

The Image of “Different Man” in the novel *Andrew’s Brain* by E. L. Doctorow

Anna Kravchenko
M. Ed.,
Lecturer in English
Kharkiv National University
Ukraine

Abstract

*The article deals with the study of the main motives in the novel *Andrew’s brain* by American writer Edgar Lawrence Doctorow viewed through postmodernism categories. Such principles of its poetics as anachronisms, postmodern sensibility, and fragmentation and mosaic structure were revealed. The author attempts to determine the main characteristics of the writer’s style as representation of postmodernism. *Andrew’s Brain* is novel-memory book, a retrospective, in which the protagonist looks back over his life to figure out how he came to be wherever he is. The book is constructed as a conversation, with someone doing most of the talking and someone doing most of the listening. Troubled man is asked to recognize that he has been responsible for disasters all his life, without having meant to do harm. The main idea of the novel is the uselessness and the pleasure of the mind’s operations.*

Key words: modern American literature, problematic issues, postmodernism, postmodern sensibility, E.L. Doctorow, anachrony of narrative.

Canadian researcher Linda Hatcheon admits that literature and history in postmodernism are systems of the definition through which the past gets form and content (93). Narrative always turns to the past, which helps to establish cause-effect relations, to determine the current state of affairs.

Reference to past events gives credibility to what happens in novel's present (Kucharenko 114). The 12th novel by Edgar Lawrence Doctorow (1932-2015) *Andrew's Brain* (2014) is considered to be the work of writer's late style. It takes reader’s attention inwards, to the loops and pathways of a neurologist's mind.

The work by E. L. Doctorow was studied by such researchers as Richard Trenner, John Clayton, Joyce Carol Oates, etc., but not from the point of view of main problems detection in this historiographical novel. Thus, the topicality of the research deals with the importance

of detecting and analyzing the social and philosophical problems in the novel viewed through postmodernistic paradigm.

John Clayton calls the writer “radical Jewish humanist” (54). Some researchers consider E.L. Doctorow’s irony as the trend of deconstruction. Ihab Hassan shows the peculiarities of E. L. Doctorow’s novels in his essay “The Expense of Spirit in Postmodern Times: between nihilism and belief” defining the postmodern spirit as a sense of mystery that stands behind “irony, kitsch, pastiche and ready to hope” (18). Writer Joyce Carol Oates calls E. L. Doctorow “a writer of dazzling gifts and boundless imaginative energy” (80). Richard Trenner states that the most important feature of E.L. Doctorow’s creative work is his “sense of morality” (5).

The cast of characters of *Andrew’s Brain* is fairly small: Andrew and his wives (one ex, one dead); Doc; an opera singer; a pair of midgets; and, toward the end, a few real-life figures from American recent political history, unnamed but brazenly undisguised. At first Andrew, whose time is the bewilderingly eventful opening decade of this century doesn’t sound like much of a witness. He seems to be far more interested in the workings of his own mind than those of the world outside, and for a long time speaks — to someone he calls Doc — only of his private life and his research into the mysteries of the human brain. He tells parts of his life story in the third person, indulges in self-analysis: “I am finally, terribly, unfeeling” (Doctorow 18).

Andrew’s scientific studies and puzzling life have together brought him to dim view of our neurological system’s trustworthiness: “Pretending is the brain’s work. It’s what it does. The brain can even pretend not to be itself” (Doctorow 72). He’s so adept at these impersonations that he’s able to add extra layers of pretending to his pretending: treating made-up characters as if they were actual historical personages, and real historical figures.

His conversation with Doc, delivered in an undisclosed location, is his attempt to explain how he got that way, and his account, manic and overelaborate, betrays the effects of having rattled around in his pretending three-pound brain too long. He feels being trapped in his own consciousness: “We’ve got these mysterious three-pound brains and they jail us” (Doctorow 79). This is a prisoner’s story, the cracked apologia of a lifer. At one point, near the end, he wonders wearily, “Perhaps I’m carrying in my brain matter the neuronal record of previous ages” (Doctorow 144). Andrew prefers to look inward and shun the wider view. He’s baffled and lonely man pacing in his cage.

“The internal dialogue affects our personality,” – says David Carr. – “We are not the authors of our stories, but we should not take life as absurd circumstances” (166). The way our stories are contextualized towards others is the key to the concept of “moral Self”. Andrew is a casualty of his times, binding his wounds with thick wrappings of words, ideas, bits of story,

whatever his spinning mind can unspool for him. His homemade therapy doesn't heal him. *Andrew's Brain* is cautionary novel about the perils of trying to think yourself out of pain. But the novel's tone is weirdly sprightly. E. L. Doctorow amuses himself here with abrupt, hairpin swerves of mood, from lyrical to tragic to satiric.

