

## Navigating Doctorow's Narrative Maze: Ideological Intricacies of Government and History



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**ABSTRACT:** Embarking on a literary journey through the tapestry of E. L. Doctorow's works unveils a rich and intricate exploration of themes that resonate deeply with the human experience. This scholarly examination delves into the interplay between government, history, and ideology within the pages of Doctorow's novels. Drawing inspiration from Lacanian, Foucauldian and Zizekian concepts, the analysis navigates through the complex narratives that unfold in *Billy Bathgate*, *Loon Lake*, *Ragtime*, and *Welcome to Hard Times*. From the symbolic demise of the big Other to the uncanny interchangeability of dreams, reality, and ideology, each novel offers a unique lens through which to view the intricacies of human consciousness and societal structures. Join this exploration as we unravel the layers of Doctorow's storytelling, seeking to understand the profound messages woven into the fabric of his literary creations.

### INTRODUCTION

Embarking on a comprehensive journey through the literary tapestry of E. L. Doctorow's distinguished works beckons us into a world where the threads of government, history, and ideology intricately weave together to form a complex narrative landscape. In this scholarly exploration, we will traverse the pages of *Billy Bathgate*, *Loon Lake*, *Ragtime*, and *Welcome to Hard Times*, immersing ourselves in the profound themes that underpin each narrative.

Our analytical lens will be sharpened by the insights of Lacanian and Foucauldian concepts, allowing us to unravel the layers of meaning embedded in Doctorow's prose. *Billy Bathgate* beckons with its portrayal of the government's symbolic demise, offering a compelling reflection on the fragility of established structures. Meanwhile, *Loon Lake* invites us to explore the uncanny interchangeability of dreams, reality, and ideology, employing the psychological factors of Lacanian philosophy to illuminate the characters' intricate relationships with their surroundings.

*Ragtime*, a hallmark of Doctorow's oeuvre, introduces us to the concept of the "unicorn of history," challenging the feasibility of rewriting the immutable "Real" of historical events. This novel becomes a playground for examining alternative versions of history, akin to wishing for the mythical unicorn—a pursuit both tantalizing and elusive.

In *Welcome to Hard Times*, the paradox of history takes center stage, with Foucauldian interruptions and cyclical social patterns shaping the narrative landscape. The dichotomy between planned societal progress and unforeseen disruptions unfolds, creating a tension that defies simplistic categorization and propelling us into the heart of Doctorow's explorations.

As we embark on this intellectual odyssey, we aim to unravel the complexities of human consciousness and societal structures that E. L. Doctorow masterfully addresses in his works. Join us in peeling back the layers of narrative intricacy to discover the profound messages and timeless reflections embedded in the pages of Doctorow's literary legacy.

### The Walking Dead Government in Doctorow's *Billy Bathgate*

There was a madman who thought himself to be a grain of corn. After being cured and sent home, he returns to his doctor, expressing his fear that there is a chicken who might eat him. After a long psychotherapy, the doctor comes to convince him that he is a human being and not a grain of corn. The man finally replies: "Yes, I know I am human, but does the hen know that too?" This logic of the madman is at work in E. L. Doctorow's *Billy Bathgate*. Doctorow's evolutionary attitude towards the American government is too intelligent to be observed easily. We see the phony justice of the American government in *The Book of Daniel*, the oppression of the government practiced upon people in *Ragtime*, the unshakeable power of Capitalism and marginalization of the system in *Loon Lake*, and finally, the disintegration or collapse of the system in *Billy Bathgate*.

Doctorow portrays the demise of the big Other (in this case, the American government) and that all the characters must coexist with the current sociopolitical situations, thus acting 'as if' (Zizek, 2008, p34). The government is powerful, 'as if' the government is dominant, and 'as if' they follow the laws designated by the government. We see this through various examples in the novel. For instance, Schultz turns himself into the authorities. However, Schultz acts 'as if' the court is not one stupid invalid

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organization, while behind the scenes, his attitudes towards the authorities are disintegrated. This leads to what is known as 'symbolic efficiency.'

