

# Parody of Western in American Literature: Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times*, and R. Coover's *The Ghost Town*

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According to many critics (Poirier 1968; Bradbury 1980) parody is one of the most important forms and tropes of the twentieth-century literature. Not only parody, but also irony used in popular genres point out, on the one hand, the *exhaustion* of traditional forms and genres, and, on the other, both parody and irony express a critique of some *myths* associated with particular cultural experience. I do not mean traditional ancient myths, but modern myths, which are produced by particular nations and cultural contexts to emphasize the distinctiveness of cultural identity of these nations and their cultural contexts. The genre of the western is one of the most traditional and genuine American genres expressing the specificity of American cultural experience (Smith 1950; Turner 1938). Leslie Fiedler considers the western, in addition to pornography and science fiction, to be one of the most typical genres of popular culture. In his study of popular culture entitled *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (1976), John Cawelti calls popular literary forms *literary formulas* which he understands as

an archetypal story pattern embodied in the images, symbols, themes and myths of a particular culture. As shaped by the imperatives of the experience of escape, these formulaic worlds are constructions that can be described as moral fantasies constituting an imaginary world in which the audience can encounter a maximum of excitement without being confronted with an overpowering sense of the insecurity and danger that accompany such forms of excitement in reality. (Cawelti 1978: 16)

In addition to this, Cawelti considers the western to be one of the major formulas (Cawelti 1978: 16), and emphasizes the cultural contexts of these formulas. In his view, these formulas 'have some sort of influence on culture because they become conventional ways of representing and relating certain images, symbols, themes, and myths' (Cawelti 1978: 20). It is especially the ideas of the frontier, harsh life, violence, outlawed gun fights, but especially the symbolic landscape (Cawelti 1978: 193) and the inventory of characters such as gunslingers, villains, beautiful ladies and prostitutes that have not only formed specific aspects of the genre of the western, but also of a myth of American cultural identity. On the other hand, postmodern authors often use parody, irony and other literary devices and tropes not only to undermine typical popular genre conventions, but, in this way, also the myths a particular culture is associated with. In this way parodies could be understood as a kind of cultural criticism, but also as a criticism of idealization of the iconography through which particular cultures emphasize their cultural values and experience.

In their parodies of the western genres Doctorow and Coover undermine not only traditional structure of this genre, but also some aspects of American cultural identity. These authors' use of parody and irony in the novels *Welcome to Hard Times* (Doctorow) and *Ghost Town* (Coover) shows, speaking in Linda Hutcheon's terms, both distance and difference between the past and present, between the past and present sensibility. Hutcheon argues that 'There is nothing in *parodia* that necessitates the inclusion of a concept of ridicule, as there is, for instance, in the joke or *burla* of burlesque. Parody, then, in its ironic "trans-contextualization" and inversion, is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signalled by irony' (Hutcheon 1985: 32).

As I have mentioned, the use of parody shows a difference between traditional and contemporary literary forms and evokes critique of traditional genres and literary forms. According to McHale, 'Parody [...] is a form of self-reflection and self-critique, a genre's way of thinking critically about itself' (McHale 1987: 145). In a similar vein, Poirier observes that 'The literature of self-parody continues, then, the critical function that parody has always assumed, but with a difference [...] parody has traditionally been anxious to suggest that life or history or reality has made certain literary styles outmoded' (Poirier 1968: 339).

In my paper I will analyze the above authors' narrative and textual strategies to show not only the diversity of parody of the western genre, but also the way these authors undermine traditional myths and icons forming American cultural identity. The major focus of this paper will be on the study of the setting, partly characters, although both authors' parody manifests itself, and even more apparently, in their narrative techniques and the depiction of plot. In addition to this, I will try to show the way both authors' parodic and ironic distortion of the traditional western setting and partly characters produces both a new kind of writing and cultural criticism. It must be emphasized, however, that both Doctorow's and Coover's work were written in a time span of more than 30 years (Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times* was written in 1960, while Coover's novel *Ghost Town* in 1998).

