



## PORTRAYAL OF CHARACTERS IN E.L. DOCTOROW'S *BILLY BATHGATE*

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### ABSTRACT

E.L. Doctorow is considered to be a political writer and he attempts to define America's past and present politics by the help of his imagination through his narrative. Most of his fiction reminds the 20<sup>th</sup> century's historical figures into imagined characters. The way, he reimagining of the Civil War, Rosenberg trial and the World War I have enticed a huge following and critical appreciations. Doctorow's four novels *The Book of Daniel*, *Ragtime*, *Billy Bathgate* and *The March* have been increasingly deeper experiments with history and fiction. According to Girgus, " Doctorow indicates his commitment to the world of imagination and creative coherence rather than to a restricted political doctrine of truth" (88).

This article focuses on Doctorow's *Billy Bathgate* (1989), a remarkable critical and popular novel (winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction). In this novel, Doctorow presents 1930s gangsters' real life with his imaginative power. The real gangster Arthur Flegenheimer played as Dutch Schultz and his accountant Otto as Berman. McCaffery says about Doctorow's selection of this theme from history "using disreputable materials and doing something serious with them" (36). Doctorow divides this novel into twenty parts and he specifically portrays two main characters Billy and Dutch Schultz. This article emphasizes these two significant characters and how Billy's lifestyle changed after he joins hand with gang leader Dutch Schultz. *Billy Bathgate* is the protagonist of this novel and Dutch Schultz is a notorious gangster.

**Key Words:** Society, Gangster, Juggler, Humanity and Redeemer

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**E. L. Doctorow** (January 6, 1931 – July 21, 2015) was a 20th century American novelist, dramatist, short-story writer, editor, and professor, best known universally for his works of historical fiction. Doctorow was one of the leading American authors of his generation. His writing style was acknowledged for its re-imagining of American history, particularly that of his favorite New York City. Doctorow's continuous political

outlook and frequent assessment of political issues has harvested a varied reaction from the readers. Recognizes as a postmodern novelist, Doctorow is renowned for his convincing reconstruction and transforming of conventional American myths and heroic characters. In this case, he is frequently viewed as a literary inheritor of such prominent American writers like Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Henry Claridge says, "Doctorow's materials are those of American history, particularly that phase from the 1900s to the late 1960s, and his forms show a striking resemblance to those of the American historical romance. (11).

Doctorow's *Billy Bathgate* (1989) is a remarkable critical and popular novel (winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction). Doctorow wants to highlight the image of gangsters as the main theme in this novel. He was enthralled by 1930s' gangster history because the fascination of the gangsters in the early 1930s' was remarkable. Billy Bathgate is the name of protagonist of this novel and Dutch Schultz is an infamous gang leader. Billy Bathgate, a fifteen year old boy and his adventure beautifully and interestingly depicted in this novel. Billy's childhood life was so miserable and it should not happen to anyone in this world. His Jewish immigrant father abandoned him like the life of Dutch Schultz. Billy's sense of special talent and his mental attitude toward self-dramatization are the main reasons for his adventurous journey. He looked with pride about his cleverness and New York American called him as Phantom, a comic superhero. He was so popular because of his extraordinary juggling performance and this distinguished him from the rank of his street kids. Dutch Schultz heard about Billy's special and he felt it would help him to earn lot in his business if he joins.

I realized I was hearing the great gangster of my dreams. "A capable boy," he said, by way of conclusion, either to his associate or to me, or to himself, or perhaps to all three, and then the meaty killer's hand came down, like scepter, and gently held for moment my cheek and jaw and neck on its hot pads, and then was lifted, and then the back of Dutch Schultz was disappearing into the dark depths of the beer drop and the big doors flattened out with a screech and locked with a loud boom behind him.(Billy Bathgate, pp. 27.)

Billy impressed lot after heard Schultz's word "a capable boy" and these words encouraged him to join in his gang. A few days Billy bought a gun and entered the threshold into the dark unknown world. Billy's internship under Schultz compared to Augie's introduction to Einhorn's library in Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*. The difference between the two relations is that Einhorn, who has a biological son and heir, does not quite play the part of surrogate father for Augie, in the way Schultz and Berman finally do for Billy. Berman, the financial expert in his gang and he gave practice to Billy. Though he had a close connection with Schultz, Billy preserved a double attitude of involvement and detachment that resembled Augie March's dual character of flexibility and inflexibility.

Bo Weinberg, a loyal gunman who died unexpectedly. Drew Preston, Bo's lover, who was forced to bring up to the Dutch Schultz's cabin. Doctorow expressed this scene in his text "as if she was rising from the ocean" (15). Drew Preston portrayed as a mythic figure and she was so beautiful but came from corrupted society. Then Billy eye witnessed the murder of a fire inspector who appeared unexpectedly at Schultz's night club. Billy shocked to see that incident and he changed from his routine work. The respect of human dignity motivated him to protect Drew Preston. Billy promised Bo Weinberg to protect Drew when he was in deathbed; he mentally prepared to face problem for Drew. This can be compared to Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* where Finn attempted to save Jim at the risk of transgressing the civic law and bringing damnation upon himself.

Billy's sense of justice and humanity was his self-image as savior, which he derived from his mother and his neighborhood. After the murder of the fire inspector Billy tempted to act like an ordinary human being. In the meantime Billy and Drew fell in love in the absence of Dutch Schultz. Billy narrated of Bo's final reaction, Drew tried to experience it but she returned to life and she developed her alliance with Billy. This incident encouraged him to act like a Drew's savior and protector. Billy wanted to see his mother so he decided to go home after long time. When he entered his home he was unable to identify his mom and his friends, he felt like "an absolute foreigner" (247). He felt uncomfortable to go back as an ordinary human. Billy's mixed

emotions and images disturbed him. While he was having lunch with his mom in a restaurant, he suddenly saw Drew's image in his mother's face.

Billy reunited with Dutch Schultz and Billy's surrogate father Dutch Schultz requested him to do a critical assignment of delivering bribes and spying on the state attorney General Dewey. The General Dewey instructed to destroy Schultz's gang. In this operation Schultz and his gangster killed by the policemen. Billy was not there when the police entered so he fortunately escaped from death. He mourned lot for the death of his spiritual father. Doctorow portrayed Billy was not quite classic orphan-hero on a mythic journey as a modern existential hero fighting for existence and at the same time rejoicing the urban landscape. The surprising arrival of his baby and the following spring redeem his immoral deeds. Drew Preston handed over a baby to Billy and he moved up from fatherlessness to fatherhood. Finally Billy was the master of two worlds ordinary and notorious.

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