Concerning 'symbolic efficiency' (Zizek, 1992, p98) to Zizek, God is not only dead, but He does not know He is dead. The system has been invalid, but it is not enough that we know the fact; the system itself must become aware of it, and the big Other must know its malfunction. To make the system aware of its death, Doctorow puts Schultz in a position of power, who assassinates at his will, refrains from paying taxes, or rules his territory away from the authorities' observation. More obviously, Billy claims: "How I admired the life of taking pains, of living in defiance of a government that did not like you and did not want you and wanted to destroy you." Billy continues: "So that you had to build out protection for yourself with money and men deploying armament, buying alliances, patrolling borders, as in a state of secession, by your will and wit and warrior living smack in the eye of the monster" (Doctorow, 1989, 78). Here, Doctorow compensates for the death of the big Other with Schultz's empire.

Nevertheless, the demise of the big Other, or the system, is uncanny and uncomfortable for American citizens. This works in a postmodern procedure. When the big Other disintegrates, an individual's superego begins to function. It orders them to enjoy the vacuum. They are obliged to enjoy freedom without law, big Other, or government. This works in reverse. This compulsion rips people off from real enjoyment. That's why they seek to establish an alternative system. They need to be bound to a system, to a set of laws. Billy confesses that "when crime was working as it was supposed to, it was very dull. Very lucrative and very dull". Crime was dull because it worked as it was supposed to in the absence of authorities.

Doctorow, here, complicates the problem and darkens the demise of the big Other, or the American government. When the big Other is weak or dead, we observe the rise of alternative, more minor, big Others. To justify his belief in the system's disintegration, Doctorow gives rise to alternatives, like the gang of Schultz and the Italian one. These two gangs signify the absence of the authorities. Even Schultz announces, "If something as ordinary and mundane as government justice could tilt my life awry, then my secret oiled connections to the real justice of a sanctified universe were nonexistent." (1989, 92). Schultz is cynical of the government's justice and even dismisses its functionality.

Thus, through an evolutionary process in Doctorow's novels, he reaches his extremist opposition to the government by dismissing that the American government even maintained the least of its functionality. However, the problem for Doctorow is that the government does not know this fact. The American government is like the chicken in the story of the madman.

### The Interchangeability of Dreams, Real, and Ideology in *Loon Lake*

In Iraq, it is a tradition that when someone loses a dear one to his heart, his acquaintances hire weepers to cry on his behalf. This is because, according to Kubler Ross, shock is the first of five stages of grief. That individual cannot comprehend his loss, thus, weepers take that responsibility and wail on his behalf, granting him a sense of emotional relief. Lacan also refers to the chorus in Greek tragedies, when the audience cannot feel the catharsis, so the chorus provides that sense of fear and tears. This relief on behalf of the other individual works wittily in an exclusive manner in E. L. Doctorow's *Loon Lake*, in the interchangeability between dreams, reality, and ideology.

This novel is obsessed with dreams. In several parts, the reader observes that the characters excessively depend on dreams or negation of dreams in their decisions. Dream scenes portray a very gloomy sense of the surrounding circumstances. Joe narrates: "I suffered terrible dreams of indistinct shapes and shadows and awful sounds of violence. Someone was crying, sobbing, and it turned out to be me" (Doctorow, 1980, 23). More precisely, Joe mentions that: "it was as bad as the original event to dream of it again drugged in a kind of dream prison and struggling for consciousness." This process of dreaming, Lacan believes, is of psychological importance. The thing that Joe encounters in his dream, the reality of his desire, the Lacanian Real (in this case, Joe's horrible event that he sees in his dream that makes him struggle for consciousness), is too terrifying to keep him asleep. Thus, he works for consciousness or awakening to escape the Real of his desire. As Slavoj Zizek puts it, "Reality (or the awakening state) is a fantasy construction which enables us to mask the Real of our desire" (Zizek, 2008, 46). Interestingly, however, ideology functions the same way as when reality veils the dreams.

The function of ideology in concealing the Real is apparent in Joe's claim at the end of the novel: "You are thinking it is a dream. It is no dream. It is the account in helpless linear translation of the unending love of our simultaneous but disynchronous lives" (1989, 98). To Joe, the traumatic, devastating the Real of capitalism is too oppressive to be maintained by him, as we have observed in the misfortunes that befall him. This Real is more apparent in his dream, so we see him denying his being in a state of dreaming. He compensates for that trauma of the Real by adopting ideology, as seen when he finally comes to be part of the system of capitalism. In other words, the adopted ideology Joe functions as hiding the traumatic state of the Real of his situation (the chaos of capitalism), therefore denying being in a dream because a dream is the Real.

