

# The Gnostic Drive for Narration in the Fiction of E. L. Doctorow

Bi Jiancheng

School of International Relations, Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing, China

**Email address:**

1098661449@qq.com

**To cite this article:**

Bi Jiancheng. The Gnostic Drive for Narration in the Fiction of E. L. Doctorow. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*. Vol. 8, No. 6, 2020, pp. 316-319. doi: 10.11648/j.ijla.20200806.12

**Received:** October 26, 2020; **Accepted:** November 12, 2020; **Published:** November 19, 2020

---

**Abstract:** As a top-ranking novelist in contemporary America, E. L. Doctorow is distinguished at his literary innovation of juxtaposing historical and imaginative texts, and is acknowledged as a “postmodern author”. However, after surveying his creative doctrines and artistic concept, we may perceive a kind of spiritual ring that is out of tune with postmodern literature, but quite compatible with Gnostic principles. The Gnosticism emphasizes the “intuitive process of knowing” which can be reflected in Doctorow’s novelistic creation. This study intends to prove that in Doctorow’s fiction there exists an ongoing drive to relate the story which stems from the author’s Gnostic consciousness; the power of Doctorow’s narrative right derives from human desire to reestablish the lost spiritual connection with other human beings by means of mysterious signs and symbols of language. The endeavor to interpret Doctorow’s literary creation with the help of Gnostic spirits and attitudes may bring dynamics to Doctorow criticism, inspire the appreciation of Doctorow’s works, and attempt to redress his stereotypical title as a “postmodern writer”.

**Keywords:** Doctorow’s Fiction, Gnosticism, Gnostic Narration, Postmodern Context

---

## 1. Introduction

One of the quintessential contemporary American writers, E. L. Doctorow was once acclaimed as the “national treasure”. He is well known for his technical sophistication in postmodern fiction, such as nonlinear narration, collage, hybrid of discourses, etc., thus tagged as a “postmodern writer [16].” Researches on Doctorow’s literary creation ranges widely from its political inclination, historical dimension, Jewish origin, experimental techniques, ethical values and existential thoughts. More recently, the studies on Doctorow’s oeuvre is more concerned with religious implication, ecological awareness, racial identity, cultural memory, etc. In sum, it is dominantly agreed that Doctorow ought to be classified as a postmodern author with some humanist tendencies. Yet as Ihab Hassan observes, literature does not only respond to power; it resists it. There is a “resistance of literary texts to their contexts” which could be “the spiritual element in literature [8].” Indeed, it seems that Doctorow’s work does not exhibit relativism and skepticism that are usually reckoned as the salient features of the postmodern literature. It is safe to say that Doctorow’s technical sophistication in postmodern fiction may not make him

qualified enough for a postmodern writer. Actually, the connotations of his works are always beyond their form and imbued with exuberant internal power, which makes the disconnected texts coherent. This paper attempts to assert that Doctorow is intrinsically a literary Gnostic whose work demonstrates affiliation with Gnostic attitudes and principles, “reflecting his spiritual concerns in a postmodern context [2].”

## 2. Spiritual Issues in Gnostically-concerned Consciousness

Gnosticism takes its name from gnosis, a Greek word for “knowing”, but not in the sense of scientific cognition, instead, it is “knowing through insight”, especially referring to “an intuitive process of knowing oneself”. Since Gnostic “knowledge” is supposed knowledge of God and oneself, it is radically different from all other rational knowledge, for the gnosis, according to its believers, is the only form that salvation can take. Gnosticism is far from a monolithic set of beliefs, and its history is one that is intimately linked to religion. Nevertheless, the references to gnosis in this study are relatively secular in orientation. The term “gnosis” is

used here in particular connection with intuition, perception and imagination which are the indispensable authorial elements in art creation.

This study proposes that the way spiritual issues in Doctorow's novels ought to be explored through a consideration of narrative techniques and the multiplicity of intertexts which are found in the imaginative production of a Gnostically-concerned consciousness. The spiritual aspects of the texts underscore important metaphysical issues that address the questions of why the imaginative act has the subversive significance, and why Doctorow's keen interest in human perception and intuition energizes his fiction, which help to explain the intuitive power of an artist's creativity. The narrators of the 8 novels being examined here — *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960), *The Book of Daniel* (1971), *Ragtime* (1974), *Loon Lake* (1979), *Billy Bathgate* (1989), *The Waterworks* (1994), *City of God* (2000), *Andrew's Brain* (2014) — all exhibit genuine spiritual concerns under the guise of the skeptical postmodern cynicism. They struggle to communicate with their intuitive capacity. In order to manage a believable depiction of these character-narrators (or writer-narrators<sup>1</sup>) and their sense of obligation to assign meaning to occurrences and make spiritual connections, Doctorow intentionally endows them with a kind of Gnostic revelation which is not dissimilar from the epiphany of the "artist as genius", the universal Romantic trope.

