

EXPLORATION OF SOME POSTMODERNIST FEATURES IN EDGAR LAWRENCE DOCTOROW'S *RAGTIME*

Terlumun Kerekaa & Carmel A. Igba-Luga

Abstract

Postmodernism is wave of critical thought on the shores of literature that subverts the canon and crystallizes fictional truths through various features. This study investigates the features of Postmodernism in Edgar Lawrence Doctorow's *Ragtime*. The fictional text thrives on the literary styles and ideas which serve to dispute, reverse, mock and reject the principles of modernist literature. The presentation considers Postmodernism as an intellectual movement which has a powerful influence on contemporary literary writings. The study examines how Doctorow re-works the traditional boundaries of narrative in modern manners. Some of the major features of postmodernism present in *Ragtime* such as subversion of the master-narrator, fragmentation, multiple points of view, intertextuality, and historiographic metafiction are examined with relevant illustrations from the fictional text. It also finds Postmodernism as a theory relevant in analysing the text. The study concludes that there is a heavy presence of postmodernist features in Doctorow's *Ragtime*.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Parody, Fragmentation, Historiographic Metafiction.

Introduction

Much has been written about Edgar Lawrence Doctorow's *Ragtime* from various insightful perspectives. Many scholars have often found it a text for literary exercise. For instance, Roynon Tessa explores "Ovid, Race and Identity in E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*", Jamal Assadi examines "The Attainment of First Personas in Doctorow's *Ragtime*"; David Heyman also examines "History and Fiction in *Ragtime*" among

other scholars. However, none of them have examined *Ragtime* as a postmodernist text as this study intends to do. Therefore, this study is out to build on the rich critical reception *Ragtime* has gained in order to articulate postmodernist features in the novel.

Synopsis of the Novel

The novel centres on a wealthy family living in New Rochelle, New York, referred to as Father, Mother, Mother's Younger Brother, Grandfather, and 'the little boy', Father and Mother's young son. The family business is the manufacture of flags and fireworks, an easy source of wealth due to the national enthusiasm for patriotic displays. Father joins Robert Peary's expedition to the North Pole, and his return sees a change in his relationship with his wife, who has experienced independence in his absence. Mother's Younger Brother is a genius in explosives and fireworks but is an insecure, unhappy character who chases after love and excitement. He becomes obsessed with the notorious socialite Evelyn Nesbit, stalking her and embarking on a brief, unsatisfactory affair with her.

Into this insecure setup comes an abandoned black child, then his severely depressed mother, Sarah. Coalhouse Walker, the child's father, visits regularly to win Sarah's affections. A professional musician well dressed and well spoken, he gains the family's respect and overcomes their prejudice initially by playing ragtime music on their piano. Things go well until he is humiliated by a racist fire crew, led by Will Conklin, who vandalizes his Model T Ford. He begins a pursuit of redress by legal action but discovers he cannot hope to win because of the inherent prejudice of the system. Sarah is killed in an attempt to aid him, and Coalhouse uses the money he was saving for their wedding to pay for an extravagant funeral.

Having exhausted legal resources, Coalhouse begins killing firemen and bombing firehouses to force the city to meet his demands: that his Model T be restored to its original condition and Conklin be turned over to him for justice. Mother unofficially adopts Sarah and Coalhouse's neglected child over Father's objections, putting strain on

their marriage. With a group of angry young men, all of whom refer to themselves as "Coalhouse Walker", Coalhouse continues his vigilante campaign and is joined by Younger Brother, who brings his knowledge of explosives. Coalhouse and his gang storm the Morgan Library, taking the priceless collection hostage and wiring the building with dynamite. Father is drawn into the escalating conflict as a mediator, as is Booker T. Washington. Coalhouse agrees to exchange Conklin's life for safe passage for his men, who leave in his restored Model T. Coalhouse is then shot as he surrenders to the authorities.

Interwoven with this story is a depiction of life in the tenement slums of New York City, focused on an Eastern European immigrant referred to as Tateh, who struggles to support himself and his daughter after driving her mother off for accepting money for sex with her employer. The girl's beauty attracts the attention of Evelyn Nesbit, who provides financial support. When Tateh learns Nesbit's identity, however, he takes his daughter out of the city.

Tateh is a talented artist and earns a living cutting out novelty paper silhouettes on the street. He tries working in a factory, where he experiences a successful workers' strike, but becomes disillusioned when he sees it change little about the workers' lives although in the final chapter he still describes himself as a socialist. He starts making and selling moving picture books to a novelty toy company, becoming a pioneer of animation in the motion picture industry. Tateh becomes wealthy and styles himself "the Baron" in order to move more easily through high society. He meets and falls in love with Mother, who marries him after Father is killed in the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania*. They adopt each other's children, as well as Coalhouse's son, and move to California.

