically appears to be the only path towards empowerment. In that sense, it is worth quoting Doctorow’s words in an interview, where he explains that he is concerned with “sex as power, either perhaps using sex as a metaphor for political relations, or helplessly annotating what passes for sex in a society that suffers paternalistic distortions” (Friedl & Schulz 121).⁷

Molly’s empowerment endows her voice with a prominence that deserves further examination, because it raises relevant questions about the role of the female voice in the novel. In this respect, this article follows the lead of Marshall B. Gentry, who in his article “Ventriloquists’ Conversations” (1993) explores Doctorow’s degree of success in relaxing male control over his novels and opening them up to the voices of women. In the only critical attempt to approach issues of gender in the novel, Gentry thus concludes that, in *Welcome to Hard Times*, Doctorow overcomes ventriloquism to give expression to a powerful, believable female voice that succeeds in telling her own story over the male narrator’s own voice (132).

Taking up the argument where Gentry drops it, it is this paper’s contention that Molly’s voice is central to the narrative from a structural perspective: first of all, as one reads the novel it becomes obvious that what Molly says, does, and is supposed to be thinking engage most of Blue’s efforts to render the story of *Hard Times*. In that sense, it is possible to claim that Molly’s voice plays a key role in advancing the narrative process. In fact, towards the end of the narrative her voice even seems to take over that of Blue at some points, almost usurping the position of

⁷ Such preoccupation with sex as power may be seen as a key element of Doctorow’s literary project, since Molly may be seen as a precursor of later characters such as Susan Isaacson (*The Book of Daniel*), Evelyn Nesbit (*Ragtime*) and even Drew Preston (*Billy Bathgate*). Susan, for instance, uses her sexuality to exert power over her older brother, who seems to be obsessed with it in very complex ways. Nesbit equally exploits her sexual power over some men to rise from rags to riches. However, Nesbit, like Molly to a certain extent, may be seen as an oxymoronic symbol of female empowerment and simultaneous subjection.

central consciousness behind the novel's narration (186). Secondly, Molly's voice frequently challenges Blue's narrative authority, providing commentary for his actions and motives, and paradoxically fulfilling the role of a sort of mediator between narrator and reader. Thus, for example, she bares Blue's obsession with coaxing new settlers to stay for what it is: "you'll rope in every damn fool you can just to make up a herd. There's surety in numbers, ain't that what you think?" (84). Therefore it becomes obvious that her voice succeeds in escaping Blue's (male) narrative control.

Blue, however, is not unaware of Molly's tremendous power over what is supposed to be his own narration, and at the beginning of the third ledger, he even voices his recognition of Molly's control over the course of events: "I think Molly, Molly, Molly and she is the time, turning in her phases like the moon [...] Molly, could you really know what was coming? Or did it come because you knew it? Were you smarter than the life, or did the life depend on you?" (147). Finally, Molly's general understanding of events and of the nature of evil proves to be more accurate than Blue's, whose optimism and endless hope for a better future are finally exposed as foolishness and self-delusion at the end of the novel. A similar point has been aptly made by Tokarczyk, who has argued that "Molly represents a hard-edged, realistic alternative to men who are idealistic or dreamy" (55). In other words, Molly's voice acts as the novel's most reliable source of information with regard to the real nature of events, while Blue's hopefulness and need to "go with the [good] signs" (129) prove to be an impossible utopia. Such acts of narrative empowerment can only stop with her death at the hands of Jimmy, leaving Blue to recount the dead as he approaches his own end, enveloped by the town's "mortal stench" (212).

Molly's female voice⁸ is allowed to resonate so clearly and powerfully that it almost appears to come through unmediated by the narrator's own consciousness. Thus, *Welcome to Hard Times* becomes a site for gender dialogue in a Bakhtinian sense of the term, since it too presents to a certain extent "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (Bakhtin 6). The novel may be, therefore, understood as a gender-conscious heteroglossic text in two different ways. On the one hand, in spite of featuring a male narratorial voice, the narration actually leaves sufficient room for the cohabitation and interaction of a female voice that challenges the narrator's discursive authority. On the other hand, *Hard Times* reveals itself as a polyphonic—i.e. multi-voiced—text at a more structural level, in that it facilitates a dialogic disharmonized reading that disrupts and subverts patriarchal configurations.⁹

⁸ The term is used in a Bakhtinian sense (1981) to refer to the female voice that challenges the novel's authoritative (male) discourse as represented by Blue, regardless of the characters' ideology.

⁹ In this context, it is particularly surprising to find that the critic John G. Parks pays no attention whatsoever to *Welcome to Hard Times* in his article "The Politics of Polyphony" (1991), where he allegedly approaches Doctorow's fiction from a Bakhtinian perspective.

To sum up, Molly's powerful voice and her empowerment proves the novel's commitment to gender issues, since it allows *Welcome to Hard Times* to make a feminist statement in spite of the main female character herself. This analysis suggests that the novel not only incorporates themes but also forms compatible with feminism. Thus, Molly at once becomes a key collaborator in the patriarchal model of female subordination and the novel's main tool to denounce and subvert it at a structural level, which certainly points to Doctorow's remarkable skill as a writer.

IV

As I hope this article has shown, E.L. Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times* succeeds in disrupting and subverting long-time fixed images of masculinity and femininity in the classical Western, seeking to demythologize the vision of the West as a key factor in the creation of American exceptionalism and sending an important ethical message for contemporary readers. The novel defends an alternative understanding of gender identity and denounces the prevailing model of gender domination and violence. Its pages undermine the capitalistic model of society that supports itself on patriarchal gender configurations of production and consumption. Doctorow uses the Western, the quintessentially manly genre to subvert and debunk such views, in this way anticipating much later socio-political movements. Thus, issues of masculinity and femininity, of violence, gender dialogue and narrative power-struggle play a central role in the novel's revision of the traditional Western and its stock characters. Furthermore, with *Welcome to Hard Times*, Doctorow pioneers a bleak view of human nature and social and gender relations on the frontier, which in the novel functions as a metaphor for contemporary society. Thus, the novel deals fundamentally with the social impact of power relations.

Welcome to Hard Times inaugurates a complex engagement with, and denunciation of hegemonic gender configurations and gender violence and oppression. Such preoccupation will accompany Doctorow all through his career as a writer, becoming a key element in his ongoing ethical literary project. In the case of *Hard Times*, the writer has managed to turn a more or less conventional tale of a western town into a tool to debunk essentialist views on gender and denounce sexual oppression through the creation of a polyphonic text that rejects the rule of the either/or.

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