This study intends to elucidate that Doctorow's oeuvre displays an alikeness with the principal doctrines of Gnosticism which is historically defined as "other" to Christianity as dualistic and thus heresy. It is through examination of differing, yet connected imagery and intertexts that evidence of thematically significant metaphysical questions concerning intuition, insight and creativity can be found. These intertexts are a testament to the versatile quality of Doctorow's writing, proving that his novels exemplify imaginative narrative as a creative act with spiritual values. Of particular interest for such an analysis are the character-narrators' desire for connections and sense of duty to interpret signs in order to reveal truth, which serve as key to a Gnostic interpretation of the novels. This study keeps a methodological openness in the multiplicity of intertexts that can be revealed by close analysis, attempting to give the seemingly unrelated textual clues some sensible interpretation.

The Gnostic cosmogony is grounded in a human longing to be reunited with an infinite source (the Light). Thus, "connection" in Gnosticism denotes "reunion with the pre-originary unity", symbolized by the image of the alienated divine spark of light returning the home of Light. This study holds that the concern with spiritual connection is an essential part of a pattern characterizing Doctorow's novels, where connections are made within the domain of the narrators' consciousness or even on the level of the unconscious. Making spiritual connection is inherent in

human psyche, and the power of Doctorow's narration right derives from the deep-grounded human desire to make the lost connections with other human beings via the signs and symbols of language. In Doctorow's work, spiritual connection is constructed through the narrators' imaginative production to compose coherent stories and to communicate with current and future readers as well. Both means "inform an authorial reconsideration of the role humankind plays at present and could play in the near future [4]."

### 3. Gnostic Imagery and Symbols in Doctorow's Literary Creation

It is to be found that Doctorow's works are imbued with Gnostic imagery and symbols. In the introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Creationists*, Doctorow paid homage to some of the creative minds that have enlightened human intellects and served as moral compasses for readers. This tribute to his favorite American men of letters is replete with references to a Gnostic strain among them such as "...we know by what we create [5]." References to authors' "sense of recognition", "illumination", and "flashes of insight" abound. In his introduction to *Creationists*, Doctorow repeatedly refers to "the mind". Since in his opinion, it is the creative mind, i.e. the imagination that serves as a vehicle of connection between what is inside and outside, past and present. He suggests that there are "outside forces", something beyond one's own consciousness, glistening in the gaps of the narrative. The artist's inspiration is a sort of gnosis, the kind of knowledge that is an intuition or recognition of transcendent truth. In the years both preceding and following the millennium shift, the mainstream media was filled with growing existentialist mood. The Gnostic illumination in Doctorow's fictional production reflects some of his fellow Americans' apparent need for expressions of "hope to balance out a postmodern worldview dominated by science and skepticism [1]."

Doctorow goes further to claim that a novel is written "at the expense of the novelist's being" and that an author's identity is "dissolved" into the writing of books. In the end, the writer becomes "mysterious to himself [5]." These are revealing Romantic assertions for a supposedly postmodern author. Throughout his introduction, he repeatedly refers to "light" in its different forms: he uses nouns like "illumination" and "radiance", as well as verbs like "shines, flashes," and "dazzles", which indicate a certain tendency to equate the writer's intuition of the obligation and desire to impart secret knowledge to the intuition that appears in the light of gnosis. Also significantly, the author himself seems not to be suspicious of change and advance as possibilities, and is deeply entrenched to the idea of bringing about social progress through his novels and their film adaptation. He does not write for an elite readership, but intends to influence and entertain the general public. When *Ragtime* first appeared, Doctorow was quoted as saying that he wanted his work to be accessible to vast new constituencies. He declared: "I want

1 Most of the narrators of Doctorow's novels are writers, scholars or persons who are capable of writing, such as Daniel, Everett, McIlvaine, and Blue. In *Ragtime*, *Loon Lake*, and *Billy Bathgate*, the narrators are all juveniles, but the novels suggest that they grow up to become writers or persons who can write.

working-class people to read it, people who don't follow novels. Reading novels requires an effort of the will. I want the reader to be as unaware of committing a cultural act as he is when he goes to movies [7]."

