

# ONE CITY AS A WHOLE WORLD IN THE NOVEL “CITY OF GOD” BY E.L. DOCTOROW

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## ГОРОД КАК ЦЕЛЫЙ МИР В РОМАНЕ Э. Л. ДОКТОРОУ «ГРАД БОЖИЙ»

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### ABSTRACT

The article deals with the study of main ideas in the novel “City of God” by American writer Edgar Lawrence Doctorow. The different opinions to the creative work of the writer as one of the most talented, the most ambitious and most respected American novelists of the era of postmodernism are demonstrated. The author attempts to determine such three main ideas in the novel, as: the idea of New York as a reflexion of all humanity, the idea of faith and religion, the idea of the role of writer and literature in the world.

### АННОТАЦИЯ

Статья посвящена анализу романа "Град Божий" американского писателя Эдгара Лоуренса Доктороу с точки зрения его идейно-структурных компонентов. Поданы различные точки зрения критиков на творчество писателя как одного из самых талантливых и уважаемых американских романистов периода постмодернизма. Делается попытка определить такие ведущие мотивы данного романа как: Нью-Йорк как отображение всего человечества, мотив веры и религии, роль писателя и литературы в мире.

**Key words:** modern American literature, historical metafiction, postmodernism, historical novel.

**Ключевые слова:** современная американская литература, историографическая метапроза, постмодернизм, исторический роман.

Edgar Lawrence Doctorow (1931 – 2015), playwright and essayist as well as novelist has among other honors the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Edith Wharton Citation

for Fiction, the William Dean Howells Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the presidentially conferred National Humanities Medal. He is considered one of the most talented, the most ambitious and most respected American novelists of the era of postmodernism. His body of work has been published in more than 30 languages.

In this paper, I will study E. L. Doctorow's novel "City of God" closely. To my mind, E. L. Doctorow has surpassed all other living writers in his 19th and 20th centuries' American life vivid depictions. His eighth novel "City of God" received the presidentially conferred National Humanities Medal. The aim of this work is to determine main ideas in the novel.

The work by E. L. Doctorow was studied by such researchers as Harold Bloom, Bruce Weber, etc., but not from the point of view of main ideas detection in this historiographical novel. Thus, the topicality of the research deals with the importance of analyzing the peculiarities of historiographical metafiction genre.

Events of "City of God" are set in the present in New York City, which represents the modern world. The book looks back on the 20th century, probing the circumstances of a priest, a rabbi and a writer in such a way that the weight of history is brought to bear on their lives. The novel has a brazen millennial cast and addresses more directly than his previous novels the nature of contemporary life.

Critics consider E.L. Doctorow's novel "City of God" (2000) as a "puzzle", "zigzag", non-linear, dotted and fragmentary, philosophical historical metafiction written in style of jazz improvisation [1, 5]. Indeed, it is narrated in an experimental mode, with a jumpiness meant to mimic what E. L. Doctorow calls the attention deficit disorder that afflicts the entire culture. Writing in "The New York Times", critic Michiko Kakutani called it a "novel of ideas that may be packed with ideas but that fails as a satisfying work of fiction" [4, p.1]. In "Newsweek", Peter Plagens wrote that it all "hangs together brilliantly" [5, p.94].

E. L. Doctorow admitted: "I also feel that an enormous number of people, perhaps most of the people in this country, partake of both ways of thinking and being without ever landing in one way or another. A lot of the Judeo-Christian ethic is now instilled

in civil life. It is possible for people who are not particularly pious to live just as ethically as people who are pious. As far as a critique of traditional religion, that's nothing new" [8, p.2].

The book "City of God" is consists of many worlds from the author's probing imagination. That one theme of the book is the artist as a God-like figure is not accidental; it jibes with the idea that God's earth is not entirely within his control. There are motives of history, physics, and philosophy, but mostly divinity motives in the novel. In the novel heaven is brought down to earth, the eternal and the everyday are mixed, spirituality and science are reconciled and hang together with a new understanding of humankind cosmic status. Many themes are combined in great synthesis: Einsteinian physics, Jewish and Christian theology, Wittgensteinian logic, Vietnam, the Holocaust, and New York City (which E. L. Doctorow calls a great religioplex)[9, p.42].

New York City plays role of both setting and symbol throughout the novel. The locale of novel is Manhattan; a novelist named Everett (whom one can hardly resist identifying with E. L. Doctorow himself, whose first name is Edgar) probes another bizarre disappearance. In this case, what has disappeared is not a person but a cross – which, after vanishing from behind the altar of Saint Timothy's, an old Episcopal church on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, has turned up on the roof of the Synagogue for Evolutionary Judaism, a Reform congregation on the Upper West Side. In line with the biblical tradition, the story begins with a bang — the big bang, a vivid introduction to what Everett describes as a "horrifying" cosmos that somehow created its own space and time to expand into. A God involved in such a Genesis, Everett thinks, is not only beyond our understanding but ultimately so fearsome as to provide no hope of consolation.

After this uneasy excursion to the birth of the universe, the setting of the novel drops back into the present, at a New York dinner party. Moments later, there is the stream of consciousness of an Episcopal priest, Tom Pemberton. And then, suddenly, the Midrash Jazz Quartet is doing poetic riffs on the lyrics of "Me and My Shadow," applying traditional rabbinical commentary to the old song as if it were a Psalm. The

lack of linearity, the parallels to the literary collage of Scripture, the narrative and philosophical jumble are all part of the point. The novel itself is an illustration of our existence; this is the confusion of the world, and it's up to us to make sense of it.

