

Edgar Lawrence Doctorow's *Ragtime*: Ragtime Music and the Musicalization of Fiction

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The purpose of the present paper is to explore Edgar Lawrence Doctorow's novel *Ragtime* (1975) as a masterful adaptation of musical form in fiction. It demonstrates the ways in which the use of musical devices of Ragtime shapes the rhythmic/narrative structure of the novel. The article offers the reading of the novel as a musicalized fiction, or, in other words, as a form of musico-literary intermediality. It focuses on the chief characteristics of Doctorow's novel such as a plurality of independent consciousnesses and a diversity of simultaneous points of view/voices. The novel by its very design is polyphonic. Manipulating polyrhythmic effects, mixed rhythms, repetitive phrases and leitmotifs, Doctorow is experimenting with the rhythm both on micro and macro textual levels.

Keywords: Ragtime, ragged rhythms, syncopation, musicalization of fiction, polyphony

Introduction

Ragtime has become a metaphor for an era. The very word evokes images of America at the dawn of the twentieth century. Ragtime came on the public scene at a time of great change in American society. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime* (1975), then, covers the exact period when the historical ragtime was a dominant genre of musical composition in American popular music. Ragtime is one of the first truly American musical genres, and it is not quite like any other American style. It is a music of toe-tapping vitality, yet often of fragile beauty and subtle rhythmic complexity.

The term "Ragtime" also identifies the era in the history of American music from 1896 to 1917 when Ragtime set a new agenda in popular music and ushered in a social revolution. While the first strains of this "novelty music" were heard as early as 1896, the ragtime "craze" began after the turn of the century. The time frame of Doctorow's novel extends from Stanford White's murder in 1906 to America's entry into World War I in 1916. The memory of the young boy, the principal narrator, reaches backward to 1902, when the house in New Rochelle was built, and forward to the marriage of Tateh and Mother in 1917, which happens to be the year of the Russian Revolution and of the first jazz recording.

Ragtime as a Genre of Musical Composition and as a Style

Ragtime as a style of American popular music was significant in a number of ways. It may have had more impact than any previous type of American vernacular music. Ragtime left its enduring impact on American music and culture:

(1) Combining African and European antecedents into a wholly new creation, ragtime was one of the first truly American musical genres;

(2) Ragtime helped shape jazz music, which has had an enormous impact on music worldwide, and new-style piano music. Ragtime's popularity, though short-lived, spread throughout Canada, Europe, Australia, and elsewhere, paving the way for the later acceptance of American jazz abroad;

(3) Ragtime allowed Afro-American rhythms to penetrate to the heart of the American musical culture at a time when blacks were denied access to many avenues of American society. The popularity of ragtime provided entree into commercial musical life for black musicians who might not otherwise have been accepted during an age of spreading "Jim Crow" laws and discrimination;

(4) Ragtime, especially instrumental rags created by the most gifted composers, produced a body of works of lasting merit;

(5) the crisp rhythms of ragtime accelerated the decline of the musically limited parlor organ and helped give rise to the more versatile piano as the primary instrument of home music making;

(6) Ragtime helped spark public debate about popular music and American music (Hasse, 1985, p. 36).

Ragtime was not only music but lifestyle as well—its rushing rhythms and instability of musical performance were relevant to the hidden conflicts and dichotomies deeply rooted in the American life and society.

Doctorow's *Ragtime*: The Musicalization of Fiction

Ragtime is music off the beat. If New Rochelle in the Doctorow novel's cinematography is treated as its soundtrack—a blend of marches, European classical traditions and African-American rhythms in which the accents occur between the downbeat and the upbeat, creating a ragged effect, then, the novel itself can be read as a fictional embodiment of ragtime's rhythmic structure.

By using a musical form to represent simultaneous actions of characters, Doctorow offers a revolutionary model of narrative in which events, time, space, and action function as sound does in music. In other words, *Ragtime* can be viewed as a translation of the "language" of music and transformation of its form into fiction. The connection of the novel with the music of Ragtime has been studied, to a certain extent, from the perspective of literary scholarship, whereas linguistic aspect of this connection needs further investigation. The word "Ragtime" itself, its origin and usage, its functions in the sentence might give the reader some kind of clue to the understanding of the novel's musical world.

Music terminology, words belonging to the lexico-semantic group of "Music", describe the early twentieth-century—they are used as epithets, metaphors, similes and other stylistic devices in diverse contexts. Music serves as the background against which the plot unfolds and, most importantly, syntactic constructions of the novel are shaped by the rhythms of Ragtime. By fragmenting the narrative structure, alternating extended and

unextended sentences and using anaphoric repetition of personal pronouns Doctorow achieves the effect of ragged and syncopated rhythms.

According to S. P. Scher's typology, the very possibility of language to imitate musical sounds is primarily provided by its phonetic level which can often be observed in poetry, a phenomenon of musical phonetic imitation that Scher defines as "word music" (Scher, 2004, pp. 23-36). The same phenomenon is referred to as "musical signifier" by Albert Gier (Gier, 1999, pp. 86-99). Although in Doctorow's *Ragtime* examples of "word music" may be difficult to identify, the distinct presence of certain musical sounds is undeniable. This effect is achieved by means of a combination of verbal music techniques and implicit musical references through the principles of comparison as well as through symbolization.