As John Parks wrote of *Ragtime*, "a novel that was making that much money raised questions about its worth as literature — a kind of perverse logic in American culture [12]." In an interview with Larry McCaffery entitled "A Spirit of Transgression", Doctorow expressed his viewpoint on the function of literature as follows: "But I also know that a book can affect consciousness — affect the way people think and therefore the way they act. Books create constituencies that have their own effect on history, and that's been proven time and time again [10]." This is much in tune with the Gnostic attitude toward reality: to plunge into mundane life in order to solve those worldly issues. And to reach this end, he has responded to powerful contemporary trends in American culture, increasing the chances that his book will be read and reviewed. In other words, he has conceived his narratives in the spirit of the professional and critical market — a postmodern discourse — while "not actually buying into that discourse [1]."

Nevertheless, his engagement in postmodern trend does not shadow his literary concerns and targets. Reading Doctorow's fiction, one might be struck by his sense of social responsibility as an artist and his persistent pursuit for historical truth. His narratives empower those neglected narratives in history, giving justice to silenced voices of the past and discrediting those who abused their power. It would appear that Doctorow sees himself as an author who can continue that ancient tradition of storytelling, making critical evaluations crucially related to the concept of human agency as well as its quest for justice, and making efforts that could be seen as atypical of the postmodern writer. As Peter Prescott has noted, "...he's a deeply traditional writer, reworking American history, American literary archetypes even exhausted subliterary genres. It's an astonishing performance..." [13]."

#### 4. Spiritual Construction Through Sparks of Gnosis

Although there was no single origin of Gnosticism, it was the unity behind the multiplicity which was "the true entity with which we are confronted [9]." This unifying factor was called in its different versions — pneuma, psyche, or metaphorically "spark" or "seed of light" — it was this "transcendent inner principle hidden within humankind, destined for ultimate recognition and reunion with its original," that was "the center of the Gnostic religion [9]." The lost and alienated fragments of spirit are finally redeemed and return to the Holy Home, the World of Light. Thus, in Gnosticism, obtaining gnosis and then being reunited with the divine origin are thus regarded to have redemptive significance. Doctorow's works are characterized by multiplicity of perspectives and fusion of discourses, which however never gives readers sense

of fragmentation and disjointedness. This study aims to justify the argument that there is a unifying spiritual core in all his works that serves to combine the seemingly fragmented narratives. Despite the "syncretistic means of expression" in them, Doctorow's texts just exhibit a consciousness of the desire for reunification with the light described by the Gnostics, a desire that demands the human agency of an attempt to gratify. The narrating power of Doctorow's fiction stems right from this Gnostic core, and it expresses the possibility of the lost connection with others that humanity is trying to build through linguistic signs and mysterious symbols. For Doctorow, Gnostic fiction narrates under an assumption that there is a pre-originary unity. Doctorow himself prefers to "be an implied author" or a "ventriloquist" as he puts it, "imitating the characters in each book to narrate stories [3]." Instead of fragmentation, there is a celebration of blending, a move toward the unity underneath the seemingly discontinuous discourses.

Most of his fictional works have similar narrative modes: the narrators of those novels all claim to be highly sensitive and perceptive writers, scholars or people who are capable of writing. They are simultaneously artists who are equipped with the artistic quality to fulfill their duties. In Doctorow's eyes, they are Gnostic narrators whose narratives are more persuasive in presenting historical truth with intuitive power of cognition. Underneath the postmodern narrative configuration of Doctorow's fiction there is a unifying spiritual core which serves to cohere the fragmented narratives. "Reunion with the pre-originary unity" is just the center doctrine of the Gnostic cosmogony. In the novels *Loon Lake*, *Waterworks* and *Welcome to Hard Times*, the narrators are claiming to be endowed with a sort of transcendent capacity of cognition (Gnosis), which may filter past events through the discourse of his own time and impart knowledge and information to future readers. In a postmodern context, Doctorow seems to poke around in the common ground between rational thought and intuition, between logic and religious mysticism, using Gnosis as a connecting signifier.

Doctorow's "non-novel is the crystallization of fact and imagination, an intertext between history and literature [6]." We may find that in this particular text, the persistent erasure of boundaries between the supposedly opposing discourses with gnosis as a connecting signifier is Doctorow's original gesture toward de-fragmentation, so that he can build spiritual connection within human psyche to forge coherent and complete stories of narrator's Self and self-consciousness. We will find that the concern with language and art creation is the hallmark of Doctorow's fiction. Thus, the concern with spiritual connection is part of a pattern underpinning Doctorow's novels. Connection can be made through communication, and writing is communication by signs. The power of Doctorow's narrative right derives from human desire to reestablish the lost spiritual connection with other human beings by means of mysterious signs and symbols of language. It requires both the "characters and readers endeavor to work to piece together a narrative that makes sense [11]." In some cases, the narrators are trying to make connections

through the medium of language with one's past, present and future to compose a coherent story as in *Loon Lake*, through synchronic communication with contemporaries as in *The Waterworks*, and through diachronic communication with later generations as in *Welcome in Hard Times*.

