



The “Counterpoint Musicality” of Americanness in E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*

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Abstract— *Musicality in E.L. Doctorow’s Ragtime is quite deserving of study, as represented by its title. This article conducts an interdisciplinary study and offers a corrective to previous scholarship that has routinely overlooked the relationship between the counterpoint of musicality and the American identities. It is split into three parts: the manifestations of counterpoint musicality in Ragtime, stabilized left-hand voice echoing progressive industry and varied right-hand voice echoing conflictive revolt, which emphasizes the reflections on the “double” American identities.*



Keywords— *Musicality; Counterpoint; Ragtime; Double American Identities*

Ragtime intentionally highlights the issue of musicality in the novel, just as R.Z. Sheppard point that *Ragtime* “has a lyrical tone, a flowing structure, and a joyful, energetic rhythm, such that an inherent musicality has been created that it eclipses any external interpretation” (69). Previous scholarship on it have favored new historicism, consumerism, and spatial theory, but failing to pay sufficient attention to the references to the relationship between its musicality and American identities. Chen Shidan points that “E. L. Doctorow through the music narratives in the integrated models of showing, telling, and thematically echoing music, creates an aesthetic experience of ‘expectation’ and ‘surprise’ in *Ragtime*, which contains the philosophy of the era that features the commitment to something in changes as well

as the pursuit of harmony in heterogeneity” (43). *Ragtime*’s counterpoint musicality reveals itself as an important part of American society and history on the eve of WWI, with its high and low voices alluding to the industrial development and conflictive revolt of American society, respectively. To some extent, the novel illustrates an in-depth consideration of the “double” American identities.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin agrees with Marovich’s transposition of the term “counterpoint” but disagrees with the metaphor: “The essence of counterpoint lies precisely in the fact that the different voices remain separate here, and as separate voices are combined in a unity that is already one level above the monophonic structure. If it is necessary to speak

of individual wills, then the polyphonic structure is precisely a combination of several wills, which in principle goes beyond the scope of the will of one individual. In this sense, the artistic skill of the polyphonic structure lies in the combination of many wills, in the formation of events” (49-50). In “*Andersstreben*”: *On Music Narratives of Western Novels*, Long Diyong indicates that “The third type of musical narrative in the Western novel is the type of cross-media narrative that imitates or borrows structurally from the art of music” (125). This article is split into three parts: the manifestations of counterpoint musicality in *Ragtime*, stabilized left-hand voice echoing progressive industry and varied right-hand voice echoing conflictive revolt, which emphasizes the reflections on the “double” American identities.

I. COUNTERPOINT MUSICALITY IN *RAGTIME*

Ragtime, a style of music originating in the United States and popularized in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was a precursor to early jazz. Ragtime evolved from piano playing along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers in the last decades of the 19th century, and was influenced by songs performed by minstrels, African American banjo styles, syncopated dance rhythms, and elements of European music. Counterpoint is the distinguishing feature, and usually the player plays an erratic syncopated melody in the right hand, accompanied by a subdued bass in the left hand, creating a “ragged time” rhyme (Berlin 5-20). The music is mostly in 4/4 or 2/4 time, and usually consists of several different themes, each 16 or 32 bars in length, which are repeated and reproduced according to a certain pattern. Scott Joplin is known as the “King of Ragtime”, and his works such as *Maple Leaf Rag* played an important role in the development and spread of the style.

The counterpoint musicality of *Ragtime* can be summarized into three aspects: structure, diction, short sentences.

A significant parallel exists between the structure of ragtime music. Ragtime music comprises a prelude, exposition, development, and coda. The prelude, an independent musical introduction, primes the subsequent development. The exposition juxtaposes musical elements to reveal the theme, while the development reinforces it. The coda concludes by summarizing preceding sections. Likewise, *Ragtime* can be divided into four parts, as Doctorow has done, mirroring the musical structure. The first part (chapters 1–13) contrasts the white’s prosperity with immigrants’ struggles, depicting social realities and acting as a narrative prelude. The second part (chapters 14–28), akin to the musical exposition, unveils the novel’s theme and tone, presenting Tateh’s mild reform and Coalhouse Walker’s violent revolution as contrasting attempts to rectify social injustice in the *Ragtime*. The third part (chapters 29–39), corresponding to the musical development or climax, sees both efforts end in failure. The novel’s final section functions as its coda (Chapter 40), bringing the narrative to a close. While a perfect structural alignment between *Ragtime* and Ragtime music is unattainable, the novel’s parts largely correspond to the musical sections in both form and length.

