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**Subject:**

**A Foucauldian Study of *Billy Bathgate* by E. L. Doctorow**

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***In the Name of the Most Compassionate***

**To**  
***My Dear Family***

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## Abstract

Among the world's literary figures, E.L. Doctorow is undoubtedly a great author whose works have won him worldwide acclaim and global audience. The present study aims at analyzing *Billy Bathgate*, one of his works, from the perspective of Michel Foucault's critical ideas and theories. The study consists of five chapters. Besides the chapters of introduction and conclusion, this thesis discusses the subject in three main chapters. The second chapter presents Foucault's ideas concerning power, panopticism, his definition of resistance and "care of the self", the relationship between power and knowledge and also his definition of discourse followed by a part about discourse of madness. The third chapter opens by a brief explanation about the historical instance in which the novel was written and also about the construction and rise of gangs and organized crime due to the atmosphere of gangsterism in the story, then the next parts discuss the notions of power and discourse in the novel. The fourth chapter discusses the notion of resistance to power and its norms in the course of the novel. Then there is the analysis of the two main protagonists of the novel in terms of their possibilities of resistance and of trying different modes of being a "self". And the last part attempts to discuss the notion of history regarding the narration of the novel. The concluding chapter presents the findings of this research. It concludes that Foucault and Doctorow have some affinities in their lines of thought on power; power is not a "possession" in the hands of one person but circulates throughout the society. Moreover, discourses provide mental frames for people of society and in the story what prevails is the economic discourse; but not all yield to power and the discourses at work and everybody has got the potentiality to resist. According to Foucault the best way of resistance is to use one's agency in order to make an "ethical self". As it is found out, only one of the main characters of the story succeeds in this process. And what is more is that not all of the characters are "real-life" personages but Doctorow has merged fiction in to reality in order to bridge the gaps existing in history.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### ***1.1. General Background***

E. L. Doctorow is widely regarded as one of America's prominent novelists of the 20th Century. On a shortlist that might also include Philip Roth, Toni Morrison, John Updike, Saul Bellow, and Don DeLillo, E. L. Doctorow is generally considered to be among the most gifted, ambitious, and admired novelists of the second half of the twentieth century, long celebrated for his vivid evocations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American life. His work is philosophically inquisitive, employing an audacious prose style, and using historical and quasi-historical figures, circumstances, and settings alongside with imaginary ones. Taken as a whole, his oeuvres stake out an American vision that is weird, distinctive, often unsettling, but at the same time splendidly colorful, consummately human.

Edgar Laurence Doctorow, named after Edgar Allan Poe, was born on January 6, 1931 in the Bronx, New York, during the Depression that also looms so important throughout his works. As Fowler puts it, Doctorow's home was full of literary, intellectual, and



political discussion. Both Doctorow and his older brother had the desire of being novelists. "I always knew that writing was my calling", Doctorow told Time magazine. After finishing grade school, Doctorow went to Bronx High School of Science. He then enrolled at Kenyon College in Ohio that was known to be a center of literary study. In 1952, He graduated from that college with a major in philosophy where he studied with John Crewe Ransom and then attended Columbia University where he met his wife. After serving in the army he got a job as an "expert reader" for Columbia Pictures. There he was supposed to read a novel a day and write a critique for evaluating its cinematic potential. Doctorow recognized that this position gave him intuitions into the structure and pacing of genre novels that he would later use in his own writing (*Understanding E. L. Doctorow* 2-4).

In 1959 he became the editor for New American library and, started writing fiction in his spare time. Doctorow's first novel, *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960), a linear first person Western which has also been called a dystopian novel and an American parable was favored by the critics. After getting the post of chief editor at Dial Press, he finished his second novel, *Big as Life* (1966) a work of science fiction, which did not get a good critical perception and was withdrawn from print by Doctorow himself. Working there gave him the chance to cooperate with some of the most talented authors of the time but he quit this position in order to finish his third novel, *The Book of Daniel* (1971). It was his first "non-genre" novel about the son of two executed Communist spies, about whom Doctorow made extensive research. The hard work was rewarded by the universal praise and a National Book Award. It took him four years to write his next novel but it was found worth the wait. *Ragtime* (1975) included a number of interrelated story lines, depicting both real-life and imaginary characters. It was another success which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for him. His next novel, *Loon Lake*

(1980), a mixture of blank verse and prose moves abruptly back and forth between first and third person and ends with the protagonist's resume, once again took him back to historical fiction . His next book, *Lives of Poets* (1984) consists of six short stories and a novella, their only apparent connection being the single character who authors them and who ends them in the middle of a sentence.