## 5. Conclusion

Therefore, it is improper and difficult to separate Doctorow from the Zeitgeist in which he writes. Nowadays, postmodernism has become a universal humanist context and cultural climate in the postmodern era. Gnosticism in postmodern context boasts to have new dimensions. Gnosis in postmodern context can be considered as the nexus between intuition and logical thinking, religious mysticism and technological material cosmos. In postmodern context, "to say that science has a cultural basis" or "to explore the use of narrative in science" are all among the "attempts to mediate and bridge the gap [14]" between intuition and logical thinking. In Doctorow's fiction, the boundaries between the intertexts have blurred; various discourses interchange and merge with each other; intuitive cognition is linked to reasonable research. Doctorow's adroit combination between literary tradition and artistic innovation wins him dual reputation in both the critical community and popular readership. Thus, Doctorow ought to be listed in the school of literary Gnostics. His works are just formally postmodern but inherently Gnostic. That is what makes him "so lastingly unique and is one of the reasons why his completed body of work remains so important [15]."

The main purport of this study is to extend the Doctorow criticism beyond the over-stressed historical, political and postmodern scopes, with the aid of some notions and doctrines of Gnosticism, trying to seek how new spiritual sources throw light to the appreciation of Doctorow's work, intending to redress the stereotypical title of the "postmodern author" tagged by the critical circle for Doctorow, in the hope to add vivacity and open new horizon to the Doctorow scholarship.

## References

- [1] Bergström, Catherine Walker. (2010), *Intuition of an Infinite Obligation: Narrative Ethics and Postmodern Gnostics in the Fiction of E. L. Doctorow*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH.
- [2] Bi, Jiancheng. (2018). A Traditional Novelist Who Writes in Postmodern Context: The Stylistic Intention in the Fiction of E. L. Doctorow. *The 2018 Northeast Asia International Symposium on Linguistics, Literature and Teaching*. Vol. B: 320-324.
- [3] Chen, Junsong. (2016). *Every Book Has Its Own Voice*. A Collection of Studies on British and American Literature. 24 (spring): 17-26.
- [4] Collado-Rodrigues, Francisco. (2017). The Holy Fool's Revelation: Metafiction, Trauma, and Posthumanity in E. L. Doctorow's *Andrew's Brain*. *Papers on Language & Literature*. 53 (4): 383-414.
- [5] Doctorow, E. L. (2006). *Creationists*. New York: Random House.
- [6] Guo, Yingjie. (2014). *Ragtime: A Non-Novel in the Mist of History*. *Cross-Linguistic & Cross-Cultural Studies*. 5 (1): 125-130.
- [7] Gussow, Mel. (1975). Novelist Syncopates History in *Ragtime*. *The New York Times* 11 July: 12.
- [8] Hassan, Ihab. (1999). *Globalism and Its Discontents: Notes of a Wandering Scholar*. Profession 99. New York: Modern Language Association: 59-67.
- [9] Jonas, Hans. (2001). *The Gnostic Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- [10] McCaffery, Larry. (1999). *A Spirit of Transgression*. Ed. Morris. *Conversations with E. L. Doctorow*. Jackson: U P of Mississippi: 72-87.
- [11] Naydan, Liliana M. (2017). E. L. Doctorow and 9/11: Negotiating Personal and National Narratives in "Child, Dead, in the Rose Garden" and *Andrew's Brain*. *Studies in American Fiction*. 44 (2): 281-297.
- [12] Parks, John. (1991). *E. L. Doctorow*. New York: Continuum.
- [13] Prescott, Peter S. (1984). All-American Classics. *Newsweek*. 104 (1 Oct.): 87-94.
- [14] Roxburgh, Natalie, Anton Kirchhofer, and Anna Auguscik. (2016). Universal Narrativity and the Anxious Scientist of the Contemporary Neuronovel. *Mosaic*. 49 (4): 71-87.
- [15] Steven, Mark. (2018). Community and Apostrophe in the Novels of E. L. Doctorow. *Studies in American Fiction*. 45 (1): 119-140.
- [16] Yang, Renjing. (2001). E. L. Doctorow: An American Postmodernist Writer Concerning History and Politics. *Foreign Literature* (5): 7-11.