### Setting/Landscapes

As J. A. Cuddon observes, western is a genre of fiction 'associated with the western states of the USA' (Cuddon 1991: 1042). From the very beginning of their novels, both authors emphasize the role of the landscape and depict it as one used in traditional western genre—as a desolate, dry, harsh but majestic geographical territory associated with the western states of the United States. According to Theo D'Haen, 'the postmodern western employs setting to express the mood of its characters, the wider import of their actions, and the importance of the issues at stake' (D'Haen 1987: 170) and landscapes 'illustrate the magnitude of the principles pitted against one another involved: good versus evil, law and justice versus lawlessness order versus anarchy' (D'Haen 1987: 166). In both novels the depiction of setting (landscape) dominates and plays a symbolic role, although in connection with other components of these novels (characters, narrative techniques, plot) the function of landscape changes. In Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times* the city as part of the landscape is depicted as situated in

the Dakota Territory, and on three sides-east, south, west-there is nothing but miles of flats [...] Most times the dust of the horizon moved east to west-wagon trains nicking the edge of the flats with their wheels and leaving a long dust turd lying on the rim of the earth [...] To the north were hills of rock and that was where the lodes were which gave an excuse for the town, although not a good one. (Doctorow 1960: 3-4)

Not only flatness, dryness, dirt, hard living conditions, but also roughness and violence associated with them is emphasized in Doctorow's novel. Doctorow's depiction of characters corresponds to his depiction of the landscape and setting. They are mostly depicted as poor, dirty, rough; the main street is covered with manure; and general hygiene in the desert city suffers of the lack of water. Blue, the narrator and later an unofficial mayor and a record-keeper of the city at the same time observes that

people would throw their slops into the alleys. Some didn't care where they did their business and it got so you were hard put to walk in the street without putting your boot down in a mess. One morning Molly found a drunken man peeing against the door. (Doctorow 1960: 169)

Harsh, dirty, rough setting plays a symbolic role in Doctorow's novel. The attempts to get rid of dirt (Blue's shaving of his beard, women's bathing in a tub) symbolize both city's progressing prosperity and its inhabitants' attempt to restore civilized order and life after former city's destruction by a Bad Man from Bodie. It manifests itself in the fact that Blue wants to continue in keeping his records and establishes his business with water; that Isaac Maple establishes his shop and Zar his public house and a saloon. In addition to this, the harsh and rough landscape and dirt symbolize evil, hard life, lawlessness, and a certain anarchy as depicted in traditional westerns. In addition to this, in Doctorow's novel *Welcome to Hard Times* the landscape and the setting represent a certain enclosure and the microcosm of the (frontier) society—poor farmers, workers, unsuccessful gold-diggers, whores, small entrepreneurs (Maple), artisans, villains, mysterious Native inhabitants—Indians (John the Bear), an illegal Russian businessman, a calm Swedish farmer and settler, a Chinese prostitute and others.

Similarly, in Coover's novel *Ghost Town* the landscape around the town is depicted as 'Bleak horizon under a glazed sky, flat desert, clumps of sage, scrub, distant butte [...] a land of sand, dry rocks, and dead things. Buzzard country [...] A space there and not there, like a monumental void, dreadful and ordinary all at once' (Coover 1998: 1, 4). The town itself is characterized as

a plain town that comes past, empty and silent, made of the desert itself with a few ramshackle false-fronted frame structures lined up to conjure a street out of the desolation. Nothing moves in it [...] the sign over the saloon door hangs heavy in the noontime sun as the blade of an ax. (Coover 1998: 6)

In difference from Doctorow who, in his *Welcome to Hard Times*, puts an emphasis on the social observation of the city life, this element is suppressed in Coover's novel. His city represents an iconic city of the western, but it is a city where almost no progress, no purposeful activity, but the violence can be observed. The reduction of the social observation is replaced by Coover's emphasis on the wild cruelty and violence which dominates in the city and which the main character, an unknown intruder and a cruel gunslinger, and later, although undesirably, a sheriff coming to the city, is unable to remove. He becomes both the subject and object of violence. The violence becomes everyday reality in the city as can be seen from the following scene:

the fat man's smile is widened from ear to ear, his stiffened handlebars snicked to a brush, and his belly's so punctured his guts start to spill out; but neither man gives an inch. *Whuck, whuck, whuck*, the knives go, and nothing he can do

but watch, both men blinded now by blood and injury, taking blow after blow after blow, the other men of the posse cheering them on, laying bets on the side, pushing the antagonists back into it if they chance to stagger apart. Finally, the butcher knife breaks off in the mestizo's ribs and, as the disarmed fat man slumps to his knees, the mestizo finishes him off in the slaughterhouse manner by stabbing him two-fisted in the back of the neck. (Coover 1998: 63)

