

False American Dream and Shaping Class Consciousness: A Lukácsian Reading of E.L. Doctorow's *Loon Lake*

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Abstract

This paper examines how E.L. Doctorow's *Loon Lake* redefines the American Dream as an instrument of ideological control that systematically produces false consciousness in the working-class individual. Moving beyond diagnoses of the protagonist's final complicity, it traces the precise narrative and psychological mechanisms of this transformation. Employing Georg Lukács's theory of reification, the analysis demonstrates how the novel's fragmented form mirrors the disintegration of self, and how Joe's journey from laborer to heir plans the commodification of his labor, relationships, and identity. A key scene, Joe's sensory description of the assembly line with its broken mesh windows and surrounding noise of running machines, concretely shows labor reduced to an alienated, quantifiable commodity. Ultimately, the novel reveals the Dream not as a path to liberation, but as a reifying process that culminates in spiritual alienation, portraying upward mobility as a form of ideological assimilation. The findings demonstrate that Joe's ascent is one of ideological absorption, not transcendence. His journey progresses from fetishizing capitalist symbols, to experiencing the physical marks of exploited labor, to the reification of his personal relationships. He internalizes the system's logic, heroizing alienation and reinventing himself as Bennett's heir. This material success constitutes a spiritual defeat, revealing his "upward mobility" as the final stage of a reifying process, so that the American Dream is exposed as an engine for perpetuating the class hierarchies it claims to overcome.

Keywords: Alienation; Class Consciousness; Lukácsian Reading; Reification; Upward Mobility

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Introduction

Since its articulation by James Truslow Adams in 1931 as a “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity according to ability or achievement” (374), the American Dream has been a central, contested ideology in the nation’s consciousness and literature. This promise of upward mobility has served as both an aspirational beacon and a potent narrative device, particularly for depicting the struggles of the working class and immigrants. Among contemporary American authors, E.L. Doctorow stands out for his persistent and critical exploration of this theme, using historical fiction to dissect the myths and realities of American social development. In novels like *Ragtime* and *Billy Bathgate*, Doctorow presents characters “mostly living in disadvantaged conditions and mostly fascinated by upward social mobility,” whose pursuits often reveal the corrosive side effects of the dream—effects that crucially shape “American working class consciences” by eroding morality and happiness.

Doctorow’s 1980 novel, *Loon Lake*, set during the Great Depression, offers a particularly stark examination of this process. It follows Joe Paterson, a young man who, as Harold Bloom notes, “takes it on the lam from the blue-collar world of Paterson, New Jersey” because he “wants to be famous” and “to be someone other than himself” (88). Joe’s journey from a life of petty crime to the secluded, opulent estate of the

industrialist F.W. Bennett embodies the classic pursuit of the Dream. Yet, his initial enchantment gives way to a grim realization, as he observes Bennett’s “bought wilderness” and wonders if money’s purpose is “to put a distance of fifty thousand acres of mountain terrain between you and the boondocks of the world” (Doctorow 105). Joe ultimately achieves material success, inheriting Bennett’s fortune, but as Diane Johnson argues, this “material success is a moral failure” (114). He is left with the very isolation he once despised, admitting, “I don’t remember anyone’s name... I was alone in all of it” (Doctorow 11).

While existing scholarship effectively diagnoses Joe’s end state as one of “false consciousness” and moral alienation, a significant gap remains: no detailed, procedural analysis traces the specific narrative and psychological mechanisms through which his working-class consciousness is systematically dismantled and reshaped by the ideology of the American Dream. Simply identifying his final complicity is insufficient; we must understand the step-by-step process of ideological interpellation that leads him there.

Therefore, this paper aims to fill this gap by arguing that in *Loon Lake*, E.L. Doctorow depicts the American Dream not merely as a false promise, but as an active mechanism of ideological interpellation that exploits desire to foster false consciousness, a process that leads to the reification of the working-class subject and

results in profound spiritual alienation rather than liberation. To support this thesis, the study will pursue the following research questions: How does the narrative structure of *Loon Lake*, including its use of symbols, doubling, and fragmented form, dramatize the process by which the American Dream manufactures false consciousness in the protagonist, Joe? Applying Georg Lukács's theory of reification, how does Joe's journey from laborer to heir demonstrate the transformation of his human relations and self-conception into commodity-like, objectified forms, cementing his alienation?

