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Parody on Ulysses-Telemachus: Father-Son Conflict in E. L. Doctorow's *Loon Lake*: A Postmodern Perspective

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The contemporary postmodern texts are characterized by the inevitable presence of parody. Parody in these metafictional texts does not perform the negative role of 'ridicule' as attributed by the traditional literary convention. Doctorow does not ridicule or mock or destruct the original work which he undertakes to parody. If a new form does not develop, the old form degenerates to form a new one. It is a creative reworking to pay reverence to the original. Doctorow's work *Loon Lake* presents a parody on the legendary 'Ulysses-Telemachus' theme that has its origin in Tennyson's "Ulysses", a dramatic monologue. The major theme of the poem is Ulysses' crave for adventure and it symbolizes the 'Victorian Spirit of Adventure and Discoveries'. This study explores only the secondary theme that is the 'Father-Son' conflict which is treated in a parodical manner by Doctorow. He parodies the 'Ulysses-Telemachus' theme by installing and subverting its significant attributes.

Named after Edgar Allan Poe, Edgar Lawrence Doctorow is one among the distinguished Postmodern American novelists of the second half of the twentieth century. He can be grouped along with Philip Roth, Donald Barthelme, John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut and Thomas Pynchon. He has been conferred with the National Book Award, two National Book Critics Circle Awards, PEN/ Faulkner Award, Edith Wharton Citation for Fiction, William Dean Howell Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and National Humanities Medal. Driving in the Adirondack Mountains, Doctorow came across a road sign 'Loon Lake' and his feelings for the woods, streams intensified and poetically charged resulting in the title. The title is suggestive yielding the period, Great Depression and setting, the remote mountain retreat and a number of characters. He imagined a private rail road track through the mountains with a party of gangsters towards the wealthy people and it became the source for his novel. The story which he published under the title "Loon Lake" in the *Kenyon Review* turned out to be the poem of Warren Penfield.

Doctorow's work *Loon Lake* presents a parody on the legendary 'Ulysses-Telemachus' theme that has its origin in Tennyson's "Ulysses", a dramatic monologue. Though the genesis of the legend is found in Homer's *Odyssey* and Dante's *Inferno*, Tennyson got his inspiration from the later one. The major theme of the poem is Ulysses' crave for adventure and it symbolizes the 'Victorian Spirit of Adventure and Discoveries'. This study explores the secondary theme that is the 'Father-Son' conflict which is manifested in terms of temperament. Doctorow uses parody as a postmodern technique not to undermine the text but to enhance and make it contemporaneous. Hutcheon says that "a new form develops out of the old, without really destroying it; only the

function is altered. Parody . . . becomes a constructive principle in literary history If a new parodic form does not develop, the old form becomes ‘insufficiently motivated’ through overuse, that old form might degenerate into pure convention” (*Theory* 36).

Parody as a form of imitation has been in practice since 1700. This literary form has been constantly renewed, reassessed and reevaluated based on the purpose of its imitation. Parody in contemporary metafiction does not perform the negative role assigned to it by the traditional conception. Linda Hutcheon closely scrutinizes the etymology of the term and widens its scope by situating it in the postmodern context. The word ‘parody’ originates from the Greek term ‘parodia’ meaning ‘counter-song’. The suffix ‘odos’ means ‘song’ and the prefix ‘para’ carries with it two meanings indicating its two different pragmatic aspects. Firstly, ‘para’ means ‘counter’ or ‘against’ in which one text is measured against another with the conventional intention of mocking or ridiculing. Secondly, it means ‘beside’ implicating ‘intimacy’ instead of ‘contrast’ and this pragmatic aspect of postmodern parody broadens its scope. It is this second neglected aspect becomes the major concern of Hutcheon who define parody as:

Parody, then, in its ironic ‘trans-contextualization’ and inversion, is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signaled by irony. But this irony can be playful as well as belittling; it can be critically constructive as well as destructive. The pleasure of parody’s irony comes not from humor in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual ‘bouncing’ between complicity and distance. (*Theory* 32)

Doctorow parodies the ‘Ulysses-Telemachus’ theme by installing and subverting its significant attributes. The context is borrowed from Tennyson and ‘trans-contextualized’ in *Loon Lake* in a new context. The old text remains at the background waiting for the readers to identify and activate it. The new text is created out of the background one and the difference between the two is marked in terms of ‘irony’. The irony does not perform the ridiculing function rather it evaluates the original. Here the postmodern parody operates targeting the individuals and their temperament, quests, dispositions and the conflict between the father and son.

