The Waterworks Short Guide

The Waterworks by E. L. Doctorow

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Characters

There are shadowy characters in keeping with the mystery of Doctorow's novel, The Waterworks, and more conventional figures in pursuit of the elusive villains. The evil genius of the book is Dr. Sartorius who has convinced the corrupt authorities of New York to convert a waterworks facility into a laboratory for medical experiments on rich old men. Dr. Sartorius, however, is only revealed in person near the end of the novel. Even then it is not clear if he should be acknowledged for his "pure scientific temperament," or rejected as "criminally insane."

One of the old men kept in limbo between life and death is Augustus Pemberton. Despite the early reports of his ghostlike appearance beyond the grave, there is nothing ambiguous about the moral status of this character. His fortune comes from slave ships and war profiteering. He even disinherits his own family to buy his way into the club of immortals at the waterworks.

His son, Martin Pemberton, has long known about the record of greed and guilt, but still is not prepared for the vanity and deceit of his father trying to outwit death. Martin is an honest young man, who feels haunted by the supposedly dead father, finds himself kidnapped by the agents of Sartorius, and survives captivity in the orphanage as well as the waterworks. Despite his penetration to the heart of the conspiracy, however, and his profession as a free lance writer, Martin is not used by Doctorow to narrate the novel.

The role of narrator, instead, is given to Martin's boss, Mr. McIlvaine, who edits the evening Telegram in New York City. Every detail of the story must come through his recollection, but this narrator is the most shadowy figure of all. Just when or why he feels the need to tell the story remains unclear. McIlvaine's position as editor of a paper means that his finger must be on the pulse of the city, but he loses the job halfway through the novel, and his life gradually turns into the story to be reported.

Social Concerns/Themes

Doctorow's novel reads more like a mystery novel than any of his earlier works. The action takes place in New York City not long after the Civil War, but the events are recalled by a narrator/character several years later. New York in the 1870s is portrayed as a city in the grip of sinister forces: the political machine of Boss Tweed, the selfish greed of robber baron capitalists, and the ingenious plot of a mad scientist.

The mystery involves the disappearance of a free lance writer after he tells of seeing his supposedly dead and buried father being driven up Broadway with several old men dressed in black. Detective work then reveals the corpse of a child in the father's grave, a family that did not receive the fortune of the "deceased," and a new orphanage in the city with children who have an unexpected reason to be frightened. The orphans are being used in medical experiments to prolong the lives of vain old men who have secretly given their money to a strange doctor in the hopes of outwitting death.

The mystery is solved by the narrator and a police captain who are ready and willing to explore the underworld of the city. The sinister forces in this novel, however, turn out to be connected with the highest levels of political and economic power. Doctorow thus exposes the myth of progress in America after the Civil War. The advances of medical science made during the war have fueled the ambition of a mad doctor, and vast fortunes from war profiteering have fed the vain dreams of immortality. Doctorow thus looks again at the roots of pride and greed in American history.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Doctorow's interest in narrative experimentation is evident again in The Waterworks. This time, however, the point of view is not a recollection of childhood as it was in Ragtime (1975), World's Fair (1985), and Billy Bathgate (1989), but a retrospective of adult experience by an old man. The motives of the narrator may therefore resemble the vanity of the men who seek immortality from the mad doctor, and the reader often wonders if the story is not being told from the limbo of the waterworks.

Doctorow's focus on a particular time and place in American history also demonstrates again his inclination and talent for historical fiction. Just as he used newspaper accounts for many details in Ragtime, Doctorow provides a very realistic setting for The Waterworks. By creating a narrator who is the editor of a newspaper, direct access is possible to the social and political life of the city. For this kind of historical fiction, Doctorow not only builds upon the tradition of his own work, but also a literary precedent such as the reporting of news in John Dos Passos's U.S.A.

(1938).

The kind of historical fiction written by Doctorow typically focuses on a period of American history where the social and political changes are most dramatic. Ragtime and World's Fair are therefore set in decades about to explode into the chaos of world war, and The Waterworks takes place as America is reshaped in the aftermath of the Civil War.

Doctorow's literary technique for The Waterworks also owes much to the tradition of mystery and detective fiction.

He knows, for example, how to build suspense by dropping hints about the secret of the waterworks, allowing the police captain to slowly unravel the mystery, and keeping the mad scientist hidden until the end. Credit is often given to Edgar Allan Poe for the basic design of such fiction. The narrator in "The Purloined Letter" (1844), for example, is also a friend of the detective, and suspense is increased until the mystery is solved.

The influence of Poe's work is also evident in the gothic elements of Doctorow's novel. Although The Waterworks is not exactly a ghost story, the unexpected sighting of men who are supposed to be dead invokes the mystery and darkness typical of gothic fiction.

The same tradition as practiced by Mary Shelley in Frankenstein (1818) is the likely source for the secret laboratory of Dr. Sartorius. The success of Doctorow's novel thus depends upon an unusual combination of realistic and gothic elements to create a nightmare world of American history.

Key Questions

Questions about the mixture of history and fiction are again apropos for a discussion of The Waterworks.

Some consideration of its gothic elements may also provoke an exchange of ideas. A lively debate, however, is most apt to result from a challenge to the moral ambiguity of a character like Sartorius. Or a challenge to the reliability of the narrator.

1. What vision of America after the Civil War does the author present in The Waterworks?

2. What perspective does McIlvaine bring to his narration? When he says, "you suffer the story you tell," what should the reader infer about his objectivity?

3. How are elements of gothic and realistic fiction combined in The Waterworks?

4. Is there enough suspense to hold a reader's attention until the mystery is solved? How successful is Doctorow's foreshadowing of the climax?

5. What is the appropriate response to the character of Dr. Sartorius? Does he have a "pure scientific temperament" or a mind that renders him "criminally insane"?

6. Why is the laboratory of Dr. Sartorius located in the waterworks structure? What does that combination symbolize for Doctorow about the way technology shapes an American past and future?

Related Titles

Doctorow used the title of this novel a decade earlier for a very brief tale in Lives of the Poets (1984). In four pages Doctorow has a narrator watch a sinister figure take the body of a drowned boy away form the waterworks. Not only is this prior sketch the germ of the novel, but Doctorow includes it almost word for word in a late chapter of The Waterworks. Here it appears as a nightmare vision of Sartorius, but the narrator wonders if the dream is not a glimpse into "a companion life . . .

running parallel in time." If three or four pages from Lives of the Poets can reappear like a ghost in The Waterworks, perhaps all of Doctorow's stories are still running parallel in time in the mind of their creator.

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