Another distinctive feature of musicality is the diction of *Ragtime*. A lot of phrasal sketches are used in the novel, giving it a syncopated syllable-like bounce. In chapter thirteen, which begins with two “Tracks! Tracks!” (Doctorow 164) and chapters twenty-seven and thirty-three begin with, “Spring, spring!” (164) “Ah, what a summer it was!” (Doctorow 208). And Doctorow described famous escape artist Houdini as “buried and reborn, buried and reborn” to reflect his great escaping skills (234). In the novel, the use of such kind of repetition is an imitation of the lively and moderately quick rhythm of Ragtime music. These repeated short phrases produce the similar musical effects to the steady double-beat of Ragtime music for the left-hand accompaniment. This kind of repetition of short sentences fastens the rhythm of narrative in the novel. It

seems to draw the reader’s attention to it or to suggest the faster rhythm of the narration. This phrase structure and repetition have a similar effect to the steady mechanical double-beat accompaniment of ragtime music in the left hand, and seems to draw the reader’s attention to it, as well as seeming to imply the narrator’s lamentation for a fleeting era.

What’s more, short sentences can also produce musicality. In the end of chapter 6, it writes, “One hundred Negroes a year were lynched. One hundred miners were burned alive. One hundred children were mutilated. There seemed to be quotas for these things. There seemed to be quotas for death by starvation. There were oil trusts and banking trusts and railroad trusts and beef trusts and steel trusts” (45-46). Doctorow utilizes sentence patterns of repeated structure with varied lexical choices to depict the contradictory social backdrop and the stark contrast between the rich and the poor, immersing readers in the era’s atmosphere. Drawing inspiration from ragtime’s syncopated rhythms, he uses similarly - structured sentences to illustrate the persistent hardships endured by blacks, miners, and child laborers, paralleling the steady left-hand rhythm in ragtime music. Simultaneously, he emphasizes the emergence of novel elements and the wealthy, mirroring the rhythmic variations of the right-hand in ragtime. The novel frequently employs recurring phrases within paragraphs, echoing the syncopated effects of ragtime. *Ragtime* itself is characterized by opposing and tension-filled syncopations, such as repetition and change, history and fantasy, white and black, rich and poor. By adopting ragtime’s rhythmic features, *Ragtime* generates a brisk, staccato-like rhythm, achieving a musical aesthetic in its narrative flow.

II. STABILIZED LEFT-HAND VOICE ECHOING PROGRESSIVE INDUSTRY

Ragtime setting in “The United States in the 1920s and 1930s was in a period of prosperity and growth, with

new things coming out of the woodwork and immigrants from all over the world flocking to the country in search of hope and opportunity (Long 95). *Ragtime* also overlapped with the Progressive Era in the United States. The Progressive Era in the United States refers to the 20-year period from the late 19th century to 1917, which witnessed a movement of improvement in American history, the Progressive Movement (Hillstrom, 2011)” This part will mainly talk about the stabilized left-hand voice as a miniature as the progressive industry.

A more obvious example is the trajectory of Father. At the beginning of the novel, the background of the white Father’s wealth through “the manufacture of flags and buntings and other accoutrements of patriotism, including fireworks (3)”. The house “is trapped by heavy square furnishings, the drapes and the dark rugs, the Oriental silk cushions, the green glass lampshades. There was a chair with a zebra rug. (3)” So, with the help of industrial production, the white Fathers amassed a large family fortune and became middle class. At the beginning of the novel, the depiction of the white Father’s wealth, derived from the manufacture of patriotic items like flags and fireworks, reflects a complex understanding of American identity during the Ragtime era. This wealth symbolizes the rise of industrialization and the emergence of a middle class, showcasing how economic success is intertwined with “consumer culture and materialism” (Han 102-104), as evidenced by the opulent furnishings of the home. However, this portrayal also highlights the underlying social inequalities, as the capitalized letter “F” in “Father” suggests a racial privilege that excludes many non-white groups from sharing in this prosperity. Thus, the narrative critiques the notion of American exceptionalism by revealing the contradictions between material wealth, national pride, and the realities of racial and class disparities (Yang 133).

The other example is the Jewish father Tateh. It can also be seen from his life trajectories: a member of the

poor immigrant community, a street performer and a socialist. After a series of strikes, he left Lawrence with his daughter. Knowing the powerlessness of workers’ strikes and socialist organizations, he used his silhouette animation skills to join the capitalist industry and later became famous in the new industry of film. The combination of the Progressive Era’s film industry and his own talent led to his success, as he was finally able to free his daughter from the squalor and dangers of the slums and create a new identity for himself: the Baron Ashkenazy of the film industry. Just as the novel said: “this is the most important today, in this country, where everybody is new. (215)” The description of the Jewish father in the *Ragtime* illustrates a nuanced perspective on American identity, emphasizing themes of resilience, adaptation, and the pursuit of the American Dream. As a member of a poor immigrant community, his journey from a street performer and socialist to a successful figure in the burgeoning film industry reflects the transformative potential of America during the Progressive Era. His ability to leverage his artistic skills in a capitalist framework highlights the tension between individual talent and systemic challenges faced by marginalized groups. By ultimately freeing his daughter from the hardships of the slums and reinventing himself as the Baron Ashkenazy, he embodies the idea that success in America is attainable through perseverance and reinvention, even amidst the struggles of immigrant life. This narrative underscores the complexity of American identity, where the promise of opportunity coexists with the realities of social and economic inequality, as encapsulated in the notion that “everybody is new” in this evolving society.