The main idea of the novel is the uselessness and the pleasure of the mind's operations. Andrew, because he has been confined to his brain unwillingly, condemned by the kangaroo court of history, and can't take much joy in its hectic machinery. He's both self-delusive and self-aware.

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Currently the neuroscientists who accept the materiality of the mind – who regard the soul as fiction – don't know yet how the brain becomes the mind, how it's responsible for all our thoughts and feelings, our subjective life. How this three-pound "knitting ball" (Doctorow 134), as Andrew calls it, produces our subjective life. If we do ever figure it out, that could be a glorious intellectual achievement. At the same time, it carries serious dangers, because if we understand how the brain works in all its detail, then a computer could be built that emulates the brain and creates consciousness.

Andrew's Brain also includes well-known political figures of USA. The final quarter of the novel is set in the White House after the September 11 attacks. Andrew spends time at the centre of political power in Washington during what seems to be the presidency of George W. Bush. With its well-worn vision of George W. Bush as an inept frat boy surrounded by maniacal advisers, the story stalls in limp political satire passed off as bitter historical analysis. George W. Bush, for whom Andrew works as "the head of the Office of Neurological Research in the White House basement" (Doctorow 104). Chaingang and Rumbum — Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, respectively — roam in and out of scenes, and the author gets to throw in some political barbs as the president is examined through Andrew's proximity to him: "His war was not going well. He'd invaded the wrong country. You can't imagine the anxiety that produces" (Doctorow 128). E. L. Doctorow's portrayals of Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld are biting and apt (when faced with the Prisoner's Dilemma problem, "Chaingang" and "Rumbum" choose to betray each other, guaranteeing the worst possible outcome). Andrew says that he blames President Bush for his wife's death because intelligence about the coming attack was widely available and he did nothing to stop it. The whole episode takes us a step away from the novel of ideas to the social realist novel.

Soon the reader learns that Andrew and George W. had been college roommates at Yale and that Andrew had taken exams for Bush, which allowed him to pass his classes, get his degree,

and eventually become President. Indirectly, then, Andrew is guilty of contributing to Briony's death and the deaths of almost 3,000 others, as well as the millions of deaths in the war. After September 11, through writerly coincidence, Andrew becomes the token neuroscientist at the White House, and this is how he gets himself in the predicament of being labeled an "enemy combatant" (Doctorow 146) and shipped off to detention after he tells Bush, "Chaingang" and "Rumdum" what he really thinks of them and their warmongering.

Andrew flits around the events that led him here — wherever here is: Early in the book he says, "I don't know what I'm doing here," (Doctorow 42) which makes two of us. He sometimes speaks of himself in the third person; he regularly mocks his unnamed interrogator; and he pays no attention to chronology. It's our job to put the tragic incidents of his life in order.

Andrew discloses in the first few pages that he unwittingly killed his infant daughter by administering a drug that had been wrongly dispensed by the pharmacist. He tells us that the brain makes decisions before we are conscious of making them and that free will is therefore an illusion. So did Andrew's brain know he was killing his baby daughter, even if he was not conscious of it? This trauma feels like the pathetic kernel of this novel, with Andrew's strange stories refractions of his own unexpressed grief. He describes many personal failures and bizarre accidents: He drops glasses, breaks a friend's jaw, poisons a child, diverts a stranger's car into a pole, and lets his dog get eaten alive. A particularly frank acquaintance tells him, "Well-meaning, gentle, kindly disposed, charming ineptitude is the modus operandi of the deadliest of killers" (Doctorow 18). In fact, it's fear of what calamity he might cause next that inspires Andrew to drop off a baby with his ex-wife — desperate plan to save the child. "I had reached the point," he says, "where I felt anything I did would bring harm to anyone I loved" (Doctorow 16).

Aside from the mixed-up chronology, we have to wade through Andrew's pronouncements about the brain and the nature of mind. He claims: "Consciousness without world is impossible" (Doctorow 26). Andrew's stories and reminiscences whisk us between strange set pieces, from the banks of a Norwegian fjord to a somersaulting prostitute in a Zagreb brothel, from a party of vaudeville midgets in California to George Bush's Oval Office.