Ragtime was written during the postmodern period and published 1975 in the second half of the 20th century. It is a historical fiction set in New York and tells the story of the traumatic encounter of three families; one American, one Jewish immigrant and one African-American. The novel interacts with a number of historical figures and participates in some of the most transcendental events in

North American history at the turn of the century. Though the setting of the novel is Victorian in nature, Doctorow explores certain postmodern techniques to write this novel. Some of the major postmodern features used in *Ragtime* are: subversion of the master-narrator, parody, fragmentation, multiple points of view, intertextuality, and historiographic metafiction.

Postmodernism

In recent years, there have been new waves of theories and approaches to the study of literature across the world. One of these critical theories is Postmodernism which potency is marked by a shift in perspective that has manifested in a variety of disciplines such as cultural, intellectual and aesthetic domains. The term Postmodernism implies a relation to Modernism. Modernism was an earlier literary and aesthetic movement which was the mode in the early decades of the twentieth century. The term “Postmodernism” is strongly marked with the prefix “post” which literally means beyond modernism. Postmodernism shares many of the features of Modernism. For instance, both schools reject the rigid boundaries between high and low art. However, Postmodernism is at once a continuation of and a break away or a shift from the Modernist stance. Brian McHale further details the shift from modernism to postmodernism, arguing that “Modernism is characterized by an epistemological dominant and that postmodern works have developed out of modernism and are primarily concerned with questions of ontology” (43). Consequently, postmodernism rejects (or builds upon) many of the tenants of modernism, including shunning meaning, intensifying and celebrating fragmentation and disorder, and initiating a major shift in literary tradition. According to Kalaivani,

Postmodernism is known for its rebellious approach and willingness to test boundaries. Several themes and techniques are indicative of writing in the postmodern era such as irony, black humour, intertextuality, pastiche, metafiction, fabulation, historiographic metafiction, temporal distortion, magic realism, paranoia, fragmentation. (1-2)

Kalaivani's assertion is insightful because Postmodernism in its outing eschews absolute meaning and challenges the ideas of individuality and identity. Thus, a new discourse was created to represent the disjunction of the modern perspective. Therefore, postmodern scholars such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and others have new discursive practices to represent the present condition. Fredric Jameson's critique of formalism and structuralism in *The Prison-House of Language* contributes to establishing the post-modern discourse in his allusions to the gothic culture which is parodied in the film industry. He views the enclosed system of relations between the structures of language as restrictive, mechanical and inhuman because language as a humanising discourse is arbitrary, changing and cannot be locked into a prescribed formulae.

The purpose of this paper is to examine Doctorow's *Ragtime* through the prism of postmodernism. Therefore, the focus is placed on locating elements of postmodernism such as plurality of meanings, intertextuality, parody, metafiction and fragmentation in the novel.

Postmodernist features in *Ragtime*

In *Ragtime*, Doctorow deploys a number of postmodern elements which run through the novel. It is these elements that makes Doctorow's novel to differ significantly from Modernist texts. For instance, there is a clear evidence of 'intertextuality' in *Ragtime*. The term 'intertextuality' was coined by Julia Kristeva in 1966, after which time intertextuality, as a term denoting a literary theory, became widely used. Kristeva's idea of intertextuality was actually influenced by the Russian linguistic and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia. Bakhtin's theory generally has a profound influence on literary criticism. His idea that every utterance is "half-ours and half-someone else's" (345) allows for a perception of language as being open-ended and characterised by heterogeneity. This idea of language being "double-voiced" inspired many theorists. Kristeva coined the term "intertextuality" to reformulate Bakhtin's account of "dialogism" and "heteroglossia". The term heteroglossia describes the coexistence of

distinct varieties within a single "language". For Bakhtin, this diversity of "languages" within a single language is not, in essence, a purely linguistic phenomenon: rather, heteroglossia is a *reflection* in language of varying ways of evaluating, conceptualizing and experiencing the world. It is the convergence in language or speech of specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values.

The term intertextuality actually encapsulates Bakhtin's idea that, "Each word tastes of a context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions" (293). According to Meeta Chatterjee-Padmanabhan "The concept of intertextuality draws on Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) theory of heteroglossia in literature which has been appropriated by scholars outside literary studies to enrich areas such as linguistics and education" (102).