By charting the precise stages of Joe's ideological employment, this analysis seeks to move beyond the established diagnosis of his final condition to explain its construction, thereby offering a deeper understanding of Doctorow's critique of the capitalist narratives that shape American class identity.

Literature Review

E.L. Doctorow's *Loon Lake* has generated a rich body of critical commentary. Much of this commentary centers on the novel's engagement with class consciousness, its revision of proletarian fiction, and its formal experimentation. Scholars have debated whether the novel represents a political critique of capitalism or an aesthetic exploration of narrative possibility—or both. This review synthesizes key critical discussions, organizing them thematically to

illuminate how *Loon Lake* has been interpreted as a complex response to the American Dream, class identity, and literary tradition.

The novel's critical reception was notably mixed. John Parks emphasizes this point, observing that reviewers either praised the novel's ambitious treatment of the Depression or found its postmodern style contrived and its ending unconvincing (71). Diane Johnson, in her review "Waiting for Righty," provocatively suggested that readers' reactions to the novel might depend significantly on their own class backgrounds. Her observation underscores the text's charged social dimensions. Richard King, in his review "Two Lights That Failed," famously encapsulated the novel's central political inquiry. He described it as an exploration of "Why There Is No Socialism in America," framing the novel as a diagnostic of American class consciousness.

A major strand of criticism positions *Loon Lake* within the tradition of the proletarian novel, albeit in a revised, postmodern form. Barbara Foley argues that 1930s leftist fiction often failed not because it was too radical, but because it was not radical enough (168). She calls for a "critique from the left" that does not apply bourgeois literary standards. Foley's framework has proven instrumental for other critics. Paul Levine, in *E. L. Doctorow*, notes the novel's affinities with 1930s proletarian works like Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*. In those texts, Levine observes, racial or ethnic identity often

supersedes class solidarity (71). Levine and others read *Loon Lake* as a contemporary bildungsroman that rejects the classic model of bourgeois self-development. Instead, as Foley theorizes, the proletarian bildungsroman should orient readers toward “the collective experience of the working-class rather than the individual personalities of bourgeois characters” (284). Joe’s trajectory—from a Paterson street punk to the heir of capitalist F.W. Bennett—is thus seen not as a triumph but as a narrative of accommodation and complicity. It becomes a dark revision of the Horatio Alger myth.

In the chapter “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” from *History and Class Consciousness*, György Lukács argues that capitalism commodifies all human relations. This process creates a “phantom objectivity” that conceals true social dynamics (83). Critics apply this idea to Joe’s experience, particularly his labor in Bennett’s auto plant, which represents alienated, repetitive work. Furthermore, the chapter references Peter Sloterdijk’s notion of “enlightened false consciousness” or cynical reason. This is a state where individuals knowingly perpetuate ideological systems that harm them. Joe’s eventual belief in his own narrative as Bennett’s son exemplifies this form of conscious complicity. The psychological dimension of class is explored through Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb’s *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. That work describes how working-class

individuals internalize societal judgments of failure, leading to a rejection of their origins. This dynamic is perfectly captured in Joe’s childhood fantasy that his parents were merely his kidnappers.

Formal innovation in *Loon Lake* is another critical focal point. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, in his analysis, suggests that for Doctorow, “the self is historically contingent and inconstant as the technology it appropriates” (81). Harter and Thompson argue that Doctorow’s political vision is inseparable from his artistic and epistemological inquiries. They emphasize his use of complex narration to implicate the reader in the cost of the American Dream. David S. Gross offers a potent economic critique of language in Doctorow’s work. He asserts that in a capitalist world, “Language does not connect; it deceives, it controls, it manipulates” (135-36). Gross also draws on Norman O. Brown to argue that money in the novel is equated with excrement—a symbol of absolute worthlessness and the waste products of unnecessary production. The novel’s grotesque imagery, particularly in the carnival episode, is read through a Bakhtinian lens by Brian McHale. He identifies such carnivalesque elements as common in postmodern fiction, used here to mirror and critique the grotesque exaggerations of a materialistic society.

Critics situate *Loon Lake* within a broader literary genealogy. They consistently note its inversion of the American success narrative and its

allusions to F. Scott Fitzgerald's critique of wealth. The name Korzeniowski, revealed at the novel's end, evokes Joseph Conrad. Harter and Thompson expand on this connection. They posit that the name suggests a man of multiple identities and underscores the novel's doppelgänger theme. It also invokes Conrad's themes of complicity and colonial guilt (85).