*World's Fair* (1985) his sixth novel, is part memoir, part oral history and part fictional. It is written from the point of view of a young man living in Bronx during the depression era. Real characters and events gave such depth and verisimilitude to the narrative that it won the American Book Award for fiction. Part thriller, part fairy tale, *Billy Bathgate* (1989) is both a picaresque and a coming of age novel with the same setting as his previous novel, Bronx. It is one of Doctorow's greatest novels which became an international best seller and earned him the National Book Critics Circle award. Doctorow's next novel, *The Waterworks* (1994) has been categorized as Gothic horror fiction; it has historical and contemporary allusions, examining the interaction among different social classes. In 2000, his *City OF God* was published. He shows three main characters in the present day, looking back on their lives in the 20th Century and the way history affected them. In *The March* (2005), Doctorow retold Civil War history according to the individual lives of a large and diverse cast of characters, whose lives are caught up in the violence and trauma of the war. *Homer & Langley* (2009) detailed the lives of the Collyer Brothers, infamous for their oddities as well as their habit of compulsively collecting lots of various, old stuff.

So with several novels, one story collection and a play (*Drinks Before Dinner* in 1978), he owns a loyal audience and an admiring cradle of critics and several prestigious awards. This body of work displays a wide range of genres from western to science fiction. In fact most critics agree that Doctorow is one of the most adventurous

novelists, not afraid of trying new styles and genres and rarely repeating from book to book. He cleverly mixes an engaging narrative with a historical and ethical scrutiny of American character and sensibility. Politically active and outspoken, Doctorow urges other writers to follow his lead in expressing their opinions about issues outside the literary community. Here in this dissertation his novel, *Billy Bathgate* will be discussed.

Doctorow's fiction is often set in the past, during an identifiable historical period, like in the 1930's Depression. *Billy Bathgate* seems more conventional than Doctorow's earlier novels, for it is told from the stand point of its main character a mature man reviewing his past. Yet the novel unfolds with such immediacy that it appears to be taking place as the narrator tells it. Young Billy is a fifteen-year-old boy who first becomes the gofer and then surrogate son of mobster Dutch Schultz and later is involved in an affair with Schultz's mistress, Drew, and at the end he wins the gang's fortune. The book explores the question of self determination versus fate, moral relativism, and the romanicization of the Mafia in American pop culture. The major purpose of this research is a Foucauldian study of this novel in order to find out the mechanism of power, knowledge and discourse in the society and characters and also seeing how the main characters are influenced by them while constructing their selves.

## ***1.2. The Argument***

This study is an attempt to read *Billy Bathgate* under the light of Foucault's theories and ideas. Since the issues of power, discourse and "care of the self" are among the major

elements in Foucault's thinking and at the same time these issues lie at the very heart of the novel using his ideas in trying to understand E. L. Doctorow's work can offer us a better reading of it. To achieve this aim, some of the main categories of the thoughts of Foucault are chosen and worked on in different chapters of this research. The categories are depicted through the novel and have been elaborated.

Foucault as an influential thinker undermines the validity of traditional understanding of the concept of power by mentioning its shortcomings. He argues that the power relations in any given society determine every single aspect of its citizens' lives. His main preoccupation is investigating how power works and through what mechanisms it changes people's lives. Foucault believes that power relations affect the whole range of human life. It determines the way one sees the world and what one regards as truth. In this view, power relations have a very close link with discourses. The important point in the relationship between power and discourse is that they create a delicate network in which they strengthen one another. In other words, power relations produce a certain discourse. This certain discourse, in its turn, produces certain claims about truth in support of the dominant power relations. These dominant power relations authorize the existence of a certain type of discourse which supports them. Other claims about truth which are made by marginal discourses outside this network are continually suppressed. Consequently, these dominant power relations by means of different discursive formations and practices create mental frames for its subjects. The subjects can only perceive things through this mental frame. Because of the pervasive nature of this network individuals even define themselves within these frameworks. Therefore, they, as the subjects, gradually begin to internalize and eternalize the rules and believe them to be absolutely true. But not all of them yield to it and they try to resist the workings of power. To Foucault, the best way of defying these norms is to construct a

self by the subjects themselves. He believes that subjects are agents that can act freely in the space that power provides for them. But having acted too differently from the prevailing norms, the individual might be labeled as "abnormal" or "mad".

In two of his books, *Madness and Civilization* and *the Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault discusses the concept of madness. He questions this notion and in his view, madness is not a self-evident behavioral or biological fact but is the product of socio-cultural practices. Madness achieves its existence in relation to the needs and demands of a given culture; in other words, it has no pre-social essence. On the other hand, in his madness can be considered as a cultural construct or empty space onto which society projects its discontents. The consequence is that modern psychiatry alienates the insane from himself by imposing on him moral categories under the guise of an ostensibly medical knowledge. There have been some efforts to show the medical institutions as humane environments. To bring an example, the creation of asylum is generally regarded as a significant advance in medical practices, heralding the advent of more humane attitudes towards the treatment of the mad. But the consequence is quite vice versa. The asylum, institutes more insidious forms of control over the mad; it is more brutal and dehumanizing in its effects than previous treatment of madness. Foucault concludes that what was introduced as the science of psychiatry was an instrument at the service of power relations and dominant discourses to eliminate from the scene those who are abnormal or nonconformist.