Kristeva further illuminates that, "in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another" (36). The notion that a text contains traces of prior texts and inescapably carries potential future texts within it has found resonance within various disciplines because of its promise of plurality and the articulation of multiple perspectives. The main import of intertextuality is the interdependence of texts. It is a text written in synthesis of other texts. The main import of this idea is that all texts are intertexts because they refer to, recycle and draw from the pre-existing texts. Any work of art, for Kristeva, is an intertext which interacts with the other texts, rewrites, transforms or parodies them. Explaining the importance of intertextuality, Jeanne Willette asserts that:

The writer is a reader of a text before s/he creates texts and the work of art is shot through with references, quotations, and influences and because what is produced is a cross fertilization of a book, it is these networks that are of interest.
(4)

Willette's assertion simply amplifies the fact that stories are not completely innocent. Every text is not completely original in its nature; there is always a residue of influence from other texts that the author might have read or even from historical facts. This means a writer's idea in a text is a synthesis of other texts. Evidently, a text is richer when it is intertextualized. Therefore, any insistence on originality only denies the text the wealth of influence the author would have brought to it. For instance, the title of Doctorow's novel is taken from the name of a Jazz music style called "Ragtime" and the text opens with an epigraph; a quotation from a composer of ragtime music:

Do not play this piece fast

It is never right to play Ragtime fast...

The above quotation that opens the novel is from an American composer and pianist Scott Joplin. Joplin achieved fame for his ragtime compositions and was dubbed the "King of Ragtime". The title of the text, *Ragtime*, itself is a metaphor that identifies with an era in American history. The fact is ragtime was a dominant style of American popular music pioneered by a black composer, Joplin, which ushered in a social revolution. The name "Ragtime" is therefore intertextualized in the text to make it easier for people in modern America to relate to the events and developments.

In postmodernist writing, sometimes intertextuality will not always have literary references but would reflect a period of history. This paper also reveals the intertextual relations between Doctorow's *Ragtime* and the history of America during the early twentieth century. Locating intertextuality in this aspect reveals Doctorow's dexterity in citing historical characters and events in history, juxtaposing them with the fictive world of his novel.

Parody is another striking postmodernist feature present in Doctorow's *Ragtime*. It means imitating with a comic or satirical intention. It is intended to mock its original. According to Paul Goring, "...the effect can be mockery of the imitated or copied" (404). Doctorow parodies the history of America, when he gives statistics regarding the

brutality towards the blacks and the poor, juxtaposing it with the charity parties people gave, supposedly intended to sympathise with the poor:

One hundred Negroes a year were lynched. One hundred miners were burned alive. One hundred children were mutilated. Here seemed to be quotas for these things.... At places in New York people gave poverty balls. Guests came dressed in rags and ate from tin plates and drank from chipped mugs. Ballrooms were decorated to look like mines with beams, iron tracks and miners' lamps. Theatrical scenery firms were hired to make outdoor gardens look like dirt farms and dining rooms like cotton mills.... The proceeds were for charity. (38)

Doctorow demonstrates his criticism of American upper-class inability to comprehend or relate to the marginalized and lower-income families, his ironic tone is inherent in the way he describes the poverty balls as “fashionable”; in other words, never really solving any major problems, nor reducing the casualty tolls he was listing a few lines above.

Doctorow affectionately parodies Victorian flowery style of writing in *Ragtime*. Victorian novels tend to be idealized portraits of difficult lives in which hard work, perseverance, romance, love and luck win out in the end; virtue would be rewarded and wrongdoers are suitably punished. They tended to be of an improving nature with a central moral lesson at heart. While this formula was the basis for much of earlier Victorian fiction, the situation became more complex as the century progressed. The following description clearly depicts a Victorian romance:

In his room pinned on the wall was a newspaper drawing by Charles Dana Gibson entitled "The Eternal Question." It showed Evelyn in profile, with a profusion of hair, one thick strand undone and fallen in the configuration of a question mark. Her downcast eye was embellished with a fallen ringlet that threw her brow in shadow. Her nose was delicately upturned. Her mouth was slightly pouted. Her long neck curved like a bird taking wing. (79)

The above flowery piece brings out a Victorian style such that can be seen when reading Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning and John Keats among others who knew about human experiences. He parodies the flowering and the aesthetic style of the Victorian era. The lushness of the language belies the fact that Doctorow praises Evelyn for her natural sexuality in a manner of a Victorian novelist. There is the use of narrational voice to express opinions. Doctorow, in his novel, appropriates some of the Victorian features but as parodies. This particular feature also indicates the end of reality. Instead, there are simulations. That is, carbon copies of reality and worse enough, there is no original copy.

