

Individual's Quest in E.L. Doctorow's *Loon Lake*

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Abstract:

This paper aims to demonstrate the search for personal fulfilment that does not require a physical journey, but an inner or spiritual exploration in E.L. Doctorow's *Loon Lake*. It also examines the contexts that Joe, the protagonist, encounters as well as his identity in relation to these settings. The paper will explore the spiritual poverty which the settings represent versus the concept of spiritual wealth represented by Joe's disappointed ideal to live in an uncorrupted context. The basic question here concerns the nature of the relationship between Joe and the individual contexts. With respect to the interdependency between causality and context, these focal points imply the question as to why he leaves all the places or contexts, yet returns to the estate.

Keywords: Exploration, Relationship, Interdependency, Identity and Spiritual.

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In Doctorow's *Loon Lake* (1980) the main character, Joe, leaves his hometown, Paterson, and sets out on a journey to escape the spiritual meagreness which accompanies material poverty. He travels to New York, but eventually leaves the city. His next destination is California which figures as a quasi promised land that he never reaches. Joe meets a travelling carnival, subsequently arrives at Loon Lake, the estate of a billionaire, but he also leaves this context and arrives in Jackson town. He finally returns to Loon Lake and remains there.

The contexts in *Loon Lake* are interconnected with one another because of the central character's experience of the represented spaces. Identity plays a crucial role in establishing the relationship between the various contexts in this novel. It is mainly through Joe's awareness of his own identity that the similarities between the contexts and the differences between a national context and an individual are foregrounded.

The argument presented here is that Joe's identity and course are determined by the nature of the particular contexts which he encounters. What distinguishes Joe from other inhabitants of a context like Paterson-- whose identities are also formed by their context -- is that initially Joe does not reject his potential to be spiritually wealthy. The spiritual poverty of Paterson becomes a theme which the reader eventually associates with other contexts in the novel as well. The narrator develops the idea of America as a collection of contexts which forms a unified or national "identity." One is therefore dealing with two opposing "identities," i.e., of an individual and a national context.

Tzvetan Todorov's "The Quest of Narrative" opens with the idea that "literature must be treated as literature" which he identifies as an established condition, disallowing literature to be "more" (120). He does not disqualify this statement, but points out that the idea has no meaning if it functions as a tautology, i.e., if the junction of subject and the predicate are identical (120). "A narrative" can only be meaningful if it does not signify itself, but another "narrative."

In *Loon Lake*, Joe's journey is not merely a journey and an escape, but also a search for his Holy Grail, namely fulfilment or spiritual wealth. A narrative is never conclusive in itself: one can always relate it to another. Joe's journey from place to place may at times seem contrived, but this should be interpreted as a technique to foreground the presence of the consciousness that composes the narrative. Towards the end of the novel, after having fled Loon Lake, having stolen the estate's owner's car and mistress, Joe returns. After a spell in Jacksontown, he is more or less welcomed with open arms and made heir to Loon Lake. The latter is a strategically important part of the novel, yet certainly the least credible. However, Joe's journey is not merely a narrative depicting a physical journey or a succession of events. It should be seen as an allegory. The novel presents the story of Joe's physical journey as well as illustrates the complexity of the choice between spiritual wealth and poverty.

"Joe's journey leads him to Loon Lake" is a statement that means very little when viewed in transrational terms. The estate's exterior is glamorous, but its very essence cannot be divorced from the nature of the other places that Joe is exposed to, namely, Paterson, the carnival which is the ultimate metaphor for private enterprise, and Jacksontown. Loon Lake is not Joe's Grail, but quite the opposite. One constantly recognizes that "every event has a literal meaning and allegorical meaning" (Todorov, 129). Significant events in the novel occur when Joe leaves one context for another: the occasion when he robs Paterson's church's poor box; Joe's reaction when Fanny, the Fat Lady, a carnival "item," is raped; when Joe is overwhelmed by Clara's beauty and follows her; when he writes his name in Loon Lake's guest book; when Joe and Clara remain in Jacksontown and when Joe returns to Loon Lake. One has to consider Joe's motivation to understand the meaning of the episodes above.

The decisions that Joe takes are always in support of his quest towards fulfilment with the exception of when he finally returns to Loon Lake as Bennett's heir. The Grail is, in opposition to Loon Lake, something unambiguously good due to its spiritual value. This is also how Loon Lake achieves its meaning. It signifies an unambiguously moral regression due to its lack of spiritual value. In "The Righteous Artist: E.L. Doctorow," Diane Johnson presents an interpretation of *Loon Lake*: "Loon Lake is 'a cold black lake,' owned, loons preying on fish there, the shores haunted by the ghosts of dying Indians. It is a reflex of capitalist society and a form of selfish luxury" (144). The estate is thus at the same time concrete and abstract, situated in a novel that represents places and events with symbolic dimensions. The concrete Loon Lake symbolizes the alternative to fulfilment, i.e., material prosperity at the price of spiritual prosperity.

The first context, Paterson, is the prototype of a lower working class location set in the 1930s Depression, symbolic of a spiritual depression throughout a nation. The person who depicts this environment is Joe, born from two of the inhabitants, i.e., his parents are mill workers of this town. He is by implication part of the conforming masses. If Paterson is the result of the Depression and the Patersonians, the products of living in Paterson, the logical deduction would be that a child would resemble his parents or the people in his context. However, the reader is constantly aware of Joe's conscious discrimination between himself and the people in Paterson as well as in the other contexts. He refuses to conform to the established mentality in Paterson and emerges from spiritual inertia as a rebellious individual.