According to the Greek legend, Ulysses one of the heroes of the Trojan War does not return to his Island kingdom of Ithaca. He embarks on an adventurous journey for twenty years and returns to his wife, Penelope as an old man. Tennyson immortalizes Ulysses in his poem, “Ulysses” where he says that this historical person is unable to adapt to the dull and savage life of his own people. He cannot rest from travelling and has acquired a wide knowledge about men, manners, climates, councils and governments and drunk the ‘delight of battle’ throughout his life. His heart is hungry to explore the untravelled margins of the world and longs to bring new things. He does not want to make a pause or put an end to his adventure and become rustic. The grey spirit of Ulysses yearns in desire to accumulate knowledge like a sinking star. He wishes to sail beyond the sunset and explore the stars, Happy Isles, great Achilles, until his death. In sharp contrast to his father, Telemachus in spite of being a blooming youth, feels satisfied with the domestic life at home. He does not wish to be adventurous and active like his father. He is content to restrict his life within the narrow confines of his Island nation, common duties and offices of tender job. He is much satisfied about the love and calm and peaceful life of home.

The Ulysses-Telemachus theme which manifests the father-son conflict in terms of temperament is the consideration of American literary writers down the ages. The heroic heart of Ulysses might have been “Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will/ To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” (Tennyson) is compared with Telemachus who favours tender works. Doctorow incorporates this theme in *Loon Lake* efficiently and parodies it from the postmodern perspective. In this novel, Joe of Paterson is portrayed as the son representing Telemachus but unlike the legendary son, Joe is governed by a non-quenchable thirst. Contradictorily, the active and dynamic father figure is subverted and replaced by two passive surrogate fathers Warren Penfield and F. W. Bennett unlike Ulysses. Moreover, the individuals confronted during the adventure in Doctorow’s work are not moralistic and they extremely epitomize ‘corruption’.

Joe is neither a noble man nor content person like Telemachus. Unlike Telemachus it is the son in *Loon Lake* who undertakes the quest even at the age of fifteen. But this non-quenchable thirst is not for knowledge and voyage. He begins his life as a rogue in search of money, sex and other illegal activities. He repudiates his parents as he disliked their submissive existence as mill workers in Paterson, New Jersey. He has a keenness for life and ‘Saint Garbage’, the accumulator of wastes is the only adorable person for him. He watches old women struggling into the corsets; joins an illegal gang; carries a knife and robs little kids and threatens a girl to take off her clothes. He also steals in the church and acknowledges the motive behind his quest as “I only wanted to be famous!” (LL 8). He resides in New York for two months and steals cart from a grocery boy to make his living. He feels like Charlie Chaplin and John D. Rockefeller and feels no difficulty to adapt to the situation, “I was interested in the way I instantly knew who the situation called for and became him” (LL 12).

Joe’s quest for sex begins in New York itself. As a grocery boy, he gets acquainted with the maid, Hilda Bertha and exchanges sex for many gifts such as sweaters, shoes, food and some dollars. One day he steals silver platter, creamer, teapot and pair of silver candlesticks and quits her home. He saved these dollars for cigarettes and movies and imagined a life in California where he could eat oranges off the trees and ripe avocados on the seaside boulevards. He can also sleep on the sand during the nights and can spend the day time under the hot sun by wading through the water.

Joe later boards a private car and enters into woods. For Ulysses, the adventure is his passion and the drive for exploration provokes him to travel more. Parodically the adventure is not a passion for Joe as he leads the life of a rogue and nature seems to be a threat for him. He manages to reach a carnival owned by Sim and Magda Hearn. He feels fascinated by Hearn and ironically believes the profession as an enterprise and the finest possible way to live. Joe establishes a sexual liaison with Fanny, the Fat Lady who conducted the business. The rarer show in the carnival is the gang-rape and subsequent murder of the Fat Lady arranged by Hearn for one thousand five hundred and eighty four dollars. It is inflicted both by the gangsters and police personnel. Magda allures Joe with the dollars earned from the gang-rape and plans to lead a wealthy life after moving to California by trading the car. But Joe’s roguishness cannot tolerate the injustice and being infuriated by the exploitation, he sexually brutalizes Magda and throws the money as the Fat Lady’s ashes and leaves her.