Thus the landscape in Coover's novel symbolically emphasizes the function of the city as a representative of violence, cruelty, brutality and lawlessness. In this way the conventions of the traditional western are invoked, but in Coover's novel this city becomes a Darwinian city in which the idea of the survival of the fittest dominates. On the other hand, there is no clear connection and relationships among the characters. Moving between the city and the desert they appear and disappear, meet and depart randomly. As Marx argues, 'The herky-jerky story line could be written on flash cards flickering in and out of the cowboy's view' (Marx 1998: 3). These characters' background is ambiguous and unclear, identity depicted only as the identity of iconic representatives of the western genre—a horse rider, the gruff barkeep, the saloon bawd, the grizzled drunk, Indian, Mestizo, singer, sheriff, sheriff's deputy and others. Thus in difference from Doctorow's emphasis on social observation, in Coover's novel chaotic behavior rather than purposeful action of the characters dominates and suppresses the function of other compositional elements of the traditional western, especially the plot and the western's romantic and adventurous nature.

### **Parody/Undermining Western**

As it was suggested above, the landscape and setting in both novels seem to be reminiscent of the setting of the traditional western genres. They have a symbolic function, but both authors first invoking the traditional inventory of the western genre they undermine it by emphasizing other elements and other symbolic connotations of their narrative strategies. The title of Doctorow's novel itself evokes negative connotations, but, at the same time, it becomes an untraditional name for the western city. Thus in difference from traditional western genre expectations concerning positive resolution and the establishment of order, the title itself suggests skepticism, pessimism, and is in contradiction with both readers' and city inhabitants' expectations. The city is finally destroyed, burnt down by a Bad Man from Bodie again and order, law and prosperity are not restored, goodness and love missing (Blue's love to Molly, for example), and the characters' expectations remain unfulfilled. In addition to this, the title has ironic connotations. Paradoxically, it does not correspond to the optimism associated with both a westward expansion and gold digging, but represents a metaphor of pessimism, difficulty, and perhaps possible failure. As Morris suggests, the title of Doctorow's novel is 'paradox: for who would want to welcome or to be welcomed to hard times?' (Morris 1991: 26). Morris further comments on other meanings of the title as possibly alluding, in his view, to Dickens' novel *Hard Times* (and thus evoking the idea of social criticism, critique of capitalist exploitation), or evoking metafictional associations (Morris 1991: 27).<sup>1</sup> Thus the landscape, setting, and their names invoke and consequently undermine both their function and traditional western conventions. These conventions are further undermined by Doctorow's emphasis on social observation, partly on psychology through his reduction of the plot, and through his depiction of almost apocalyptic final tragic destruction of the city when evil is only partly destroyed (a boy, Jimmy Fee, seems to represent a future follower of Bad Man from Bodie).

As suggested above, also in Coover's novel *Ghost Town* the landscape and its symbolic function is reminiscent of traditional western genre conventions. At the same time,

both the name of the city and the title of the novel indicate its sinister character, desolation, emptiness, purposelessness that is in contradiction with both names of the real cities and optimistic expectations of their settlers. Similarly, in Doctorow's novel, the name of the city becomes an iconic name evoking the atmosphere of disillusion, lawlessness, anarchy that further passes into violence as the dominant image not only of this novel, but also of the *western culture* and frontier life. The idea of violence is evoked at the very beginning of the novel. Coover uses the imagery of death, dreadfulness, and danger. For example, the door hangs are compared to 'the blade of an ax' (Coover 1998: 6). This imagery dominates, either literally or symbolically, in the whole novel. The novel teems with deaths, blood, violence, but also with chaos and anarchy which the unnamed and tough gunslinger along with his deputy are unable and perhaps often unwilling to remove. They become a part of the violent and brutal circus ending in itself and creating a metaphor of the frontier life and its culture. It is a metaphor of cruelty and aimless violence as a representation of frontier culture that is associated with a mythical role of the idea of the American frontier as an important part of American cultural identity. This violence results almost in apocalyptic ending where the town becomes destroyed, abandoned, and dead:

Nothing but a dark cobwebbed and dusty murk in there. Busted furniture strewn about, broken lamps and bottles, the old grand piano fallen face forward as if to bite floor with its sad scatter of chipped teeth [...] The only sign of life is his hat in the middle of the empty street [...] The town's been abandoned. He's all alone. (Coover 1998: 146)