For a while the cross's mysterious migration, which Tom and Joshua guess must be an inscrutable act of religiously motivated vandalism, looks as though it will be the center of a philosophical idea of the novel. Pemberton himself says he doesn't really want to know, because it's in the nature of spiritual signs to be inexplicable. Hence, the transfer of the cross is symbolic. Signs can be recognized, he tells Everett over drinks, but their meaning and provenance can't be expressed in words. The cross on the temple roof is ultimately allowed to stand, as though on an insurance claim, as an act of God. Joshua's murder outside a Lithuanian synagogue is treated with similar indifference. Both events serve the single narrative purpose of bringing Tom and Sarah together, though their connection seems to be more a matter of theological convenience than of romantic sympathy.

At the end of the novel Everett considers issue of coincidental deaths and miracles of survival, just before spinning an apocalyptic prophecy that parallels the way the Bible itself ends, with the Book of Revelation. The novel is the cloudy, atomized text of our existence.

Tom Pemberton's spiritual fatigue, variously attributed to the legacy of the 1960's, to Christianity's insufficient response to the destruction of European Jewry, to his own Oedipal struggles and to the whole damn 20th century, seems to have infected his author, whoever that may be. For all its ringing obeisances to the sacraments of literary modernism, "City of God" is a work of profoundly uneasy conscience . Evolutionary Judaism, the movement Tom embraces, along with Sarah, at the novel's end, seeks to recapture the holy vitalism that has been smothered by layers of tradition and mocked by modern skepticism. Wittgenstein's philosophy articulates a similar impulse – a desire to clear away received thinking and historical neuroses and engage the world as we find it.

"City of God" breathes life into the inert images and fading monuments of the past. There are references to the past that are as vivid as the present action and that

serve to clarify the results of what they foreshadow. Symbolism is clear and essential. The theft of a rather decrepit and no longer handsome altar cross is the slender reed that supports the meetings of two groups of characters. Their actions form what plot there is. What begins as a civilized dichotomy between the Christian and the Jews morphs into the closest possible collaboration. Through the past and the foreseeable future, always the city is a presence.

21st Century Manhattan might be very like the city limned by St. Augustine. Doctorow suggests a hope that it may have a better future than the 16th Century one, not because of sin and salvation nor destruction, nor revelation, nor even science nor religion, but because only two of those people inhabit it. It is left to the reader to decide if this denouement is ironic [6, p.45].

Writing between 413 and 426 A.D., Augustine drew the distinction between the City of God (faith, the elect) and the City of Man (unbelief, the damned). The fall of Roman civilization was the consequence of its moral decay, of the failure of piety to prevail over paganism. E. L. Doctorow's book raises that question for the end of the 20th Century.

Holden White believes that the similarity between historical and fictional narrative is "a function of their mutual interest in the mysteries of time" [7, p.152]. Within the framework of philosophical discourse Gnostic revelation is depicted in the novel, old characters are interpreted in a new way, such as a stolen cross. "The internal dialogue affects our personality," – says D. Carr. – "We are not the authors of our stories, but we should not take life as absurd circumstances" [2, p.166]. Novel characters, according to H. Bloom, "need the stranger or alien God of the Gnostics, who is exiled from our solar system, and the strange or alien God of the Gnostics, who is exiled from our solar system, and wanders out in the interstellar spaces" [1, p.5].

There is a characteristically fine celebration of the lyricality of hope in the novel: "Perhaps the first songs were lullabies. Perhaps mothers were the first singers. Perhaps they learned to soothe their squirming simian babes by imitating the sounds of moving water, the gurgles, cascades, splashes, puddlings, flows, floods, spurts, spills, gushes, laps and sucks. Perhaps they knew their babies were born from water. And rhythm was

the gentle rock of the water hammock slung between the pelvic trees. And melody was the sound the water made when the baby stirred its limbs” [3, p.124]. As Pem's formal faith withers, the book progresses as an increasingly secular pursuit of the idea of goodness, of a fundamental ethic.

The climax of the book occurs at the party celebrating Pem's marriage to the widowed rabbi, Sarah. Its form is a speech or prayer or sermon Pem delivers. It is as eloquent an exploration of the nature of human evil and the importance of good. For all its rage about the inhumanity of man, the novel is magnificently affirming. The wedding speech, the writer explained, “is just a portrayal of hell. The book turns out to cover a kind of struggle for faith, a spiritual crisis of one sort or another of these two people, both of whom are historically aware. And I don't think people who are secure in their faith can feel anything but compassion for this sort of struggle, which many people have gone through” [5, p.2].

For E.L. Doctorow, *City of God* is “New York, New York, capital of literature, the arts, social pretension, subway tunnel condos” [3, p.24]. Fictional New York is a place of hope and hopelessness, where God seems to be far and near, and people search for sense of life. In the contemporary photo the narrator sees New York as a vague but unmistakable city. He writes: “The city may begin from a marketplace, a trading post, the confluence of waters, but it secretly depends on the human need to walk among strangers.” [3, p.23]. Taking a look at the old photo of New York, the narrator observes: “I feel such stillness, the stillness of listening to a story whose end I know. I am looking at times when people had a story to enact and the streets they walked upon were narrative passages.” [3, p.23].

This study allows determining in the novel “*City of God*” by E.L. Doctorow three main ideas: the idea of New York as a reflexion of all humanity, the idea of faith, the idea of literature and the role of writer in the world. The novel, thus, attempts to encompass in some way the entire human race and all of life, the world and cosmos, the twentieth century's legacy of brutality as well as of scientific discovery. The originality of E.L. Doctorow's prose, meaningful depth of his works, variability and diversity of characters can be used as a subject for further research.

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