

E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* as a Metapher of American Social Vision: A Study

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Abstract

The present research study entitled “E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* as a Metapher of American Social Vision: A Study is to examine the novel *Ragtime* and its characters and establishes it as a social and artistic vision of Doctorow. This study deals with Doctorow’s treatment of American social problems. Doctorow has achieved worldwide recognition as one of the American leading writers of fiction. His awareness of the various aspects of American life establishes the Americanness of his fiction. In the recent past, Doctorow’s works did not attract much critical attention. One of the reasons may be that his novels barring two core subjects, the one is Jewish problems impact of its doctrine and the second one is American political and social issues. Keeping in mind the Paucity of critical studies and evaluations, an attempt is made in this research to study exhaustively the American social conditions and problems portrayed by Doctorow.

Key word: Social Vision, American Dreams, Search for identity, Jewish identity, narrative nuances, Jazz as a narrative mode.

Introduction

E.L. Doctorow is a contemporary American novelist, poet and essayist. He was born in 1931 at in New York. He has published thirteen volumes of fictional

works. His major works deal predominantly with the search for identity. This study concentrates mainly on the protagonists and examine their behavior to the environment. The aim of this study is to make a bridge between Doctorow, his writings and the topic of identity. His characters are flustered personalities.

The salient feature of his works are his characters. His characters are obsessed with the quest for self-discovery and self-understanding. They lead an obscure life in an unstable and changing environment which has an impact on their personal identity. In this novel all the characters are searching for their identity. Some of the characters completely lost themselves. Some of the protagonists acquire double or multiple identity. Some of the characters are escaping from their real identity. Some characters present their mistaken identities. Some of them undergo the process of identity formation. E.L. Doctorow's writings are interwoven with the issues of self identity, fragmented selves, split personalities, multiple, confused, and mistaken identities. This novel also presents hiding, escaping, merging and obscure characters, which the present study attempts to examine.

American novelist, short story and novella writer, editor, essayist, and dramatist. The work *World Fair* (1985), his sixth novel, Doctorow continues the experimental blending of historical fact and invention that characterizes his work. Like his novel *Ragtime* (1976), which earned both the National Book Critics Circle and American Academy of Arts and Letters awards, the *World's Fair* won laurels for its imaginative recreation of a period in American history.

A former book editor and publisher, Doctorow is one of the rare contemporary bestselling author who attracts serious attention from critics while entertaining a general audience. Reviewers called *Ragtime* an ingenious panorama of life in New York during the early twentieth century, with its juxtaposition of actual events and historical figures with fictional ones. They also praised the skill with which Doctorow, in the *Book of Daniel* (1971), uses the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the American couple executed in 1953 for espionage, as the basis for fictional

speculation. In *World's Fair*, Doctorow draws upon his personal experiences as a child growing up in New York during the Great Depression. His narrator, a middle-aged man named Edgar, relates anecdotes about his childhood crowned by his visits to New York's famous *World's Fair* in 1939. Reviewer note that numerous details of Edgar's life, including his parent's first names and his boyhood street address, correspond to biographical information about Doctorow himself. From this several critics conclude that *World's Fair* is not a genuine novel but thinly disguised autobiography. Doctorow called the book an illusion of a memoir." He also explained: "I make books for people to live in, as architects make houses. I lived in it by writing it. Now it's the reader's turn. When an architect does a house, do you say to him, 'Is this house autobiographical?'"

Reviewers praised *World's Fair* as a well-researched, accurate impression of the 1930s. Edgar's anecdotal recreation of his boyhood failed to interest some critics, but the majority observed that, in describing the mundane settings and occurrences in Edgar's life, Doctorow infuses them with their own engaging narrative tension. Edgar's reminiscences, a few critics averred, invoke nostalgia for a Jewish childhood in Depression-era New York even in those who never lived in Edgar's particular time and place. Many reviewers also found merit in Doctorow's portrayal of the young Edgar's development from infancy to age nine, comparing his confrontations with mortality and sexuality and his growing writer's consciousness to those of Stephen Daedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man*. States critic T.O. Treadwell, "Doctorow's portrait of the artist when young may not be in the Joycean class, but it is a considerable achievement."

Doctorow as an American novelist

Doctorow is an American novelist and editor, best known for the widely popular novel *Ragtime*. His major fictive concerns are the cyclical nature of history and experience. Doctorow experiments with history and fiction, especially in *Ragtime*, which has been controversial for the fictions it presents about historical figures.