With the help of Michel Foucault's ideas, this study aims to answer the following questions:

- Is what Foucault thought about power (and its changes) any similar to what Doctorow represented in his novel?
- Is it possible to move outside power networks?
- What are the dominant discourses represented in the novel?
- Are there any discourses struggling with one another or being at the service of other discourses?
- How do the characters of the novel resist the dominant power relations of their society?
- Has either Billy Bathgate or Drew Preston, as major characters of the novel, achieved "ethical self-formation" according to Michel Foucault's ideas?
- What is the historical significance of the novel?

### ***1.3. Literature Review***

Some of Foucault's own works are the main sources of this thesis. His *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* is one of them. This excellent collection of essays and interviews, including the total field of his concerns, enabled Foucault to construe the results of his research in each area and to reveal the contribution of each to the splendid and scary portrait of society that he was patiently bringing together. For, as Foucault shows, what he was always describing was the nature of power in society; not the conventional treatment of power that focuses on

powerful individuals and suppressive institutions, but the much more persistent and subtle mechanisms by which power "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives"(119). Foucault's investigations of prisons, schools, barracks, hospitals, factories, cities, families, and other organized forms of social life are each a part of one of the most surprising intellectual endeavors of all time and, as this book shows, one which has deep implications for understanding the social control of our bodies and our minds. In *The History of Sexuality; Volume I*, (1976), that is another source for this thesis, Foucault describes that power is always exercised in the polemical force relation. But in his later works, through different non-dominating techniques, he shows that power can also function through the process of organization of subjectivity in a structured form. Therefore, the research paper follows the thought line of Foucault and his reconceptualization of notion of power in his career.

*Discipline and Punish*, another important source for this study, opens with a graphic description of a brutal public execution in 1757. In this book Foucault discusses power at different historical periods and inquires how such changes in punishment have developed in a short time. He also shows how institutions encourage discipline as a form of self-regulation, and how regimes through the use of different techniques exercise power in a society. In this book, Foucault speaks of disciplinary power that affects bodies, rather than power in general and talks about how specific disciplinary mechanism bring about an internalization of power.

Other than Foucault's own works, there are other supportive guide books written on him and his works that are other sources of this paper. One of them is Sara Mills' *Michel Foucault* that is a small book published by Routledge. The book provides an introduction to both his ideas and the debate around them. It starts by explaining why

reading Foucault is important, then gives a general background of his intellectual and political development and then goes on to discuss his ideas in the following chapters to conclude with suggesting possible ways to apply Foucault's theoretical positions to texts and for more general analysis.

*Understanding Foucault*, by Geoff Danaher and two other writers -that is an accessible and comprehensive introduction to the work of Michel Foucault- is the next supportive source. Reading Foucault, however, can be a challenge, as can writing about him, but in this book the authors offer an entertaining and informative introduction to his thinking. They cover all the issues Foucault dealt with, including power, knowledge, subjectivity and sexuality and discuss the development of his analysis throughout his work. Each topic is illustrated with topical examples from popular culture so that readers can see how to use Foucault's theories in their own writing.

In the other one, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, Tyson offers a thorough and accessible introduction to contemporary critical theory. It provides in-depth coverage of the most common approaches to literary analysis today: new historicism, cultural criticism, feminism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, reader-response theory, structuralism and semiotics, deconstruction and etc. The chapters provide a comprehensive explanation of each theory, using examples from everyday life, popular culture, and literary texts. It motivates readers by showing them what critical theory can offer in terms of their practical understanding of literary texts and in terms of their personal understanding of themselves and the world in which they live.

There are also some guide books about Doctorow which are the other sources of this study. One of them is *Understanding E. L. Doctorow* by Douglas Fowler published by University of South Carolina Press. This book takes the reader through Doctorow's



fiction and is a detailed study of Doctorow's novels in eight chapters. Doctorow has produced new imaginative forms and invented fresh voices for each of his novels. Fowler describes Doctorow work in terms of author's intentions, inventions, politics, creation of voice, taste of melodrama, and character types. According to Fowler a fantastic and brutal incursion into the commonplace almost always provides the highly charged environment in which Doctorow's novels are set and there is often a lurid gleam of the macabre in the worlds he creates.

The next one is *American Writers, A Collection of Literary Biographies* by A. Walton Litz which is published by Charles Scribner's Sons. It is a series of books containing a set of extended, jargon-free essays that serve the general reader and be of use to the specialists. Many of the finest scholar teachers of the generation after the Second World War have contributed to these works. The essays are useful monuments to a great period in American literary studies and their aim is a fresh view of the writer cast in accessible form. Also essays on Doctorow are available in this work.