Through the above analysis of the two father figures who grew up in the rolling torrent of industrialization, we can see that the development of industrialization echoes the left beat of ragtime music: i.e., the steady mechanical bass symbolizes the rolling forward development of industry.

III. VARIED RIGHT-HAND VOICE ECHOING CONFLICTIVE REVOLT

“Behind the prosperity of *Ragtime* there were also crises, such as class conflicts, labor disputes, gender equality, racial discrimination and other issues, and the shadow of war was approaching. The novel deals with various real historical events, such as the assassination of Duke Ferdinand, the murder of Evelyn’s lover, and the impending outbreak of the First World War. The third climactic phase of immigration to the United States was from 1881 to 1920, when the number of immigrants skyrocketed to 23.5 million. The U.S. government enacted numerous pieces of legislation that sought to limit European immigration and exclude Asian immigrants and immigrants had a very hard time living in the United States (Long 95).” This part will mainly talk about varied right-hand voice echoing conflictive revolt.

The Joplin famous song “Maple Leaf Rag” (1899), which the black musician Coalhouse Walker played in a white home, is a prime example. If the left hand plays the sound of the rolling wheel of the era, the syncopation of the right hand exposes the simultaneous unstable notes of the era: the feminist movement, racial conflict, and the decay of capitalism beneath the appearance of progress, yet it is these unstable notes that catalyze the sound of a reformed, redemptive future, which embodies the other side of the coin in thinking about Americanness.

The transformation of the white mother is the most striking microcosm of the rise of the middle-class woman: she grows from obedient, dependent on her husband’s decision-making, and unassertive to become a solo hostess, manager, and adopter of the black baby and its birth mother, Sarah, who also befriends Sarah’s husband, Coalhouse Walker. “Now she was almost overcome by the music which was associated in her mind also with the Young Brother. (211)” Her mother embarks on a path of independence and progress, while her father sinks deeper into the quagmire of white-centered traditional thinking.

The confusion brought about by the change of life forces him to devote himself to his work, and he is tragically killed in a shipwreck during a fireworks deal.

Another obvious example is the condition of black people. Despite their emancipation after the Civil War, blacks continued to suffer discrimination and injustice in practice. Most blacks, after emancipation, continued to work in the same jobs they did when they were slaves. It was rare for a Negro to become a professional, accounting for only 1 percent of all Negroes (Sowell 1981). Coalhouse's smart attire and expensive car were then met with taunts and hatred from white firefighters. From the end of Reconstruction in the American South in 1877 through the first two decades of the twentieth century, the continued deterioration of the social and political status of blacks characterized black-white race relations in American society. By the eve of World War I, blacks were effectively denied virtually all the political rights and benefits they had secured through the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution and the measures of Congress and the Reconstructionist government in the South. The plight of the Negro in *Ragtime* corroborates the above historical facts. "One hundred Negroes a year were lynched. One hundred miners were buried alive. One hundred children were mutilated (34)" In the face of segregation, lynchings, and race riots running rampant, the Negro intelligentsia put up an indomitable and dogged fight.

While presenting the tumultuous note of racial conflict, Doctorow also voices out several times in the novel to denounce the hypocrisy, decadence and heartlessness of capitalism, and hints at the fate of the capitalist illusion that will lead to its demise in the future. For example: "He (Tateh) was followed and beaten. He stumbled away the crowded he was still beaten. Finally, he fell." (106) When the rich hold a poor man's ball under the banner of charity, wasting human, material and financial resources, and the destination of the proceeds from the

event is not clear. In describing the group photo shoot prior to sending the children to the boarding house, Doctorow draws on a third-person omniscient narrative perspective to comment: "(Children)staring resolutely ahead as if toward the awful fate industrial America had prepared for them. (103)" Such is the decadence of America that Doctorow, borrowing from Freud, commented that America's random mixing of great wealth and abject poverty, a chaotic and tumultuous European civilization, "America is a mistake, a gigantic mistake. (33)" which is also the reflection of the other side of American identities.

IV. CONCLUSION

To summarize, the dual-voice theme conveyed in the novel *Ragtime* fits closely with the distinctly different left- and right-hand melodies of ragtime music's counterpoint, reflecting Doctorow's reflection on the "double" American identities of the ragtime era: the ostensibly upbeat, melodic ragtime music contains serious, melancholic, and painful reflections and cries about the ills of the times.

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