Intriguingly, then, ideology tends to give joy to its adopter, as the weepers, chorus, or pornography. When someone adopts a specific ideology, it gives him relief from the traumatic Real. In ideology, there is a sense of security from the suppression and chaos of the Real. As seen previously in the quote by Joe, "It is no dream," he tends to avoid the Real by finding relief in ideology. Joe cannot enjoy his life on his own, so as a result, he resorts to ideology that he wants on his behalf.

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Thus, it is impossible to find any individual without ideology. As it is unimaginable to remain in dreams, it is unreasonable to survive without ideology. Since a dream is the home of the traumatic Real, life without ideology is the place of psychological agonies. Joe cannot remain in his dream or survive without ideology because he cannot enjoy himself alone. Ideology is the ultimate joy.

### Unicorn of History in *Ragtime*

As kids, we always dreamed of impossible wishes, like being transformed into creatures of different species or beings of various existences. We would ask for a unicorn despite its impossibility. Sometimes, the wish for a unicorn survives up to later stages of our lives, as witnessed in Doctorow's approach to history in his novels, like *Ragtime*. He wishes for alternative versions of history. In new historicism, encountering the veiled history from the viewpoint of the marginalized or minority seems a legitimate tactic. In the case of Doctorow, he seeks to write a radically new version of events. In his words, Doctorow believes that "there is no history except as it is composed... That is why history has to be written and rewritten from one generation to another. The act of composition can never end". He seeks the composition of new history. This is an entirely wrong assumption: to look for alternative versions of history. This is like wishing for a unicorn. Doctorow's insistence on this aspect reaches the border of theory, thus an eye for an eye, a theory for a theory.

One method of Doctorow's approach to alternative versions of history, or as I would call it, 'the unicorn of history,' is his repetitive references to actual historical figures, such as the great Winslow Homer and the American Painter. "This was the time in our history when Winslow Homer was doing his painting. A certain light was still available along the western seaboard. Homer painted the light" (Doctorow, 1975, 5). This historical assumption is impossible. We cannot have any other version because the best possibility of historical events always takes place. Any other replacement is a worse option. According to Darwin, only the fittest survives. This cannot be restrained within the small circle of biology. In history, the fittest result always occurs; otherwise, it cannot outlive the neighboring wild, chaotic, resisting historical alternatives. Only the best and the most substantial historical selection survives to the circle of result and existence.

The Danish-American social reformer Jacob Riis is another realistic reference in *Ragtime*, Doctorow's strategy to propose an alternative to history. "At this time in history, Jacob Riis, a tireless newspaper reporter and reformer, wrote about the need for housing for the poor" (1975, 24). This 'unicorn of history' cannot resist Nietzsche's genealogy. Doctorow's history prescription has neglected the scope, breadth, or totality of discourse within the period. Doctorow's approach is focused only on one dominant angle, that of his ideology, thus neglecting other social forces and ideologies that gave rise to that history.

Doctorow's 'unicorn of history' gallops away to Theodore Dreiser, the American novelist and journalist of the naturalist school. "This was the time in our history when the morose novelist Theodore Dreiser was suffering terribly from the bad reviews and negligible sales of his first book *Sister Carrie*" (1975, 102). Again, Doctorow strives to safeguard his proposal of an alternative version of history. He tends to tame historical events within the boundaries of his prescription, turning his back to other historical forces. According to Michel Foucault, the history that Doctorow seeks to reverse undergoes the phenomena of rupture and discontinuity. Doctorow is not allowed to encircle history within his tradition or to trace his line of events. The history that had taken place undergoes division and limits.

Doctorow moves to give validity to his alternative history by referencing deeply rooted American concerns. "Of course, at this time in our history, the images of ancient Egypt were stamped on everyone's mind. This was due to the discoveries reported out of the desert by British and American archaeologists" (1975, 128). Doctorow's 'unicorn of history' is 'impossible' in the Lacanian sense. The 'impossible' is the psychological status, which is beyond the reach of the desire. Thus, Doctorow resorts to 'fantasy,' the setting in which one tends to realize his impossible desires. He begins to propose the 'impossible' side of history. However, the Lacanian 'Real' of history is unchangeable. The Real is stable: it can be neither spoken nor written. The Real never ceases to write itself. In this respect, Doctorow's attempt is at only the creation of the 'symbolic,' since the history that Doctorow tends to replace is the unchangeable 'Real.'