Joe runs into the deep dense woods leaving Magda and sleeps in the forest itself knowing not what to pursue in his life. Once again he feels the threat of nature’s unusual sounds and

darkness. In the darkness, he is blinded by the sudden arrival of a bright light which is nothing but the train on the tracks. It is lighted brightly where he gets the glimpse of a bright bedroom with frosted-glass wall lamps and a naked blond girl standing in front of a mirror holding and examining a white dress on a hanger. Considering this as an epiphanic moment, Joe runs through the tracks and reaches Adirondacks and identifies the girl as Clara Lukacs and develops a sexual relationship with her also. He elopes with Clara and befriends the family of Red James, the Secretary of workers and gets a job in the Bennett Autobody Number Six. Red James is employed by Bennett himself to spy on the workers. When Red James is killed by the Crapo Industrial Services for finding him to be the real danger, Clara leaves Joe and returns to the gang of Tommy Crapo. Joe immediately gets attracted towards Sandy James and shares a brief liaison with her. He then moves along with her and the baby with the insurance that they got through Red James' death. Joe imagines a bungalow under palm trees made of stucco with a red tile roof and warm sun to lead a blissful life but leaves her also in the pursuit of wealth. His ironical adventure for wealth promotes him as the heir of the multimillionaire Bennett but sexual quest leaves him no heir and he becomes barren and sterile.

Joe meets his two father figures – Warren Penfield and F. W. Bennett in Adirondacks. Both fascinate him in different ways. Penfield, the failed residential poet may lack the wealth of Bennett but he rejoices the freedom in his artistic talents. The power of the words, lyrics, composition and imagination that culminate the creativity fascinate Joe. The poem which Penfield recites under the title, “Loon Lake” provokes Joe to wonder about his creativity. Even in the drunken state, his words seem to be the most beautiful, “I was living at last! . . . I was feeling Penfield's immense careless generosity, the boon of himself which granted me without argument everything I was struggling for, all of it assumed in the simple giving of words, so moving to this scruffy boy” (LL 86).

When Joe escapes with Clara, Penfield bequeaths a letter to Joe assuming that he would return to Adirondacks. He leaves all his papers, copies of chap books, letters, journals, night thoughts to Joe telling him, “You are what I would want my son to be” (LL 173) and ascertains Joe as his adopted son. Unlike Telemachus who does not wish to inherit his father's legacy, Joe tests his creativity inherited from Penfield for survival. When the cops imprison and enquire Joe for the death of Red James, he becomes the master narrator. The Crapo Industrial Services is a spy agency employed by the F. W. Bennett Company and Red James is appointed for the purpose of spying the workers. Red James becomes the trustworthy person of the workers but when the company learns James to be the real danger as he knew more about the company nuances, they kill him. Joe accepts himself as the witness for the incidents and self-consciously wonders about how he could make up such a story which is believed by the Chief cop also. He has made up Tommy Crapo and Crapo Industrial Services and acknowledges the mastery of these skills from Mr. Penfield, the hero of his narration.

It was an amazing discovery, the uses of my ignorance, a kind of industrial manufacture of my own. And the more of it went on, the more I believed it, taking this fact and that possibility and assembling them, then sending the results . . . and adding another fact and dropping an idea . . . and sending it on a bit for another operation, another bolt to the construction, my own factory of lies, . . . I was going to make it! (LL 222)

Ironically, he names Bennett as his father. To establish veracity of his story, Joe gives the phone number of Bennett as, “Tell Mr. Bennett it’s his son calling. Tell him it’s his son, Joe” (LL 224).

The life of another surrogate father, Bennett is also not an active one like Ulysses. His journey differs drastically from the legendary king and marks some of the important historical moments of America which are tragic - at the Ludlow disaster in 1910, he sees the dismantled bodies of the miners; in the miners’ strike of 1913-1914 Penfield is one among those who are evacuated and witnesses the General Strike (1919) in Seattle and later gets admitted in the Colorado State Mental Asylum. He eventually serves in the Army Signal Corps during the World War I. Instead of sending accurate communication, Penfield sends Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”. Assuming himself as a poet and not as a war veteran, he returns the medal to the Secretary of the Army for which he is sent to the Veterans Psychology Facility in New Jersey.

