
American Literary Terror of the Foreign Doctress

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Abstract

Nicola Beisel and Tamara Kay argue that outlawing abortion in nineteenth century America was largely an attempt to deal with the terror of Irish immigrants becoming more populous and dominant than the Anglo-American majority. Leslie J. Reagan similarly suggests that anti-abortion activists used the threat of European Catholic immigrants' large families as a justification for forcing Anglo-American women to procreate by outlawing abortion. And Karen Weingarten claims that "the late nineteenth century saw the emergence of anti-abortion laws that were entrenched in anxieties about whiteness and citizenship" (19-20). Women physicians in nineteenth-century America were often equated with abortionists, and they were often depicted in literature as of Irish or eastern European descent. In these literary depictions, their "medical" knowledge was reduced to merely an evil greed, taking advantage of young, unmarried, Anglo-American pregnant girls. This image of the foreign, evil nineteenth-century abortionist appears in various sensation novels by dime store writers like Ned Buntline and Andrew Jackson Davis. Sentimental novels and, later, novels of realism with women physicians as main characters often sought to correct this stereotypical image of the dark, racially obscure foreign baby-killer by creating women physician characters as virtuous, scientific, and importantly, Anglo-American. Focusing primarily on Rebecca Harding Davis's *Kitty's Choice*, a novel that inhabits a liminal space between sentimentalism and realism, while drawing comparisons to Lillie Devereux Blake's sentimental depiction of a woman physician in *Fettered for Life* and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's realist novel, *Dr. Zay*, this essay will argue that the literary woman physician character in the nineteenth century was haunted by the terror of foreign immigration, of transgression against a pure Anglo-American citizenry. Thus, novels with women physicians as characters were not simply written against prevailing arguments concerning "The Woman Question." They were written against prevailing arguments concerning the transgressive, "foreign" threat of immigration.

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