Doctorow is novel refers to a particular music in *Ragtime*. The term 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 Tatch and Mother in 1917, which happens to Toe the year of the Russian. Doctorow's novel, covers the exact period, when historical-ragtime was a dominant style of American popular music.

The novel historical significance and current meaning are not identical, and the novel's epistemology is inspired by this difference. Historical ragtime was pioneered by blacks and initially resisted by the Victorian musical establishment. 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 white face, as it were. James T. Maher writes: "The straight line from plantation music to the earliest recorded jazz (1917) runs through ragtime: the impact of Negro syncopation is the major force in the Americanization of our popular music." After 1917 ragtime was replaced by jazz and Tin Pan Alley and gradually lost its status as the queen of popular music.

The more recent renaissance of *Ragtime* began in the early seventies with a best-selling classical record of Joplin rags, recorded by Joshua Rifkin, a classical pianist with degrees from Juilliard and Princeton. The rehabilitation of ragtime by the musical establishment would have pleased Joplin, who had always insisted that his compositions should be listed under classical music. The ragtime soon reasserted its crossover appeal and went slumming again. The success of the musical score of the film *The Sting* restored ragtime to the popular market and expanded its contemporary audience considerably. It also helped to increase the distance from historical ragtime to obscure further the role of its creators. The film score of Joplin's music was nominated for two Oscars, but the

awards were given not to Joplin, but to Marvin Hamlisch, who arranged the music for the film.

The novel *The Ragtime* renaissance of the seventies, which undoubtedly inspired the naming of the novel and helped to launch it to best-seller status, was a belated recognition of the music both in the classical and popular markets, it also constituted a subtle form of collective repression. A renaissance filters out the blood, sweat, and tears of the historical place and time that it evokes, while it foregrounds current, and nostalgic desire. This renaissance lifted ragtime out of its context and turned its history into metaphor or image or a key word in the novel. The historical music became the vehicle of a nostalgia for history with a set of associations quite different from the webs of significance in which, the original producers and consumers were caught. The "re-arrangement" of black-derived ragtime in our structure of feeling, which goes to the rearranger, mirrors the previous, "mistaken" adoption of this black foundling and its successful career in white ragtime schools and publications. Understandably, the current nostalgia recognizes that ragtime is in its time a revolutionary and an embattled black music and that one of its proud black -creators died poor, and maddened by the lack of public recognition. Indeed, the current "trivialized" recognition of ragtime as part of a throw away musical culture may have shifted attention away from the story of ragtime, which Ragtime tries to tell.

Doctorow articulates a justification for the "rediscovery" of ragtime and its age through the boy narrator, who not only treasures anything discarded," but also is particularly interested in "meaning perceived through neglect." This .editorial aside invites us to read the novel as an attempt to reconstruct the conflict-laden musical universe at the time, when ragtime entered into the mainstream of American music and to restore to consciousness, what was repressed in the renaissance of ragtime. This reading is supported by a telling detail from Doctorow's biography, which he elaborated on in his novel *World's Fair*. Doctorow's father ran a record store in Manhattan, that served a

mixed clientele of whites and blacks, and his uncle once a famous jazz musician, who had fallen on bad times, passed his knowledge of music history on to his nephew.

The "historical" novel *Ragtime*, is a form of biographical-anthropological fiction, that apprehends and portrays, the historical moment of the 1970s, the world of human desire and action of the turn of the century history in the mode of participant observation over an interval of seventy years. This narrative stance, which deliberately merges past significance and present meaning, met with a mixed reaction from the critics. Though, the book was a popular success and received high praise, it was also called the most overrated novel of the year. Historians in particular found it anti-historical, anachronistic, frivolous, and irresponsible.