Warren Penfield undertakes the quest for enlightenment and wanders from one monastery to another in Kyoto for Zen training. By paying huge bills to an old man, he enters into a monastery which preached Buddhism. The training involved the propagation of eightfold path for beating desire but the monks who preached them do not follow it. When Penfield entered the monastery, he notices the shambled place, drunken monks sleeping in a pool of vomit and torn and worn out walls. The serene Master who is believed to have realized the spirit of Buddha behaves like a lunatic, demon and destructor of ego. The monastery which he thought would illuminate and eradicate desire has totally pushed him into a despair condition. He is unable to distinguish between himself and the monks and understand the questions that arose in his mind, “I don’t know why don’t the storms of self taste fire and thunder across their braingrow, why aren’t they as sick and unsure of their dangerous selves as I am of mine, leading then to the false Zen-like casuistry” (LL 137). He leaves the monastery only to assassinate Bennett at Adirondacks for the cruelties perpetrated on poor people. Ironically, he drops his motive and turns into a failed residential poet of Bennett and loses his life with Lucinda Bennett during one of their flights.

Like Penfield, Bennett also contradicts Ulysses in temperament. The second father figure whom Joe meets in Adirondacks is the multimillionaire, F. W. Bennett whose aspirations are to suppress the oppressed. Adirondacks is once the place of wilderness where sugar maples are trapped during the spring and native people irrigated the land during summer. Later the artists ventured into it to foster their creativity by drawing inspiration from Nature. The place eventually became the domain of F. W. Bennett who has corrupted it as a place of immoral retreat. Joe also notices the enormous will placed on Nature by crushing its purity and parodies the temperament of Bennett who has bought the wilderness with enormous wealth. Like Penfield, Bennett also leads a futile and vague life involving the monitoring of workers and full of business. There are several allegations regarding Bennett over his capitalist behaviours. He lacks compassion and fails to understand the worker’s needs and has spent his entire life for the massive accumulation of wealth. He is sexually exploitative and never pities the death of his workers. He is selfish even in his generosity and it always goes with personal motives. In America, it is the general tendency of the wealthy people to construct hospitals, Universities, libraries, museums, parks and planetariums for the benefit of the utmost classes to deceive the poor.

The manic energy and impersonal force that attracted Joe towards the pimp, Mr. Hearn and Warren Penfield drive him towards F. W. Bennett also. Joe believes that he does not belong to the working class and desires to get assimilated into Bennett's luxurious life. Contradictory to the legendary Telemachus, Joe yearns to feel the freedom of his father. This time 'wealth' becomes the embodiment of freedom. Moreover, the temperament of Bennett also contradicts Ulysses which is very much through the way in which he philosophizes his son. The existential condition of human beings is explicated by Bennett as, "Every kind of life has its demands, its tests. Can I do this? Can I live with the consequences of what I'm doing? If you can't answer yes, you're in a life that's too much for you" (LL 109). He gives many options for leading a life no matter of what interested him. While Ulysses is much concerned about his passion for adventure and voyage, Bennett suggests his surrogate son to adopt stealing if it suits him or may beg. If he may not able to adopt, he may become a poet like Penfield.

By reworking the Ulysses-Telemachus theme parodically, Doctorow rejuvenates and enriches an exhausted traditional technique. "Parody implies a distance between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new work, a distance usually signaled by irony. But this irony is more playful than ridiculing, more critical than destructive" (Hutcheon, "Parody" 202). In *Loon Lake*, the quest undertaken by Ulysses is subverted by attributing it to the son, Joe who is a rogue and the father figures contradictorily become sluggish – with Penfield being a failed residential poet and Bennett being exhausted by huge wealth. Besides there is an irony in the quest also as Joe's keenness is for wealth and sex. Exploring the sea is a passion for Ulysses but Nature remains a threat for Joe and the people confronted by him are freaks, pimp and exploiters.

Unlike the original, Joe is not unaffected by his father figures – he inherits the art of storytelling from Penfield and immense wealth from Bennett. Though Joe criticizes his surrogate fathers, he develops a fascination for them and becomes them altogether. Both Penfield and Bennett lack the legendary king's loftier thinking and aspiration whereas Joe, the surrogate son unlike the original desires to adopt his fathers' aspiration but for sex and money. Stade affirms that Joe triumphs over Bennett, his adoptive father by becoming worse, "It is not a matter of co-option . . . but of revenge through usurpation. In America . . . the sons win; they destroy the past only to preserve the worst of it in themselves, and thereby destroy the future. Such is Doctorow's variation on the conventional American success story" (126). Doctorow does not ridicule or mock or destruct the original work which he undertakes to parody. If a new form does not develop, the old form degenerates to form a new one. It is a creative reworking to pay reverence to the original.

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