As a matter of fact, Music is instrumental in shaping conceptual plane and innovative/experimental narrative structure/composition of the novel. Doctorow borrows from the Rag music the techniques of variation, i. e. multifaceted representation of one and the same object through the lens of diverse perspectives and free accentuation of the characters in order to emphasize the chaos, disharmony and dissonance as universal human condition at the beginning of the century when everything is mixed up and demarcation lines between "serious" art and entertainment, good and evil, the minutest and grandiose, moral and immoral are blurred or, in other words, skeptical relativism is omnipresent, dominating human consciousness, science, philosophy and arts. The chief characteristic of Doctorow's novel is a plurality of independent consciousnesses, a diversity of simultaneous points of view and voices. The novel by its very design is polyphonic. Manipulating polyrhythmic effects, mixed rhythms, repetitive phrases and leitmotif s, Doctorow is experimenting with the rhythm both on micro and macro textual levels (Korolyova & Sheynker, 1985, pp. 142-151).

Coalhouse Walker, black Ragtime professional pianist is one of the main protagonists of the novel. Unlike other characters, the author provides his personal name. One of the most memorable parts of the whole story is his performance on the piano keyboard. The writer describes how his long dark hands seemingly without any effort produce the clusters of syncopating chords and the thumping octaves, arousing a dynamic sense of energy and vigor: "This was a most robust composition, a vigorous music that roused the senses and never stood still a moment" (Doctorow, 2007, p. 149). The impression is rendered through the feelings of the boy who perceives the music as "light that glowed" (Doctorow, 2007, p. 149). Father, musically illiterate, thinks that the Negro music is fit for nothing else but cakewalking. The younger brother is the only person who understands Coalhouse's music. Ragtime music serves as a metaphor for the struggle between stability and change. The rhythmic structure of the novel, like that of the Ragtime music, is shaped by the tension between restrained, ordered rhythms and free-flowing syncopation.

Doctorow acknowledges this dual aspect when Coalhouse Walker plays ragtime for the family: "The pianist sat stiffly at the keyboard, his long dark hands with their pink nails seemingly with no effort producing the clusters of syncopating chords and the thumping octaves" (Doctorow, 2007, p. 183).

One more example can be found at the end of the 22nd chapter. The character is then depicted on the train in the midst of its way to New Rochelle with the train cars "syncopating" and playing "suicide rag":

He considered throwing himself under the wheels. He listened to their rhythm, their steady clacking, like the left hand of the rag. The screeching and pounding of metal on metal where the two cars joined was the syncopating right hand.

It was a suicide rag. He held the door handles on either side of him listening to the music. The cars jumped under his feet. (Doctorow, 2007, p. 173)

Doctorow uses the terms related to Ragtime music and metallic sounds of a moving mechanism (clacking, screeching, and pounding) to establish an unmistakable analogy between the ragged rhythm of transient reality and syncopation. This kind of intermediality makes the art an inseparable part of life and its direct reflection. The use of onomatopoeia and actualization of verbal music techniques enrich the musicality of the text and significantly contribute to the musicalization of the form of the novel.

The central idea of the novel and its dominant motive, if any, is lost in the polyphony of voices, in the diversity and plurality of narrative planes, plot situations, conflicts and, as such, is hard to grasp.

The epigraph for *Ragtime* is, appropriately, a quotation from Scott Joplin: "Do not play this piece fast. It is never right to play Ragtime fast" (Doctorow, 2007, p. 9). It suggests the conflict that seems to hold together Doctorow's odd mixture of fictional and historical characters and events: the struggle between change and stability. Like Joplin's caution for restraint in the face of an impulse for speed, most of the fictional characters and events reflect the dialectical struggle between time's inexorable force toward change and the human desire for stability. Generally, the characters who recognize the nature of the conflict fare much better than those who resist change. Both the content and the form of *Ragtime* support this theme.

Like Ragtime music, the novel appears to be a syncopation of both conflicting sides—the oppressors and the oppressed (Father, the firemen, J. P. Morgan versus Tateh, Coalhouse Walker, Sarah), historical versus fictional (historical facts and figures versus fictive facts and figures). And yet, just as Ragtime is a syncopated music (the weak beats in the bar are stressed instead of the strong ones), the novel intends to deconstruct the above-mentioned binary oppositions by focusing readers' attention on the marginal or "inferior" members of the oppositions in question: oppressed immigrants, Afro-Americans, female figures, and the fictional. Perhaps, this is why Doctorow, as the epigraph of the novel suggests, wants his novel to be read and reacted to the same way as Scott Joplin wanted the Ragtime music to be played: "Do not play this piece fast. It is never right to play Ragtime fast ..." (Doctorow, 2007, p. 9). To gain insight into the original conception underlying the novel, one should digest it fully, bringing up to the surface what appears to be less significant. Doctorow intends to highlight the intertextual relationship between his hypertext and the hypo text, but what is of major importance is that readers perceive the functionality of the hypo text at some key points that have been taken for granted. The title also serves another hypo textual intention. The king of ragtime music, Scott Joplin, rose from unknown saloon piano player to renowned composer of ragtime music. However, his dream of gaining national recognition as an opera composer was blocked by publishers who refused to accept his work, labelling his music as "Negro Music" (Boyer, 2000, p. 559). Hence, even the title foreshadows the events of the novel, as history (Scott Joplin's success and thwarted ambition) and story (Coalhouse Walker's story of success and downfall) finally coincide.

Conclusion

The forms of musico-literary intermediality make it possible to read Doctorow's *Ragtime* as an imitation to or adaptation of a musical form, as a musicalized fiction. The author's experiments in the field yield valuable insights into mainly a-mimetic and formalist aesthetic tendencies in the development of postmodern fiction as a

whole. However, one should always keep in mind that, given the fundamental differences between music and literature, the limitations of a transposition of music into fiction remain apparent.

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