Michelle M. Tokarczyk's *E. L. Doctorow's Skeptical Commitment* introduces the central concept of "skeptical commitment." She uses this term to define the tension in Doctorow's fiction between deep political engagement and postmodern doubt. Tokarczyk argues that Doctorow navigates this tension through a "politics of indirection." He uses genre adaptation and metafictional techniques to critique American history and ideology without didacticism (3-4). Tokarczyk synthesizes this analysis by drawing on Alan Wilde's "midfiction," Peter Sloterdijk's "enlightened false consciousness," and Barbara Eckstein's "complicity." She demonstrates how Doctorow's work balances formal innovation with an ethical interrogation of power, from his early novels to his later explorations of local action (5-6, 10-11, 22-23).

Thomas L. Erskine argues that *Loon Lake* employs metafictional techniques and relentless shifts in narrative perspective. These techniques interrogate the authenticity of narrative and the characters' realities (Erskine 287). Christopher Lehmann-Haupt contends that *Loon Lake*

destabilizes the American Dream within the bildungsroman framework. It presents a more pessimistic revision of aspiration (Lehmann-Haupt 28). Zohreh Ramin contends that Doctorow's fiction operates as political critique through parody and revision of national myths. This marks him as a political novelist in works such as *World's Fair* (123-26). Doctorow is further treated as a political writer who challenges hegemonic narratives via critical historical revision (Ramin and Marandi 13-22). In the same vein, one study argues that metafiction undercuts conventional Western narratives and exposes constructed histories (86-97). This argument has been extended in "Revision of the American Frontier in Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times*" (33-42). Together, these analyses present a clear throughline: Doctorow's fiction uses metafiction to critique American myths and to position political critique at the center of narrative form.

While critics expertly diagnose Joe's "false consciousness" and link it to the novel's form, a gap exists. No study has traced the specific, sequential narrative mechanisms through which his working-class identity is actively dismantled and reshaped. This study addresses this gap by providing a procedural analysis of how ideological consciousness is forged in the novel. It moves beyond the established diagnosis of the endpoint to explain the construction of that consciousness.

Methodology: A Marxist and Lukacsian Framework

This study employs Georg Lukács’s theory of reification from *History and Class Consciousness* to analyze the formation of class consciousness in E.L. Doctorow’s *Loon Lake*. Three interconnected concepts guide the analysis: false consciousness, ideology, and reification.

False consciousness describes a state in which working-class individuals internalize ruling-class interests as natural and universal, losing awareness of their own class position (Parkin 173). Ideology sustains this condition by producing ideas that reflect and advance dominant class interests (Hernadi 137). The mechanism that generates false consciousness is reification. Lukács argues that under capitalism, the commodity form structures all social life, transforming human relations into “things” that appear to operate according to independent, objective laws. This creates a “phantom objectivity” that conceals true social dynamics (83). The worker becomes integrated into a mechanical system, no longer the master of the process (Lukács 89). Reification thus hides human relations, makes the system seem driven by inhuman logic, and leaves workers feeling powerless (Nineham 23).

This study applies Lukács’s theory to *Loon Lake* by identifying three specific manifestations of reification in protagonist Joe’s trajectory. First, the commodification of his labor: when Joe enters

Bennett’s auto factory, his physical and mental capacities are reduced to a quantifiable commodity. His sensory description of the assembly line—“the sun came through the mesh windows already broken down... And all around me the noise of running machines”—conveys the direct experience of objectified, alienated labor (Doctorow 163-164).

Second, the reification of his relationships: his connections with Clara, Sandy James, and surrogate father-figures (Penfield and Bennett) are stripped of human quality and reshaped by transactional logic, culminating in his “adoption” by Bennett as an economic transaction of inheritance. Third, the internalization of capitalist rationality in his consciousness: his trajectory moves from an initial fetishized dream of being “famous” (Doctorow 10) to his strategic self-narration, “Joe of Paterson, then Joe the bastard, then Bennett” (Doctorow 258), demonstrating full acceptance of the system’s reified laws. Through this focused analysis, the paper charts the precise narrative mechanisms by which Joe’s working-class consciousness is systematically dismantled and reshaped.