In addition to this, and in difference from Doctorow, Coover suggests the possible illusory, imaginary character of the city and thus symbolically the whole idea of the frontier myth. His main character doubts about the existence of the city, the city

disappears behind a slight rise, then reappears when that rise is reached, often as not even further away to the naked eye, his naked eye, than when last seen, like a receding mirage, which it likely is. Sometimes there's no horizon at all, burned away by the sun's glare or night's sudden erasure, so no town either [...] (Coover 1998: 5)

This evokes a doubt about the real existence of the city and about the gunslinger's perception of reality that is further supported by Coover's depiction of his visions, dreams, and imagination. More radically than in Doctorow's novel, the imagery of the violence and absence may stand for a metaphor of doubt, a doubt about the importance of this myth in American cultural tradition. At the end of the novel the gunslinger's survival becomes a purposeless act since the town is destructed, his enemies and loves lost, and his function of a restorer of order unfulfilled. What remains, however damaged, is the inventory of both the western genre and a frontier life, that is a saloon, a horse, jailhouse, the claims office, steeped church, store, the country, and death (Coover 1998: 146-147). This destruction and absence imagery undermines both the conventions of the western genre and the myth of the frontier life. As Yanc observes, 'Coover remains steadfast in his goal to continually knock the reader off balance by trotting out an endless series of Western clichés—the trusted horse, the limping old codger as Sheriff, the good-time saloon gal [...]—then brutally twisting them into nightmarish caricatures to illuminate the staleness of such conventions' (Yanc 1998: 1).

Such depiction of the landscape and its function in connection with other compositional elements of both novels evokes a parodic effect. It is not a traditional parody, it is a parody that does not necessarily stick to the structural pattern of the parodied genre but

a parody that distorts not necessarily all, but only some compositional elements of the parodied genre; a parody which lacks a ridiculing effect but which points out the *exhaustion* of traditional genres and shows the new possibilities of contemporary fiction which, with the use of parody, shows the distance between the past and present forms of representation, between the past and present cultural values. According to Linda Hutcheon, such parody

does not seem to aim at ridicule or destruction. Parody implies a distance between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new work, a distance usually signaled by irony. But the irony is more playful than ridiculing, more critical than destructive. (Hutcheon 1978: 202)

In both Doctorow's and Coover's novels, the depiction of the landscape is used first to establish the genre conventions of the western and then to undermine them. In Doctorow's novel, the parodic undermining is done through the author's emphasis on other elements of the novel (social observation, partly psychology, apocalyptic ending evoking the resemblance to the ancient tragedies); in Coover's novel it is done mainly through the mythologization of the violence associated with the symbolic function of the rough setting and through the juxtaposition of the imagery evoking the real western landscape (and present in the traditional western genre) and the imagery of dreams, visions, absence and doubt. Such a distortion of the function of the landscape evokes, as I have tried to show a parodic effect. In addition to this, undermining the western genre conventions both authors undermine the importance of the cultural value of the western and frontier myths and its importance for the formation of American cultural identity. Parody in both novels serves as a form of intramural critique of the traditional genres, but without a ridiculing effect. At the same time, this intramural critique suggests a possibility of a new kind of writing using and distorting (through parody, irony, pastiche) traditional forms and genres. In addition to this, Doctorow's novel can be read in different ways, not only as a parody of the western, but also as a story of evil, as a story of a failure of the frontier settling; as a story of the negative effects of violence (Vilikovský 1989: 186). On the other hand, the apocalyptic and tragic ending undermines the myth of the American West and the frontier as an important part of American cultural mythology evokes its critique. In Coover's case, mythologization of violence ends in itself and thus becomes purposeless. The acts and aims of the main character and violence associated with him lose its purpose and result in the absence. There are no winners, no happy ending, and no resolution. What remains, as I have suggested, are the remains of the inventory of the western genre on which Coover has constructed a different story that could be read as a story of the power of evil or, as I have tried to argue, as a postmodern parody of the western. As a form of cultural criticism, radical distortion of the western genre conventions mean also a radical attack on the genre representing one of the most important aspects of American cultural mythology suggest the myth of the American frontier is only the illusion, a myth with rather negative than positive connotations.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> As I have mentioned, Morris sees the intertextual connection between Doctorow's novel *Welcome to Hard Times* and Dickens' *Hard Times*; on the other hand stretching of the sign Welcome to Hard Times across the main street of the town in the story is understood as a reference to a sign evoking the question of referentiality and representation. Morris thus asks the question 'do titles, textual signs, refer to "signifieds" or to other signs?' (Morris 1991: 27), although he does not further clarify the metafictional associations

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