

Text, Music and History in Symphonic Intertextuality: A Postmodern Narrative Study of *Ragtime*

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ABSTRACT: *Ragtime*, the representative work of American postmodernist writer E. L. Doctorow, is set against the backdrop of the "Progressive Era" in early twentieth-century America and interweaves the stories of three families from different racial and class backgrounds. This essay adopts Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality as its core analytical framework and examines the intertextual relationships in the novel from three dimensions: first, its parody and variation of German writer Heinrich von Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas*; second, its deep intertextual engagement with ragtime music itself; and third, its mirror-like dialogue with the social realities of 1960s America, the period in which the novel was written. Through this threefold intertextual analysis, this essay argues that Doctorow does not simply reconstruct history. Rather, employing a musical polyphonic narrative and an encyclopedic citation of texts, he constructs an open network of meaning that compels readers to actively participate in the generation of meaning amidst fractures and blanks, thereby completing a critical reflection on power structures, historical narratives, and individual destinies.

KEYWORDS - E. L. Doctorow, Intertextuality, Musicality, Postmodern, *Ragtime*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ragtime, by American novelist E. L. Doctorow, is widely regarded as a distinguished postmodern novel. The narrative interweaves stories from three families representing different races and social classes in the early twentieth century, thereby providing readers with a panoramic view of that era. Among the postmodern writing techniques employed in *Ragtime*—such as ambiguity, indeterminacy, and intertextuality—the last is particularly prominent. This essay takes intertextuality as its core analytical framework, examining the intertextual relationships between text and history, between reality and music, and exploring how intertextuality deepens the novel's thematic concerns.

Intertextuality was proposed by Julia Kristeva in 1960s who combined Saussurean and Bakhtinian theories of language and literature. Kristeva once mentioned that Bakhtin's dialogic theory made her dissatisfied with merely exploring the system or structure of language itself, and instead shifted her focus to the "speaking subject" and the world outside the text (Chang, [8]). In "The Bounded Text," Kristeva first proposes the term intertextuality. She maintains that a text is constructed out of already existent discourse and that authors do not create their texts from their own original minds but rather compile them from pre-existent texts. Kristeva's definition, in her essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel," reads: intertextuality is "a mosaic of quotations: any text is the absorption and transformation of another (Martin, [148]). In Kristeva's perspectives, text is not an individual, isolated object but a combination of cultural texts.

II. INTERTEXTUALITY WITH *MICHELE COLHANS*

In an interview, Doctorow mentioned that the story of Coalhouse was inspired by the German novelist Heinrich von Kleist's work *Michael Kohlhaas*. This German novel was written in 1908. The horse dealer Michael Colhans' horses were similarly detained by the nobleman Wenzel for no reason. After his appeals proved futile and his wife died, Colhans embarked on a path of violence in his quest for justice. Colhan was a well-read and gentle-mannered man and in *Ragtime* Coalhouse Walker was depicted as the same image as Colhan who failed to seek justice and chose the radical way which led to his disaster. By analyzing the plot and characters, it can be confirmed that *Ragtime* is intertextual with *Michael Colhans*, or rather, the former is a parody of the latter. Finding the parody is only the first step and it is necessary to dig out the difference between the two texts and what E. L. Doctorow wants to express through the intertextuality.

Michele Colhans is adopted based on an event that actually happened during 16th Century Germany, besides the center conflict is the oppression and exploitation of the commoner class by the feudal aristocracy while what Coalhouse Walker suffered in this novel is racial discrimination. As marginalized individuals, the essence of their oppression are identical. Their enemy are the center of the society. From these two texts we can find that the sameness of racial and class issues. Both of Colhans and Coalhouse Walker turned to violence when they were faced with social injustice and met their tragedy. But they were in different time and space. Colhan was in 16th Century Germany while Coalhouse Walker was in 20th Century America. Although the time and space span are very large, their choice and fate are same, which prompts readers to reflect the correctness and reasonability of their resorting to violence when they were facing structural injustice and how to avoid such terrible end. The author advocates for a harmonious approach to social reform. In his view, radical figures are always the ones who have to be sacrificed. The pursuit of justice and the moral dilemmas encountered in this pursuit are among the important themes of *Ragtime*.