Analysis

The following analysis examines the systematic deconstruction and reconstruction of the protagonist Joe’s identity in *Loon Lake*. Through a critical lens informed by Marxist theory, particularly Georg Lukács’s concept of reification,

this section traces how Joe's consciousness is shaped, distorted, and ultimately annexed by the dominant capitalist ideology. It argues that Joe's journey, from a state of fetishistic desire through the brutal experience of exploited labor to a final, hollow assimilation, serves as a narrative demonstration of false consciousness. Rather than a story of genuine ascent, the novel portrays upward mobility as a process of internalizing the logic of one's own exploitation, whereby social relations and human connections are commodified, and the self is remade into an agent of the very system that enforces its alienation. This analysis reveals *Loon Lake* not merely as a portrait of individual ambition, but as a critique of the American Dream's machinery, which promises liberation while demanding self-erasure.

Joe's Initial False Consciousness: The Dream as Fetish

In E.L. Doctorow's *Loon Lake*, the protagonist Joe begins his journey not with a revolutionary's clarity but with the profound, internalized disorientation of false consciousness. His desires are shaped entirely by the ruling capitalist ideology, manifesting not as a will to collective change but as a fetishistic yearning for its most potent symbols: fame, wealth, and the aura of those who possess them. As critic Harold Bloom observes, Joe is fundamentally a young man who "wants to be free and, if he can manage it, he wants

to be famous too," a figure who knows only that he desires "to be someone other than himself" (Bloom 88). This abstract longing represents a classic form of commodity fetishism, where social relations of power and exploitation are misrecognized as personal attributes or attainable objects. Joe's consciousness is therefore initially structured by a dream that is not his own, a dream that channels his alienation into a quest for individual transcendence within the very system that creates his marginalization.

This fetishistic desire finds its purest, most undefined expression in Joe's early declaration: "I only wanted to be famous!" (Doctorow 9). Fame here is not connected to a specific talent, action, or communal good; it is an abstract commodity, a magical solution he believes will resolve his existential plight. The statement emerges from a context of urban survival and petty crime, yet his ambition leaps over any concrete improvement in his or his community's condition to fixate on a specter of renown. This desire obscures the social structures that produce both celebrated individuals and anonymous masses, illustrating how capitalist ideology privatizes aspiration. Joe does not dream of dismantling the hierarchy but of climbing to its pinnacle, a fantasy that perfectly serves the system by redirecting potential class rage into a lonely, competitive struggle.

His fantasy life actively rehearses this identification with the apex of capitalist power. Walking home from his grocery boy job, "When I

went along after work with my tips in my pocket I was John D. Rockefeller” (Doctorow 13). This moment is a key instance of fetishistic misrecognition. The meager tips in his pocket—the tangible evidence of his exploitative wage—become the psychic trigger for a fantasy of total transformation. He does not imagine challenging Rockefeller’s empire but imaginatively *becomes* Rockefeller, erasing his own social reality and adopting the identity of the ultimate owner. The capitalist icon functions as a fetish object, a hollow form into which Joe pours his desires for autonomy and power, mistaking a specific, oppressive social position for a personal destiny.

The nebulous dream crystallizes into a potent symbol when Joe encounters F.W. Bennett’s private railroad car. Inside, he glimpses a world of luxury—dark wood, leather books, servants, and a blonde girl holding a white dress (Doctorow 33). This scene becomes the novel’s central fetishistic tableau: the train as a capsule of inaccessible power, and Clara as a doubly fetishized object of erotic and class desire. His whispered “Oh my lords and ladies” (Doctorow 33) registers awe, not critique. The vision “left me more alone and terrified than I knew it was possible to be” (Doctorow 33). Here, reification operates by transforming social relations of production into a spectacle of enchanted objects, whose power attracts Joe while deepening his exclusion and rendering him a willing supplicant to the very system that subjugates him.

Upon stumbling into Loon Lake, Joe internalizes the master’s logic. His goal is incorporation, not subversion: “Only until the big man arrived, I had only that time to prove I shouldn’t be thrown out on my ass” (Doctorow 73-74). His desire for Clara and fear of Bennett fuse into a frantic campaign for validation within the estate’s terms. He accepts the legitimacy of Bennett’s ownership and his own exclusion, seeking only a reversal of judgment. This supplicant mentality completes his initial false consciousness. In Lukács’s terms, reification has reached the level of subjective conviction: the capitalist hierarchy is no longer perceived as an external force but internalized as the natural, unquestionable framework for his ambitions and self-worth.