The basic difference between Joe and the town's population is that the masses remain in Paterson where they have the security of an income earned by working at a mill, albeit a meagre one, in comparison to Joe who leaves Paterson. This difference can be interpreted in terms of metaphorical stasis. The stasis of the Patersonians that prompts Joe's rebellious disposition is not due to the material poverty of his parents and the town, but the spiritual poverty of both. They reduce their total existence to their poor material lives.

The population of Paterson can be divided into four prominent categories. The first three categories are nameless. They are the workers like Joe's parents and the homeless and unemployed consisting of children, derelicts and gangs. The third category is the church represented by the priest. A characteristic of the Patersonians is that they lack individuality and potential to attain any form of external or inner prosperity. Joe and the Patersonians are distinguishable from each other because Joe's fate is not fixed, at least not until he returns to Loon Lake. Every Patersonian is subjected to his or her own seemingly irrevocable personal fate. The lives of Joe's parents are presented as unchangeable and they lack the capacity to improve their existence. There is no sign of any attempt to enrich their lives. The reader consequently recognizes the bitter acceptance of this impoverished existence.

The difference between the nature of the individual and that of the context causes Joe's isolation. His chronic alienation due to spiritual poverty leads him to leave Paterson. A feature of Joe's youth is that he is ultimately homeless despite being naturally associated with Paterson. In *Loon Lake*, Joe is aware of his freedom in opposition to those imprisoned by their context. He still wants to attain his dream by going to a place that will not disappoint him, but he does not know how to reach such a place and confuses a mental destination with a geographical location. Among the down-and-outs in New York, he appreciates the kind of man who would say "why things were the way they were" (10). Such an attitude would not deny the harsh reality of any context that he has encountered. Joe is, unlike Daniel, nevertheless not exempt from self-deception.

He hears from the homeless that California is exquisite, New York's complete antithesis. A cycle becomes recognizable and the reader anticipates disillusionment. But it is also his dream, naive as it may be, that keeps him spiritually alive. In New York, Joe learns that individuals are essentially prisoners of their own contexts, i.e., they over-identify themselves with the contexts that they are part of and are unable to

have a discerning perspective. Joe's bird's eye view enables him to see that there is no distinction between the materially wealthy and the poor with regard to personal fulfilment.

The implication of Joe's return to Loon Lake is that he completes a cycle. Bennett is a person who sustains the kind of relationship that exists between Paterson and Loon Lake. Paterson's reality is indirectly determined by Bennett's contribution to the creation of contexts within society. Joe becomes the heir to a legacy that will support the kind of context of which Joe had been a victim as a child. Joe has to decide between the life style of searching and one that endows external power. When Clara rejects Joe out of fear for her returning boyfriend, Tommy Crapo, his willingness to endure material poverty gives way to accepting material wealth at the price of the possibility of finding spiritual wealth. His decision to return to Loon Lake on his way to California with Sandy signifies a belief that he will be disappointed again. Joe finally believes that spiritual fulfilment does not exist.

In the custom of Doctorow's fiction, *Loon Lake* emphasizes that material wealth does not safeguard spiritual wealth -- and Joe knows this very well. He sees freedom as the real source of wealth, but also as unobtainable. While in New York, Joe is content with his meagre earnings that he receives for working at Graeber's store: "When I went along after work with my tips in my pocket I was John D. Rockefeller" (9). The name "Rockefeller" here signifies exhilaration and contentment. Looking at the elements of Joe's identity that one recognizes that they do not only distinguish him as a promising capitalist. The reproduction of capitalism depends on the validity of principle, not of desire, and therefore Joe, the capitalist-to-be, has to prove his eligibility by displaying the principal qualities which make the master: cunning, immorality, selfishness, determination, freedom from desire. And as Christopher Morris, *Models of Misrepresentation: On the Fiction of E. L. Doctorow*, points out:

Joe's epiphany compensates for the loss of Clara... This discovery on Joe's part aligns his joyful 'wisdom' with Bennett's and with the Nietzschean idea of the *Übermensch*. At the end of the novel, both characters embody values similar to those of J.P. Morgan in *Ragtime*... (129)

If Joe would have found wealth, it would have been as a rebellious Joe of Paterson. But in 1941, Joe changes his name legally: he becomes Joseph Paterson Bennett and modifies his identity and consequently loses his freedom to mature as he had when he left the carnival. The name change symbolizes fulfilment of the American Dream. One can therefore conclude that Doctorow relativizes the validity of the American Dream. Leaving no doubt that the inherent barrenness and narcissism of the capitalist hierarchy are the historical conditions of his career; Joe's autobiography will have to be read not as a half-hearted, emphatic apology for, but as an incisive indictment of the capitalist's life which is especially poignant for its being a self-indictment.

The centre of Joe's idealism is partly represented by a fiction he created out of Clara, i.e., by what he as the spiritual son of Penfield the poet thinks he sees in her. Clara is ultimately just another attempt in

trying to find his Grail, a “context” that could be fulfilling. However, just like his hopes in New York, his desire to reach California, longing for a life with the carnival and being accepted by Clara end in disappointment.

Joe’s realization that he cannot escape from spiritual poverty and his disillusionment induces his resignation. He gives up by choosing Loon Lake as his home: the metaphorical residence of the powerful who control towns and cities. Paterson, New York, Jacksontown are synonymous with one another and although geographically detached from the estate, they form a unity with Loon Lake.

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