Andrew sounds much more conversant with American literature, particularly Mark Twain's work, which is closer to E. L. Doctorow's skill set as a longtime English professor. Indeed, thematically, this novel echoes the cynical solipsism of Twain's last attempt at a novel "The Mysterious stranger". Andrew also speaks movingly about Twain's struggle with depression: "I see his frail grasp of life at those moments of his prose, his after-dinner guard left down and his upwardly mobile decency become vulnerable to his self-creation. And the woman he loved, gone, and a child he loved, gone, and he looks in the mirror and hates the pretense of

his white hair and mustache and suit, all gathered in the rocking-chair wisdom that resides in his bleary eyes. He despairs of the likelihood that the world is his illusion that he is but a vagrant mind in a futile drift through eternity” (Doctorow 40).

Andrew describes himself as a “fake person” (Doctorow 70), offering the reader something elliptical and vague as a simulacrum of intellectual provocation. The doctor/patient exchanges are often hilarious: their passive-aggressive interplay, their interruptions, and the doctor’s rising mistrust of Andrew’s increasingly elaborate yarns give the novel a momentum that is largely sustained. Is he the disaster artist he assumes himself to be, or is he just like anyone else: a human operating in the world where disasters happen. Humans’ minds often have a way of convincing them they have a measure of control over events. This narrator is not paranoid; Andrew of *Andrew’s Brain* takes his orders from E.L. Doctorow, whose own name is suspiciously close to Doc or “doctor”.

The story starts out as a tale of lost love and ends up taking a baffling political turn into rather biting commentary on post-September 11 America. Andrew’s hapless, highly educated, cerebral and mostly sympathetic. He often speaks of himself in the third person — literally estranged from his emotions.

There are sometimes abstruse discussions of consciousness in the novel. Andrew tells his students: “You are in the depthless dingedom of your own soul. Self-knowledge, on the other hand, is elusive because it is dangerous to stare into yourself. You pass through endless mirrors of self-estrangement. This too is the brain’s cunning, that you are not to know yourself” (Doctorow 100). Chapters become progressively shorter, and we’re not sure what to believe because everything is filtered through Andrew’s unreliable mind. He notes “How can I think about my brain when it’s my brain doing the thinking?” (Doctorow 28). Andrew, so used to blaming himself for disasters, sees a broader, political reason of his wife’s death. He tells Doc, “I’ve always responded to the history of my times. I’ve always attended to the context of my life” (Doctorow 52).

Andrew’s Brain begins by framing an irreconcilable dilemma: “If consciousness exists without the world, it is nothing, and if it needs the world to exist, it is still nothing” (Doctorow 26). Andrew is talking from an undisclosed location, so indistinct it may not be physical. He could be a phantom of his neurology.

Andrew’s Brain is not exactly a novel of ideas. Rather, it is a memory book, a retrospective, in which Andrew looks back over his life to figure out how he came to be wherever he is. Bad things happen around him: the death of a motorist, who veered into a tree so as not to hit him while he was sledding, an attack on his dachshund puppy by a red-tailed hawk in Washington Square. He recalls his father saying: “Son, lots of kids were sleigh riding and it could have been any one of them in the path of that car. It just happened to be you. He didn’t

believe this any more than I did. He knew that if any kid was likely to cause a fatal crash it would be me” (Doctorow 44).

These memories raise an enigmatic question: Do our experiences shape our personalities or is it the other way around? Andrew admits: “Deep down, at the bottom of my soul, if such exists, I am finally unmoved by what I’ve done” (Doctorow 18). What he’s getting at is how our actions and attitudes create ripples, reverberations, a butterfly effect.

At the heart of the shift are 9/11 and the excesses of the George W. Bush administration, which are meant to echo, in some sense, Andrew’s own indifference and bad luck. To make the point explicit, Doctorow establishes a personal connection between the character and the president, as if to indicate that they are cut from the same careless cloth. Andrew tells the leader of the free world: “You are only the worst so far, there is far worse to come. Perhaps not tomorrow. Perhaps not next year, but you have shown us the path into the Dark Wood” (Doctorow 170).

Andrew is a depressive who may also be bipolar and schizophrenic: “My mind is shot through with visions, dreams, and the actions and words of people I don’t know” (Doctorow 142). He proclaims: “I hear soundless voices” (Doctorow 142). He reveals gradually his obsession with the possibility of replicating consciousness through computers.