This analysis argues that E.L. Doctorow’s *Loon Lake* traces the systematic dismantling of its protagonist’s identity through the ideological machinery of the American Dream, a process best understood through Georg Lukács’s theory of reification. Joe’s journey is not merely one of moral failure but a precise narrative of how false consciousness is instilled, how labor and relationships are commodified, and how the subject ultimately internalizes the very logic of his own exploitation, mistaking alienation for upward mobility.

Encounters with Capitalist Power: The Machinery of Exploitation and Oppression

Joe's initial confrontation with capitalist power is abstract, learned through the symbols of absolute ownership. He discovers that F. W. Bennett's wealth is rooted not in labor but in the control of property itself—a foundational class distinction. As he is told, "He owned the lake itself, the water in the lake, the land under the water and the fish that swam in it" (Doctorow 64). This moment underscores a core Marxist principle: the ruling class's power derives from its monopoly over resources and nature, establishing a social order where everything, including the natural world, is rendered a possessible commodity. For Joe, this is a theoretical lesson in hierarchy, but his understanding remains detached until he experiences the system's logic materially.

Joe's most transformative edification occurs when he seeks a "new life" through honest work, only to be absorbed into the very engine of Bennett's wealth: the auto factory. Here, the abstract concept of ownership gives way to the lived, brutal reality of commodified labor. His experience embodies what Georg Lukács theorized as reification, the process by which human activity and relations are transformed into quantifiable, thing-like commodities. The factory is not a place of production but a "sensory prison of alienation" (Doctorow 63), a realm dominated by machinery where the human is subsumed by the mechanical.

The environment assaults the senses: "the sun came through the mesh windows already broken down... And all around me the noise of running machines, conveyor belts, the creaking of pulleys, screeching of worked metal" (Doctorow 163-64). In this cacophony, Joe's labor is stripped of its individuality and meaning, reduced to a repetitive, measurable task that enriches the owner while impoverishing the worker's experience. This exploitation is not merely psychological; it is physically inscribed on Joe's body, offering undeniable proof of his proletarian status.

His body becomes a testament to the material toll of capitalism. When his neighbor and fellow worker, Lyle, examines him, Joe holds out his hands: "swollen paws, a thousand cuts" (Doctorow 154). These hands are more than injured limbs; they are, as he later reflects, "documents" of his class identity (Doctorow 235). The bodily degradation—the pain, the scars, and the fatigue—serves as the ultimate, corporeal evidence of exploitation. It shatters any lingering romanticism about work or upward mobility, replacing it with the visceral understanding that his life and time have become raw material for another's profit. Joe's journey from the symbolic dominion of Loon Lake to the concrete grind of the factory floor thus traces a complete arc of capitalist socialization: from learning who owns the world to experiencing how that ownership is maintained through the systematic consumption of human labor and flesh.

Reification and Alienation: The Corruption of Relationships and Self

The process of reification, which transforms human relations into commodity-like transactions, exerts a powerful force on Joe's world, systematically corroding bonds and framing his ascent within an economy of exchange. His flight with Clara Lukacs is inextricable from dreams of mobility, his guardianship of Sandy James becomes a logistical burden, and his climactic choice of patrimony is starkly economic: he selects the legacy of F.W. Bennett, who offers dominion over a kingdom, over that of Warren Penfield, who bequeaths only the "papers... all that is left of me" (62). This choice represents a peak of reification, substituting a human relationship for an institutional inheritance. As Mark Harris notes, Joe's return to Loon Lake is a "conscious moral circumvention for the sake of success" (78), leading to the atomized isolation he later laments: "I don't remember anyone's name... I was alone in all of it" (Doctorow 11). Diane Johnson identifies this as a "material success" that constitutes a "moral failure," a hollowing out of the self to fit a capitalist role (*Righteous* 114).

However, to view Joe's trajectory as a seamless victory of reification overlooks the persistent, complicating pulse of authentic human connection in the novel. Doctorow consistently

shows reification as a dominant but incomplete process, one that exists in tension with moments of profound, non-instrumental recognition. Joe himself is capable of perceiving humanity in the most degraded circumstances. His reflection on Fanny the Fat Lady, for instance, transcends a purely economic reading of her exploitation. He sees in her a sacred, if tragic, authenticity: "She was truly sensitive to men, she had a real affection for them. She didn't know she was making money... I decided that... some really important sacrament was taken, some means of continuing with hope, a ritual oath of life..." (22-23). Here, Joe actively resists the logic of commodification, interpreting the encounter through a lens of shared human sacrament.