Thus, Doctorow attempts to find alternative histories in *Ragtime* and his other novels are futile wishings that do not trespass the borderlines of innocent dreams. They are, as I would call them, the unicorns of history. According to Darwin's evolution, Nietzsche's genealogy, Foucault's rupture of history, Lacan's Real, and Doctorow's project of rewriting history remains infertile, a seed that never fruits. His ambitious approach to history cannot exceed sophisticated attempts at reflecting the historical contexts he grapples with. Doctorow's unicorn of history is doomed to slaughter at the hands of genuine history.

### The Theft of Enjoyment: Anti-Semitism in the Book of Daniel

It is almost impossible to recognize our animal forefathers while gazing at our reflection in the mirror, for the absence of fur in our faces, claws in our hands, or sharp tusks in our mouths; yet, we come to recognize the link in the chaotic structure of our backbones, the smooth disappearance of the teeth of wisdom, or malfunction in our sights. Through millions of years, these three instances have not evolved that successfully. This evolutionary process is also applicable to anti-Semitism. Despite its foggy, unclear shape in the present time, it is diagnosable in certain aspects, as in E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*.

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Many critics are reluctant to encounter this anti-Semitism ideology since it is not too apparent to their readers. They are not to blame, for Doctorow has interwoven this reality into the fabric of other anxieties in the novel, yet of grave importance, to the extent that one could ascribe Daniel's calamities and his Jewish acquaintances to this ideological fact.

Doctorow has reflected on this anti-Semitism from a postmodern perspective. Thus, looking at this aspect from the traditional hatred viewpoint would be in vain. Daniel, a Jewish figure, is related to the concept of 'che vuoi?' or 'what does the Jew want?' (Zizek, 2008, 128), a feature attached to the God of Torah, for He is an 'impossible Other,' according to Lacan, whose wishes and demands cannot be resolved, like His wish for the Israelites to roam the earth, his command to Abraham to slaughter Isaac, his calamities upon Job, and finally his choice of the Jews to be the chosen ones. This 'impossible' is attached to the Jews in everyday life.

Daniel is not clear in his demand, part of his being a Jew. Thus, 'fantasy,' in the Lacanian sense of the word (the setting of realizing the desire for the impossible Other), replaces the void hovering around Daniel or his Jewish friends and relatives. They become symbols of economic exploitation, political scheming, morally corrupting, sexually seducing innocent girls, and in sum, a code, a cipher representing social symptoms and antagonism. Doctorow reflects this unconscious hatred in his words: "Jews were charged with international conspiracy and Catholics with trying to bring the Pope to America" (Doctorow, 2007, 29).

Moreover, the word 'Jew' in the novel goes beyond its semantic and syntactic connotations. It becomes a signifier of corruptive properties. In other words, a Jew is greedy, schemer, seducer, and exploiter because he is a Jew. It is not a matter of tautology; in fact, Jewish means filthy, cheap, schemer, and so on. In the scene where the mob attacks the bus on which Daniel, his parents, and relatives are sitting, this 'Jew' signifier is well employed: "Flying in with the rocks... the words kike, commie bastards, Jew commie... Jew bastard...". The shouting mob does not need to attach the word "Jew" with other modifiers since the word itself is pregnant with a long history of hatred and unreal fantasy.

Robert Lewin, another Jewish character in the novel, undergoes the label of 'conceptual Jew.' Doctorow describes him and his family in a unique, ironic way: "liberal Jews who live comfortably in a Christian world" (2007, 76). The antagonism towards these successful characters is based upon their being the theft of enjoyment of other citizens. As believed, they have something that the others do not, as fantasy recreates. The typical non-Jewish society ascribes its socio-economical deprivation to the Jews as having something that we do not have. They have the 'jouissance' that we are deprived of. From here on, the postmodern anti-Semitism ignites. This could be the main reason behind Daniel's agony: "And for thousands of years, my people stumbling through the world in their suffering looking for paradise on earth, righteous in our adoration of YHVH, trying to find a home on earth..." (2007, 66).

Thus, Doctorow has wittily adjusted his narrative techniques and the disorder of events to this postmodern ideology of anti-Semitism. This ideology cannot be looked at through the traditional lenses of analysis. This ideology has undergone a very smooth and lengthy process of evolutionary changes that it no longer appears on the surface.