And the last one is *Notable American Novelists* by Carl Rollyson. This work presents biographical sketches and analytical overviews of 120 the United States' best – known writers of long fiction from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, arranged alphabetically by name. The set's three volumes survey those American novelists whose works are included in the core of curriculum of English literature studies. E. L. Doctorow is also one of the writers whose life and works are discussed in these series.

Also some valuable articles like "Foucault and Critique: Deploying Agency Again Autonomous" by Mark Bevir and "Ethical Self-Formation: A Look at the Later Foucault" by Justen Infinito, intend to clarify the later ideas of Foucault on the subject

and "ethical self-formation", and help the researcher with applying Foucault's ideas to the present novel.

#### **1.4. Thesis Outline**

The present study's aim is to read E.L. Doctorow's *Billy Bathgate*, by means of Foucault's theories. Concentrating on Foucault's ideas about power, knowledge, discourse, ethical self and the depiction of these elements in the novel constitutes the body of this work. Therefore, a short summary of what is done in different chapters will be revealing about the general direction of this body.

This thesis includes five chapters. Besides the present chapter, that is a general introduction about the whole research, the researcher expands the subject in three main chapters, and the final chapter contains the concluding results. The second chapter is entitled as *Michel Foucault's Ideology*. The first part is an introduction to Foucault's life and works and the next part focuses on the notion of power and its subdivisions that are panopticon, resistance and care of the self, and knowledge. The last part elaborates on the notion of discourse and madness.

The third chapter is titled as *A Foucauldian Study of Power and Discourse in Billy Bathgate*. First there is a general look at the story and its significance among Doctorow's other works. Then due to the atmosphere of the novel, some explanations about the Depression era and gangsterism are provided. And the other parts deal with the two major Foucauldian concepts -power and discourse- in this novel that intend to represent the workings of power relations and discourses at work inside the novel.

The fourth chapter named as *Foucauldian "Ethical Self" and History in Billy Bathgate* analyses two main characters of the novel, in terms of their resistance to the dominant power relations and their efforts in relation to constructing their selves in the light of Foucault's ideas. It discusses Billy's possibilities of resistance and clarifies his attitude towards different modes of being and questioning his identity, and finally follows his process of self-formation. It also analyzes the character of Drew Preston in terms of her resistance to the prevailing power of her society and will discuss her success, as an agent, in confronting the power relations. And lastly it elaborates on the significance of history in the novel. Also the final chapter, as the concluding chapter, both provides a short summary and review of the previous chapters, and the findings resulting from the third and fourth chapters. Ultimately a number of suggestions for further readings and researches are presented.

### ***1.5. Methodology and approach***

The basic focus of this thesis is to apply some of Foucault's assumptions on one of E. L. Doctorow's novels i.e. *Billy Bathgate*. This thesis will be a descriptive and library research, so the entire information and resources would be provided through libraries and internet. It will consist of five chapters, the first chapter as a general introduction, the second one about Foucault and notions related to his theories, in chapters three and four, Foucault's theories will be applied to the novel and his different concepts will be considered in each of these chapters respectively and the last chapter will be a conclusion to all. So a Foucauldian reading of the novel *Billy Bathgate* gives us a unique chance to comprehend it.

As a leading figure in twentieth century, Foucault's writings have remarkably influenced different fields of study. Foucault's theories are specifically concerned with the concepts of discourse, knowledge, and power. While he is not the first figure consulting on the question of power, Foucault puts aside the conventional assumptions regarding this notion. He sees history in terms of power and his power is not simply a hierarchical repressive force only to deny or censure, rather it is a complex web of relations dispersed throughout society operating through institutionalized discourses.

According to Foucault there is a reciprocal relationship between knowledge and power; on the one hand power is based on knowledge and makes use of it, on the other hand it reproduces knowledge through shaping it according to its intentions. Therefore, by means of knowledge power re/creates its own field of exercise. Based on this mutual relation, there is no power without knowledge and no knowledge can ever exist without putting forth relations of power. What is more, power as Foucault believes, works through discourses. Discourse is defined as a system through which certain knowledge is possible; it is the discourse that constructs our sense of reality, and structures the way we see the world and think about it. Any given discourse creates a field through which certain claims to knowledge are produced and therefore assumes the status of "truth". Thus, "truth" becomes a relative concept which is the product of the effects of various discourses in each society and is created according to the society's norms.

Foucault tries to examine the way power operates within everyday relations between people. He believes power is exercised rather than possessed, and he insists that power is not repressive but productive. So, power can function through the process of organization of subjectivity in a structured form. What he portrays in "The Subject and Power" is a field of possible actions structured by power, where a subject must act. Power structures possible actions through which it functions. Even the capacity of free