Throughout the novel, Andrew insists that he himself feels very little. His whole story, however, is that of a man beleaguered by tragedy, tormented by visions and voices that are “cringing in anguish.” They leave him no peace. He states: “Only by hoping that there is a science behind this am I able to endure it” (Doctorow 142). Science, in these circumstances, certainly functions as a kind of religion. Even if advances in replicating consciousness are made, they will undoubtedly be turned to the uses of war. After all, as Andrew muses during his stay in the White House, “contention makes us human.”

His first deft stroke is to present Andrew as seen by other, hostile eyes, namely the husband of his divorced wife. This husband proclaims that Andrew “leaves disaster” in his wake (Doctorow 10). He calls him Andrew the Pretender.

The latter question is particularly relevant because Briony, Andrew says, represents “redemption” (Doctorow 52). It is a redemption having nothing to do with computers, but rather with Briony’s loving arms. Even cognitive scientists, it appears, can abandon the religion of science for such glories.

E. L. Doctorow gives the episode a deeper colouring, a feeling of strangeness, when he has Briony and Andrew visit Briony’s parents. The parents are charming, affectionate and distinguished looking — but they are also midgets. Andrew is quite taken with the middle-aged couple, but at the same time wonders if Briony has a natural affinity with the weird, the unnatural. Andrew muses: “It was what she knew, her normal social reality. So who would

she find for herself, whom would she be morbidly attracted to, but someone as adorable as a freakishly depressive cognitive scientist klutz” (Doctorow 62).

Andrew worries about what might happen when consciousness is replicated. The faith behind the religion of science can be so easily transmuted into the despair behind the religion of science.

Andrew’s story is close to a monologue, investigates several big concepts — disastrous fate, amorous and parental love, political evil. They are spread across background noise composed of cognitive science, 9/11, “midget” Hollywood, Boris Godunov, and the works of Mark Twain. Andrew’s narration is no more reliable, with convenient coincidences (the aforementioned opera playing on the radio, being the President’s college roommate, his wife’s loutish ex-boyfriend calling as the WTC burns, chalk breaking at the blackboard twice) and utter mysteries (a farmhouse in Pennsylvania, the identity of his psychiatrist, the timeline of his catastrophes).

There’s a wavering, not-quite compelling brain science motif running through the book. In a late exchange, Andrew tells his possibly court-appointed shrink that when divided, the human brain’s hemispheres will continue operating independently, unaware of each other. Similarly, there are two independent halves to Andrew’s story: pre-9/11, which is concerned with a lifelong string of catastrophes that includes several deaths and injuries, the courtship of his student and the abandonment of their daughter to his first wife; and post-9/11, in which all of that drama is largely forgotten in favor of an extended sequence — reeking of delusional fantasy and occasional paranoia — involving Andrew’s relationship with President George W. Bush (who is never explicitly named, but also not at all disguised).

Parallel to the cognitive science through line, there is another involving Mark Twain that seems more fully formed. Twain’s work appears in several locations where Andrew is staying, including collected editions in his cell at the book’s close and at a cabin to which Andrew retreats early in the novel. There, Andrew explicitly calls out the similarities between Twain’s sorrow at losing a wife and a daughter and his own, and this metaphor feels truer, than do any of the unlikely White House shenanigans and consequences.

Andrew’s Brain’s strengths are in the compelling nature of Andrew’s voice telling his story. Throughout the book, Andrew tells his psychiatrist that he’s “a different man” multiple times: “in front of a class,” “alone in a cabin,” “in a fjord,” “in the oval office” and when he’s with his wife.

A question that has long plagued him is whether the brain — that mass of millions of neurons and synapses — can be said to be the source of the mind, or soul. If human consciousness and everything that goes with it, from existential angst to the ability to register emotions such as

love, guilt and remorse, is conjured up merely by 1.4 kg of electrical impulses and neurotransmitters, then one day it may be possible to replicate it.

As further details emerge non-chronologically, a jigsaw picture is revealed of a man whose life has been beset by tragedies, often seemingly caused, inadvertently, by himself. Andrew also wonders about the nature of memory, and whether memories can be inherited via DNA. His own memories are at times unreliable and shifting.

E. L. Doctorow's writing is assured and at times visually striking. His main subject is the question of freewill and the origins consciousness, which would seem to offer a lot in terms of deep thinking. The author investigates whether or not the mind is "like a computer" or whether or not genes "have memory" or their "codes" can be "read" is superficial science fiction. Such comparisons are trite metaphors that no one doing serious work in the philosophy of mind entertains anymore.

E. L. Doctorow demonstrates his humanity and disproves the theory, held by Andrew, which thought can be described as a rational process, quantized and reproduced.

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