### ***Welcome to Hard Times: A Paradox of History***

It would help if you had, even for once, thought of your death and planned to die a hero for your nation, for history, for intellectuality, that your name shall be "before the mountains were born... from everlasting to everlasting" (Psalms 90:2). However, one day you cross the street to buy a Coca-Cola and suddenly find yourself dead by an irresponsible teenage driver. Your name is not even worth mentioning the next day. Your death was inevitable, but it didn't happen the way you planned. This is what happens in *Welcome to Hard Times*.

This novel (1960) by E. L. Doctorow is of great symbolic value. It accepts many interpretations and readings, yet the aspect of History could be neglected. In sum, this novel is a tricky one in this regard and has adopted both Foucauldian and anti-Foucauldian, or social cycle theory, attitudes toward processing History.

In the novel, the so-called Mayor, Mr. Blue, intends to reestablish the town after it had been burnt by the Bad Man from Bodie. He plans to move in a predetermined line to reach the climax of economic and social prosperity he had in mind. His strategy was to welcome newcomers, make them build houses, and work to complete prosperity. However, the events did not occur as he wished. "They suspend the continuous accumulation of knowledge, interrupt its slow development, and force it to enter a new time." Unlike Mr. Blue's planning, they "cut it off from its empirical origin and original motivations" (Foucault, 2010, 4). The newcomers ceased building houses, favoring spending on other investments. Moreover, the overpopulation of the town and the following crimes frustrated Mr. Blue's final destination. These Foucauldian interruptions of History are one significant aspect of the novel.

Nevertheless, the day the Bad Man from Bodie burnt the town and left, Mr. Blue expected a second coming of the criminal. Moreover, he had foreseen that the deserted town would one day be full of people again if he treads a specific designated plan. In other words, the significant events were expected by Mr. Blue to happen. According to "social cycle theory," the events in the novel undergo three primary Historical phases. First, after the population of a specific place reaches an unbearable status and becomes overcrowded, its growth rate declines to a stable value, unable to accept further increase in number, as observed at the novel's beginning before the debut of the Bad Man. This reoccurs at the end before the second coming of the criminal, forming a circular appearance of events. Second, in a specific development of events and population, the dominant systems experience a decline in the

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living standards of individuals, increasing the possibility of disorder and divergence (Turchin and Nefedov, 2009, 303). After the horrible overpopulation before the first and second coming of the Bad Man, we observe a severe decline in the living standards of the townspeople, except for a few individuals like Zar, Isaac, and Mr. Blue.

In contrast, the others were suffering economically, leading to a sudden eruption of the people after the appearance of the Bad Man. Third, after the social breakdown, free resources become available, the production rate starts to increase again, the growth of the population resumes, and a new social order or sociodemographic cycle begins (Turchin, 2003: 386). This is again observable twice in the novel. First, after the Bad Man burns down the town and most of the residences leave, Mr. Blue inherits the well of water for free, collects woods for a decent expense, and resumes economic prosperity without many challenges. The second time, this is observed, though symbolically, at the very end, where a new cycle is about to begin when Mr. Blue thinks of keeping the wood, for "someone will come by sometime who will want to use the wood" (1960 47).

Thus, Doctorow's approach to History in this novel is complex. The writer tends to plot the order of significant events teleologically in a circular manner, while minute dramatic events erupt unexpectedly.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the comprehensive analysis of the literary oeuvre of E. L. Doctorow renders an intricate examination of a wide array of themes, spanning from the disintegration of government structures to the interplay between dreams, reality, and ideology. By employing the theoretical frameworks of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis, the author delves deep into the intricate web of relationships that exist between the characters within Doctorow's works and their respective socio-political contexts. A particularly poignant example of this can be found in the metaphorical representation of a chicken within the story of a madman, which serves as a powerful symbol of the government's obliviousness to its own dysfunction, a motif that resonates throughout the entirety of Doctorow's novels. Furthermore, the examination of history as an elusive "unicorn," incessantly seeking alternative versions and interpretations, presents a compelling argument that challenges the very feasibility of rewriting the unchangeable "Real" of historical events. This paradox of history, as exemplified in the novel "Welcome to Hard Times," introduces a dynamic interplay between Foucauldian interruptions and cyclical social patterns, thereby engendering a narrative tension that defies simplistic categorization. The scholarly exploration of Doctorow's works, as meticulously dissected herein, serves to provide a rich tapestry of profound insights into the fundamental essence of the human condition, the intricacies of governance structures, and the intricate dance between dreams, reality, and ideology, thereby enriching our understanding of these complex concepts.

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