Postmodern narrative techniques differ significantly from those of traditional novels. Traditional novels are realistic texts with chronological, detailed plots and well developed characters. There is no master narration in postmodern novels. In traditional novels, there are omniscient narrators who have full control over the plots and characters. They are the all-knowing. In Victorian novels, it is seen that the narrators know everything about their character but Doctorow from a postmodernist view point rejects such kind of authorship. For instance, about Harry the artist, the narrator is not sure of his escape techniques. He differs from the Victorian narrators and in Chapter 2, the narrator wonders,

He went all over the world accepting all kinds of bondage and escaping. He was roped to a chair. He escaped. He was chained to a ladder. He escaped. He was handcuffed, his legs were put in irons, he was tied up in a strait jacket and put in a locked cabinet. He escaped. He escaped from bank vaults, nailed-up barrels, sewn mailbags; he escaped from a zinc-lined Knabe piano case.... His escapes were mystifying because he never damaged or appeared to unlock what he escaped from.... (18)

This shows that the narrator does not use his power over the characters. He is not a master narrator who knows everything about his characters. It is evident in the above lines that he himself finds the behaviour of Harris mysterious and paints reality the way it is.

Fragmentation is one of the most distinctive characteristics of Postmodernism. It is a loss of rational and social coherence in favour of cultural images and social reforms and identities marked by multiplicity, plurality and indeterminacy. Both postmodernism and modernism use fragmentation. The major difference between the two is explained by Peter Barry that while the “lament, pessimism and despair” that characterised modernism about the state of the world was shown through fragmentation, postmodernists celebrate it as an “exhilarating, liberating phenomenon” (84). What this means is Postmodernism does not use fragmentation to express a pessimistic view of the world and its values that are falling apart. It uses fragmentation to create a comprehensive and ‘real’ description of the world and its history, both in terms of what is in it and what happens in it. The following excerpt from *Ragtime* clearly agrees with the ensuing discourse:

This was the time in our history when Winslow Homer was doing his painting. A certain light was still available along the Eastern seaboard. Homer painted the light. It gave the sea a heavy dull menace and shone coldly on the rock and shoals of the New England coast. There were unexplained shipwrecks and brave towline rescues. Odd things went on in lighthouses and in shacks nestled in the wild beach plum. Across America sex and death were barely distinguishable. Runaway women died in the rigors of ecstasy. Stories were hushed up and reporters paid off by rich families. One read between the lines of the journals and gazettes. In New York City the papers were full of the shooting of the famous architect Stanford White by Harry K. (1)

From the above description, it can be said that in trying to paint a comprehensive picture of the American society, Doctorow uses this postmodernist feature by allowing so many diverse fragment elements together to form a picture of the country and its history. The historical fiction connects to the positive view on fragmentation amongst postmodern writers. He presents the American society by describing its

real pictures and history alongside fictional figures to the world. It also creates such clear, visual pictures of a time past and historical events in the mind of the readers and makes them see the present world from a different perspective.

Furthermore, Doctorow has somehow deliberately built postmodern tension into the flow of his sentences. Yet this is not a tension or contradiction that can be exemplified through the usual literary-critical method of closely reading individual sentences, or even whole passages. Instead, what Doctorow does in *Ragtime* is fragmentation.

Patriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1900's. Teddy Roosevelt was President. The population customarily gathered in great numbers either out of doors for parades, public concerts, fish fries, political picnics, social outings, or indoors in meeting halls, vaudeville theatres, operas, ballrooms. There seemed to be no entertainment that did not involve great swarms of people. Trains and steamers and trolleys moved them from one place to another. That was the style, that was the way people lived. Women were stouter then. They visited the fleet carrying white parasols. (1)

Rather than austere and ascetic, this passage is rich and exuberant, while retaining an ironic consciousness that is subtle but significant. The declarative nature of the first few sentences where the voice of historical accounting seems as reliable as the sentiment of patriotism being described becomes slowly inflected over the final lines by a conjoined emphasis on whiteness and on style, almost as if the style of the passage itself can be associated with whiteness. The narrator's emphasis on lifestyle as white style, "Everyone wore white in summer", prepares the ground for the final two sentences, which will stop a reader short who has been lulled into trusting this smooth and seemingly authoritative voice of history. The blatant counterfactuals that now arrive, "There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants", raise the spectre of ideological whitewashing, as if history itself can be whitened while retaining its omniscient sheen.

By celebrating fragmentation in the way *Ragtime* does – by including almost everything and everyone: the famous person’s story and that of the unknown, what did happen and what could have happened – it provides an alternative to history. Doctorow makes readers realise that both his version and other established versions are simply alternatives of history, and hands them the freedom to create their own history and place within it.