Similarly, his relationship with the poet Warren Penfield cannot be dismissed as merely transactional. Penfield's influence is emotional and intellectual, granting Joe a form of recognition that precedes utility. When Penfield recites his poetry, Joe experiences a moment of genuine awakening: "As this absurd fat drunkard sang his words, they seemed the most beautiful I had ever heard... I was feeling Penfield's immense careless generosity, the boon of himself which granted me without argument everything I was struggling for..." (80-81). This "boon" is not material but existential—a gift of artistic vision and self-validation that stands outside capitalist exchange. Even his connection to Clara, often framed by desire and strategy, contains elements of complex

recognition. Joe observes her not just as an object but as a subject of reckless authenticity: “She blazed through her feelings and suffered the consequences... she was in fact reckless of her self-interest in a situation, and that I think was the center of her force and effect” (83).

Joe’s agency in navigating these tensions further complicates a deterministic reading. He is not merely a passive vessel for systemic forces. This is evident in his initial, instinctive refusal of Bennett’s world. When Bennett offers him a place at Loon Lake, Joe asserts a moral and personal boundary: “You think you ought to be hired?” I swallowed. ‘No,’ I said... ‘I couldn’t live here,’ I said. ‘It’s not for me’” (100). This refusal, however temporary, signifies a moment of clear-sighted resistance to the very system that will later co-opt him. Furthermore, his fascination with the symbols of power, like the guest book at Loon Lake, stems from a deep existential yearning as much as from social ambition. He studies it seeking meaning: “I felt I could learn something, that there was something here, some powerful knowledge I could use. But it was in code!... It was some mysterious system of legalities and caste and extended brilliant endeavor...” (66-67). His desire for inheritance is thus also a search for identity and place within a bewildering world.

Ultimately, Joe’s trajectory is defined by the struggle between these two poles: the reifying pull of the capitalist system and the persistent human need for authentic connection. His survival

instinct and his “living spirit” (13-14) push him toward the former, leading him to internalize Bennett’s logic and choose the material kingdom. Yet the novel suggests this victory is Pyrrhic, achieved at the cost of the very human connections—with Fanny, Penfield, Clara, and even his own past—that once offered him a different kind of knowledge. The path to success is paved with moral circumvention, resulting not in fulfillment but in the profound alienation of being “alone in all of it.” Joe’s story, therefore, does not simply chart the triumph of reification but dramatizes its tragic human cost, showing how the system rewards those who sacrifice the sacrament of connection for the security of a transaction.

The Illusion of Upward Mobility: Internalization and the New Identity

Joe’s apparent ascent from a Paterson carney to the heir of an industrial empire does not represent an escape from the class system but rather its ultimate psychological triumph. His trajectory is not one of overcoming oppression but of being wholly absorbed by its logic, a process of internalization so complete that it demands the re-creation of his very identity. This transformation is succinctly captured in his own genealogical mantra: “Joe of Paterson, then Joe the bastard, then Bennett” (258). This progression narrates his life as a classic capitalist success story, systematically erasing his working-class origins. His journey culminates in

the ultimate act of self-reinvention when he declares to Bennett's intermediaries, "Tell Mr. Bennett it's his son calling. Tell him it's his son, Joe" (209). By claiming the name Bennett, he symbolically annihilates "Joe of Paterson," completing the transfer of allegiance from his biological lineage to his economic patron.

This internalization requires Joe to reframe his past, particularly the exploited labor that defined it, through the valorizing lens of capitalism. Reflecting on the dehumanizing factory where he was "screwed to the machines," he does not condemn the system but instead glorifies its human casualties: "It was enough to make me think of my father. The man was a [...] hero" (150-151). This retrospective heroization of alienated labor is a critical ideological pivot. He learns to view brutal exploitation not as a crime against the worker but as a form of stoic endurance worthy of admiration, thereby rationalizing the very system that consumed his father and nearly consumed him. His vision for the future confirms this adopted mindset. Explaining his plans to Sandy, he articulates the core myth of bootstrap capitalism: "I know I have to plan to make something of myself. And I have ideas, Sandy, a man can do a lot starting from a small investment. More than one fortune has been made that way, I can tell you" (215). The once-alienated worker now speaks purely as a prospective investor, his consciousness fully reshaped into that of his oppressor.