III. INTERTEXTUALITY WITH MUSIC

Ragtime music is a popular piano music genre that originated from African Americans and was integrated with European music. But after 1900 ragtime lost its association with black musicians and became a "white" music by national adoption. Hence black sounds entered the American mainstream in whiteface (Ostendorf,[580]). In the early 20th century, the United States experienced its third wave of immigration. Between 1900 and 1910, over 9 million immigrants entered the country. In the early 20th century, African Americans in the United States initiated a series of movements to gain respect and equality for their race. In 1905, W.E.B. Du Bois and others founded the Niagara Movement. Booker T. Washington advocated that African Americans improve their status through economic development. He encouraged them to start businesses and factories, and to develop vocational skills, in order to gain social standing through economic independence. The early 20th-century United States was a complex and dynamic country. Just like ragtime music, various races brought their own cultures into the United States and actively integrated them with American culture. However, like the fate of ragtime music, different ethnic groups gradually lost their own identities in the process of Americanization. In the novel, the Jewish papa arrives in the United States, the great melting pot, as an immigrant. Initially, he is a staunch socialist who actively participates in workers' rallies. However, through repeated experiences of massive strikes, he comes to see the true nature of American society. As a result, he abandons his identity as a worker and enters the film industry. After achieving success, he fabricates a title for himself and alters his appearance in an attempt to conceal his immigrant origins. The fate of the Jewish papa is much like that of ragtime music.

Ragtime music is characterized by its lively rhythm and frequent syncopated notes. Ragtime music can be broken down into "rag" (meaning "broken" or "tattered") and "time" (meaning "rhythm"). It features a rhythm that is torn or fragmented, creating a lively and irregular beat through syncopation. This unique rhythmic structure gives the music a distinctive, playful, and energetic style. The syncopated rhythms and irregular rhythmic variations of ragtime music give a sense of being "torn" or "broken". Similarly, *Ragtime* employs fragmented narration and complex character relationships to convey a sense of "brokenness" in that era. This reflects the instability of society and the confusion within people's hearts. Paragraphs are composed of disconnect and

fragmented sentences which provide large blankness leaving readers space to imagine. “When Evelyn was fifteen, she once modeled for a famous artist. Her underwear was always white. Her husband often whipped her. One time, she ran into the revolutionary Emma Goldman by chance. Goldman gave her a severe talking-to. Clearly, there were still Black people and immigrants. Although the newspapers said that the shooting was the biggest crime of the century, Goldman was well aware that it was only 1906, and there were still ninety-four years left until the end of the century!” (Doctorow,[4]) The description is straightforward and concise, without a single causal conjunction. Each sentence is like a cinematic frame, and by juxtaposing these frames, the author requires the reader to use their imagination and creativity to connect the dots (Liang, [55]). Evelyn’s life is filled with fragmented events, from her early experience as a model to being abused by her husband, and then encountering the revolutionary Emma Goldman by chance. There is no obvious causal relationship between these events, yet they collectively form the complex trajectory of her life. Through this disjointed narrative, the author may intend to convey the disorderliness and unpredictability of life. Evelyn’s life is full of accidental and fragmented experiences, which, though seemingly unrelated, together shape her life. Within these sentences many social conflicts are secretly revealed at that time. The domination of men over women and the conflicts between races and classes are presented by using concise and crisp sentences.

A steady two-beat accompaniment in the left hand and a continuous and varied syncopated rhythm in the right hand is another striking feature of ragtime. The steady bass accompaniment in the left hand underscores the rumbling sound of the wheels of progress in the era, while the syncopated and ever-changing melody in the right hand highlights the turbulent notes of the times and the cries for reform and redemption from the brave (Tao,[44]). The first period of 20th Century is regarded as progressive era. The United States underwent rapid industrialization and urbanization, with its economy developing swiftly. In the left hand, steady melody is created, which in this novel is steady development of that time while many new calls surge beneath the main melody. In *Ragtime*, Jews papa represented the working class and immigrants who took part in anarchist gatherings and general strikes in order to change their living condition and increase their wages. The growth and awakening of mother changed her family status and challenged her position as the other in her marriage. Coalhouse Walker made his effort to transform the stereotype of black man in white community. All those calls and changes are played by the right hand. The left-hand repetition and right-hand variation harmoniously form the complete composition of Ragtime (jiang,[19]).