Doctorow also appropriates Historiographic Metafiction which is a postmodernist feature in *Ragtime*. This is a term coined by literary theorist Linda Hutcheon. It is the process of re-writing history through a work of fiction. It is clear that in Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, the readers shuffle between contemporary realistic narrative and a fiction narrative. This is a striking method through which Doctorow achieves this comprehensiveness by blending reality and fiction.

Teddy Roosevelt was President.... That was the style that was the way people lived. Women were stouter then. They visit the fleet carrying white parasols. Everyone wore white in summer.... There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants. On Sunday afternoon, after dinner, Father and Mother went upstairs and closed the bedroom door. Grandfather fell asleep on the divan in the parlor.... This was the time in our history when Winslow Homer was doing his painting. In New York City the papers were full of the shooting of the famous architect Stanford White by Harry K.
(3)

He lets real historical characters meet his fictional ones, causing the interaction between them to create the sense that these people actually live at the same time, share the experiences of America at this time, and can relate to the same things. For instance, there are a mixed up of recognizable historical figures including Teddy Roosevelt, J.P. Morgan, Henry Ford and fictional characters such as the Jewish immigrant Tateh and Coalhouse Walker in the novel. An example to illustrate this is seen right on the first page where Doctorow declares

that “Patriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1900’s. Teddy Roosevelt was president” (Doctorow 3).

The fictional people become a part of the same historical chronicle as the ‘real’ characters, rather than of a made-up story in a novel. By allowing rich and poor, famous and unknown, success and failure, fantasy and reality to meet in this way, Doctorow makes it possible for a majority of Americans, and many from other parts of the world, to relate to the story. Fredric Jameson argues that by “blending fact and fiction, Doctorow obscures the historical referent” (25). However, Linda Hutcheon disagrees that “it is the very blending, combined with the accuracy in the description of the era, which makes the reader aware of the historical element and how it works” (89). These different opinions about Doctorow’s use of historiographic metafiction in *Ragtime* only agree that the author stimulates the reader’s own creation of history.

Multiple points of view is yet another postmodernist feature that Doctorow deploys in *Ragtime*. The principal narrator cannot be determined, either as an ‘omniscient’ or identifiable character or both. Parts of the text imply that the little boy is the narrator from the third person point of view as it is seen from the beginning of the narrative:

In 1902 Father built a house at the crest of the Broadview Avenue hill in New Rochelle, New York. It was a three-story brown shingle with dormers, bay windows and a screened porch. Striped awnings shaded the windows. The family took possession of this stout manse on a sunny day in June and it seemed for some years thereafter that all their days would be warm and fair. (1)

However, sometimes he is referred to in third person and this suggests that he is not the narrator. Within the same chapter the boy whom at the opening of the chapter seemed to be the narrator is described in the third person such as “On Sunday afternoon, after dinner, Father and Mother went upstairs and closed the bedroom door. Grandfather fell asleep on the divan in the parlor. The Little Boy in the sailor blouse sat on the screened porch and waved away the flies” (1). There is also an intrusion of the first person point of view such as:

We have the account of this odd event from the magician's private, unpublished papers. Harry Houdini's career in show business gave him to overstatement, so we must not relinquish our own judgment in considering his claim that it was the one genuine mystical experience of his life. (116-117)

Doctorow enters the narrative several times as an observer and sometimes as a participant. He comments on the actions of his characters and discusses the relationship between the art of the novel and life. The uncertainty over who is actually narrating the story gives it a postmodern narrative style of multiple points of view.

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Conclusion

All along the above discourse, Doctorow's *Ragtime* demonstrates and proves times and again that the text itself is an intertextualised site where postmodernist structures converge. The author sufficiently deploys postmodern tactics and builds fiction out of history by locating the story within a particular historical context. With this, his readers are given the details of the historical events casually as the story proceeds. Historical figures such as Teddy Roosevelt, Stanford White, and Ford are woven into the plot of the story, and their stories often intermingle with the lives of the characters in the novel so realistically, that it becomes complicated at times to distinguish fiction from real history. The author interrupts in the novel along with the narrator from third person to first person narrative. Again, the author does not have full authority over the characters. The novel is actually a fine example of "historiographic metafiction"; it combines history and fiction. *Ragtime* displays multiple meanings, as Doctorow rejects the idea of fixed meaning. Moreover, the novel refers to many other texts and events fulfilling the postmodern characteristic of intertextuality. Hence it can be said that Doctorow appropriated postmodernist features in writing *Ragtime*.

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