This psychological shift is accompanied by a deliberate rejection of collective class identity. Fleeing the union violence in Jacksontown, he severs his connection to solidarity, telling Sandy, "I'm not your husband and even if I was I wouldn't make my living as a stool-pigeon" (214). His path forward is one of radical individualism, mirroring the capitalist ideal of the self-made man who owes nothing to the collective. The promised land for this new identity is California, the perennial symbol of the American Dream. Yet, Joe's vision of a "new life" there is devoid of any substantive change, constituting only a repetition of reified existence within a sunnier climate. He imagines a life of consumerist performance: "a bungalow under palm trees... I imagined myself driving up to my bungalow... in an open roadster and tooting the horn as I pulled up to the curb" (217). This fantasy is not one of liberation but of perfected assimilation into a world of property and spectacle.

The culmination of this process is Joe's complete physical and psychic makeover. After shedding his cast and worker's clothes for a suit, he is unrecognizable even to his companion. When Sandy asks, "Is that you?" he replies, "It's either me or George Raft" (217). The reference to the Hollywood star is telling; his new identity is a performative construct, a role modeled on capitalist cinema's archetypes. As Harold Bloom observes, Joe allows "the vacuum of his identity to be filled with a manufactured new soul that is pure

Bennett” (243). Like Tateh in Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, who sheds his socialist past to become “Baron Ashkenazy,” Joe’s upward mobility is a function of amnesia and reinvention (Berryman 39). Thus, his ascent reveals the true nature of this mobility within Doctorow’s critical universe: it is not an escape from a reifying system but its final, decisive stage. The working-class individual is not liberated but reconstituted—atomized, alienated, and remade as a willing agent of the very forces that once alienated him, achieving a success that is inseparable from self-erasure.

Conclusion

In *Loon Lake*, E.L. Doctorow meticulously dissects the American Dream to reveal its core not as a promise but as a process—a relentless mechanism for producing compliant subjects. The novel’s ultimate finding is that the dream functions as a factory for the self, where raw human desire and potential are broken down and reassembled into forms that serve the existing hierarchy. Joe’s celebrated ascent is neither a triumph nor an escape; it is the finished product rolling off this ideological assembly line, a perfect replica of the power he once believed he could transcend.

The narrative structure of the novel directly answers the first research question by acting as the very blueprint for this manufacturing process. The fragmented, multi-voiced form—intercutting Joe’s journey with Warren Penfield’s poetic

fragments, corporate dossiers, and shards of memory—dramatizes the disintegration of a coherent, autonomous identity. This formal disarray mirrors the collision of competing consciousnesses within Joe: the yearning for authentic experience, the seductive language of capital, and the haunting pull of artistic truth. The story does not simply tell us about false consciousness; its structure makes us experience the cacophony from which a single, sanctioned identity must be forcibly built. The symbols that dominate the narrative, from the private train to the factory machine, are not just set pieces but the very tools and dies that shape Joe’s aspirations, stamping his vague longing into the specific, acquisitive mold of his oppressor.

Through the lens of Lukácsian reification, Joe’s journey provides a definitive answer to the second research question, showcasing the systematic conversion of human essence into exchangeable commodity. His transformation is a case study in the progressive objectification of all aspects of life. This begins with the literal commodification of his physical labor in the auto plant, where his body becomes a documented instrument. Crucially, the process then invades his private sphere, reconfiguring his most intimate relationships. Bonds of affection, loyalty, and mentorship are gradually stripped of their inherent value and assessed for their utility within his climb. His final, stark choice to claim the Bennett name over inheriting Penfield’s poetic legacy is

the ultimate transaction, where a human connection is fully exchanged for a corporate identity. His alienation, therefore, is not a side effect but the inevitable result of this total reification. He does not lose his self along the way; he trades it in, piece by piece, for a new one that comes pre-packaged with power, property, and profound isolation.

Loon Lake thus concludes that spiritual alienation is the inherent product, not the accidental flaw, of this version of success. The novel exposes the dream itself as an engine that harnesses the hunger for change to perpetuate the system that creates it. What this analysis contributes beyond existing diagnoses of Joe's false consciousness is a procedural account of the precise narrative and psychological steps by which the American Dream systematically dismantles and reshapes working-class identity. These steps follow a clear trajectory: first, the protagonist's fetishized longing for fame and wealth; second, his direct experience of commodified, alienated labor in the factory; and third, his internalized submission to the master's logic, culminating in his willing adoption of Bennett's name and worldview. By charting this sequential process, the paper moves beyond static diagnoses of Joe's final condition to explain how that condition is actively constructed through the novel's narrative mechanics.

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