Music seems to possess an intrinsic vitality, as if it flows and evolves on its own rather than being entirely dependent on the deliberate design of its creator. It gives a sense of being natural and spontaneous, as if the music itself has its own rhythm and direction. Although music is created by a composer, its fluidity and vitality make it feel as if it has its own life. Even without the creator, the music can still exist independently and convey emotions. In *Ragtime*, Doctorow does not impose his own views on the novel, but instead presents a complex era through multiple perspectives and diverse voices. The text gives the extraordinary impression of being self-generated, privileging no character and producing itself in dependent of any narrator (Harpham,[82]). This stance is not simply about dominating the story, but revealing social issues through the dialogue and interactions among characters. In the conversation between Father and Coalhouse, we see that even when African Americans achieve social wealth and respectable professions, white prejudice against them is still deeply rooted. In their dialogue, Doctorow deliberately conceals the authorial voice and narrates through the perspective of the young boy. The novel frequently shifts and transitions between different characters and events, without a fixed focal point. It moves fluidly among various elements much like a musical melody line, immersing readers in an era characterized by constant change and uncertainty.

IV. INTERTEXTUALITY WITH REALITY

Ragtime was published in 1960s while the novel is set between 1906 and 1914, just before the outbreak of World War I. The author’s choice of the “Progressive Era” as a historical backdrop to comment on the social realities of the 1970s is also based on the many similarities between the two periods. (Xu, [126]) 1900s was a time of rapid industrialization and urbanization in the United States, a time filled with change and upheaval. On one

hand, the economy was booming, and new things were emerging constantly, such as the rise of new industries like automobiles and cinema. On the other hand, social problems were also becoming increasingly prominent, including labor-capital conflicts, racial tensions, and wealth disparity. At the beginning of the 20th century, a large number of European immigrants poured into the United States, bringing with them different cultures, values, and social backgrounds. The integration and conflicts between these immigrants and native Americans constituted the diversity and complexity of American society.

In the 1960s, American society underwent profound changes with the rise of the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and the women's rights movement. These movements reflected society's pursuit of equality, freedom, and justice, but also exposed the limitations of the American Dream. Doctorow says it is "a myth that is being nullified by history", a cultural fiction that is being superseded by the pressure of changing national and cultural circumstance (Harris, [47]). In *Ragtime*, Jews papa's experience is the best portrayal of the shattering of the American Dream in the 1960s. Jews papa suffered long time oppression and finally understood the falsity of American Dream that one can obtain success psychologically and materially on this new land. At that time, the United States had quietly transformed into a "consumer society." Consumption became an important criterion for measuring personal happiness and social progress. People displayed their social status and lifestyle through consumption, which was imbued with strong symbolic significance. Baudrillard believed that the ideology of consumption greatly eroded the will to struggle of the ruled class. The dramatic experiences and fate of papa revealed the ruthless manipulation of people's beliefs and consciousness by consumer society, highlighting the cunning and conspiracy of capitalist consumer ideology. (Han, [104]) He resolutely abandoned his proletarian class identity and actively conformed to the mainstream social currents of American development. Eventually, he rose to become a famous filmmaker and secured a comfortable life for his daughter. However, his deliberate change of name and identity, though earning him superficial respect within his community, cannot be interpreted as a typical realization of the "American Dream"—that is, an individual achieving both material and spiritual success in the New Land through honest labor. On the contrary, it profoundly reveals the internal paradox and ultimate collapse of the ideology of the American Dream. For the success he attained was not founded on the affirmation of his self-worth, but was achieved at the cost of negating his own class origin and erasing his original cultural identity, by assimilating into the symbolic order of consumer society. This kind of success precisely confirms the American Dream as a cultural fiction: it promises that everyone can succeed, yet tacitly demands that individuals abandon themselves and submit to the dominant power structure, thereby making the so-called "dream come true" essentially a dissolution and betrayal of the dream itself.

The feminist movement of the 1960s was a pivotal turning point in American history. It not only propelled changes in laws and policies but also sparked significant shifts in social attitudes and culture. The Equal Pay Act was enacted in 1963, mandating that employers pay men and women equally for the same work and prohibiting wage discrimination based on sex. This was the first time the United States legally acknowledged women's equal rights in the workplace. Title IX of the Education Amendments prohibited gender discrimination in educational settings, ensuring that women had equal educational opportunities as men. In the novel *Ragtime*, the spiritual growth and independent development of "Mother" deeply reflect the social realities of the American women's liberation movement of the 1960s. At the beginning of the novel, the author uses a few brief descriptions of the sexual encounters between "Mother" and "Father" to subtly reveal "Mother's" position as the "Other" within the marital structure — she exists almost entirely as an object of desire and a domestic servant, lacking space for autonomous speech and bodily subjectivity. It is worth noting that the gradual awakening of "Mother" is not presented through direct interior monologue or declarative feminist rhetoric, but is deliberately concealed within textual details and narrative gaps. This implicit treatment precisely demonstrates Doctorow's realist grasp of female consciousness: true awakening often does not take the form of a dramatic epiphany, but rather emerges as a structural transformation accumulated through a series of subtle changes. As the story progresses, "Mother" begins to manage the factory independently during her husband's absence. This change carries strong symbolic meaning — her entry into the sphere of economic production gradually frees her from the role constraints of the traditional housewife, granting her control over material resources and her own labor capacity. At the same time,

her discursive power and decision-making status within the family steadily increase; she shifts from passive obedience to active participation, even becoming the de facto center of family operations.

The speeches on women's liberation delivered by the historical figure Emma Goldman, interspersed throughout the novel, create a distinct intertextual dialogue between the text and history. Goldman, as an authentic voice of radical feminism and anarchism in the early twentieth century, is embedded by Doctorow into the novel's narrative. This serves both to restore the spirit of women's resistance in that era and as a metaphorical hint: the silent growth that "Mother" undergoes inwardly resonates with the public discourse of women's liberation represented by Goldman. Although "Mother" never directly participates in radical movements, Goldman's speeches act like a mirror, reflecting "Mother's" internal trajectory of self-awakening and suggesting that even within the seemingly tranquil domestic sphere, undercurrents of resistance against traditional gender divisions are surging.

The text of *Ragtime* establishes an intertextual relationship with the social realities of the period in which it was written. E. L. Doctorow's decision to set his novel in the "Progressive Era" is not intended merely to reconstruct that historical period; rather, he employs history as a mirror to deepen readers' understanding of various social issues confronting the United States in the 1970s, while simultaneously articulating his own political stance on those issues (Xu,[126]). As the proposition holds, all history is contemporary history. Doctorow's engagement with history as the subject matter of the historical novel stems directly from his identity as an "engaged" writer and from his reflections on history: "I am thus led to the proposition that the development of civilizations is essentially metaphorical" (Evans, [26]). Through this narrative technique, Doctorow's profound conception and interpretation of history become evident.

V. CONCLUSION

Doctorow's intertextual writing in *Ragtime* is not merely a citation or pastiche of prior texts, but rather an ontological narrative strategy. Through intertextuality with Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas*, he transplants the tragedy of feudal oppression into a racialized context, revealing the inevitability and sacrificial nature of violent resistance under structural injustice. At the same time, he transforms ragtime musical form into narrative syntax: the novel's fractured syntax and juxtaposed montage passages imitate the "brokenness" of syncopated rhythms, metaphorically representing the struggle and variation of immigrants and women beneath the dominant melody. Doctorow deliberately withdraws authorial authority, allowing the text to present itself as a self-generating mosaic of fragments, inviting readers to actively construct meaning in the blanks.

More importantly, by choosing the "Progressive Era" as his historical backdrop while allowing the civil rights, feminist, and countercultural movements of the 1960s to resonate within it, he reveals the proposition that "all history is contemporary history." He rejects the linear narrative of the American Dream and instead employs the circular structure of music to present the cycles and ruptures of history: every resistance comes with trauma, every assimilation implies self-negation. True liberation may not lie in becoming part of the main melody, but in the courage to retain difference through syncopation and dislocation. Thus, this novel is not merely a record of an era, but an allegory of the predicament of modernity.

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