Review of Literature

The disagreement over *Ragtime* hinges on the question of truth in historiography and historical fiction. Historian Gushing Strout, who has written the most articulate critique of the novel, praises Hawthorne's, Twain's and Dos Passos's historical fictions. They deal with empirical facts for the sake of a moral point, but finds little to praise in *Ragtime*. On the one hand, Strout argues, *Ragtime* as narrative lacks an integrating, objective point of view. On the other hand, he faults the author for having obvious political, subjective interests, namely to give the black protagonist Coalhouse Walker Jr. more dignity and power than is his historical due. Strout argues that "its unannounced anachronisms make incredible this tale of a ragtime pianist. All these details are in a contemporary idiom at odds with the era of ragtime" (50). Most objectionable of all, Doctorow mixes "fidelity to historical details in 1902" (60). With his own inventions. "The ragtime era is as frivolously manipulated as if it were only a tune." In the novel he represents an attack on neutrality, objectivity, and impartiality as virtues in historiography. It boils down to a cheapening of historiographical truth by obscuring the line between history and fiction. It is a "subversion of the conventional form by its deliberate affronts to the historical imagination." Indeed, Doctorow breaks all conventions: "it is too historical for farce, too light-hearted for the rage of black humor,

and too caricatured for history". It is irreverent and populist: "appropriately, this novel was promoted in the media like a popular song, whatever his own intentions may have been". This list of sins against Clio's purpose adds up to a summary statement of Doctorow's aesthetic.

Doctorow's epistemological agnosticism towards "objective" history explains the absence of an objective, integrating point of view. He argues in "False Documents" that an "objective historiographical point of view" unburdened by the benefit of hindsight is the greatest fiction of all. Doctorow presents a confusion of voices and narratives vacillating between the past and present and mixing real and invented figures. The moral center of the narrative consciousness is firmly anchored in the subjectivity of the author rather than in a historical time. This conscious moral orientation in the present implies a recognition of the inevitability of our historical place.

It could be argued that, Doctorow shows more respect for a "truth of the heart" by insisting that all narratives, historical, fictional, and biographical, are written from contemporary points of view and have to be decoded as fictions of their time. The epistemological tack of the novel and merely insist on historical accuracy, the novel *Ragtime* is true-enough to salient, though neglected facts of American music history. It picks up some of the contradictions of ethnicity and class at that particular juncture in the development of American popular music. By the 1970s certain historical and cultural results of that ethnic and class mix had become manifest, notably in the emergence of ethnic agents and agendas in all -fields of inquiry, and novelists of historical fiction would profit from the benefit of hindsight. Doctorow himself is one "result" of the mixture of ethnicity and class he describes. In this sense, *Ragtime* is "autobiographical" because it identifies Doctorow's social and epistemological place both in America's real and narrative history as a result of the very forces of history and historiography.

The Structure of the Novel

The structure of *Ragtime* is indeed complex, and the novel's political and psychological vision is also quite intricate. But the surface of the novel is so rich with

events and personalities that its dynamic life may be quickly enjoyed without pausing to analyze its remarkable structure. Thus the great popularity of the novel, and the equally great incomprehension. *Ragtime* is a comic novel, and much of the comedy depends upon the coincidences of history and fiction that come together in the mind of the narrator. The narrator of *Ragtime* shows a variety of faces reflected in a decade of history, and he knows that the images will be shattered when the decade ends in war. It is not the vanity of the narcissistic quest that so much concerns Doctorow's narrator, but rather the diffraction of the image and the inevitable destruction. Mutability and death haunt the final movements of *Ragtime* on the eve of international violence. The narrator does not love what he sees in the mirror, but he is fascinated with the cycles of change.

Generally the reviews of E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* have been superlative, praising the novel as a rare evocation of American history and imagined life during the critical years before and during world war I against the panorama of this era, with all of its turbulence and fury, an imagined family seeks its way toward the dreams of a peculiar brand of human achievement and ultimately to the ironic discovery of the dissolution of its dreams. At every level, Doctorow's narrative is compelling and painful in its intensity—both for the personal fate of its people and for its powerful imprint of a century in the making. As the drama unfolds, the distant music of a ragtime beat echoes over all events, a symbolic and rhythmic pattern capturing the clash of two different meters being played simultaneously. Doctorow's fictional triumph resides in his narrative skill and balance of the sounds of life in its deceptive search for pattern. To create the sense of “moving” time and its painful presence, Doctorow has interspersed his narrative with dates and public figures about whose existence we have a relative sense of place and history. The intricacies of Doctorow's plot refuse summary statement, and not as important as the aura, he creates about the nature of destiny itself both American and human.

Two related charges against Doctorow have been voiced. First, as the detached and distanced author, he has successfully removed himself from the arena of moral commitment; he refuses judgment on the reality he creates. Secondly, at least one

critic has maintained that *Ragtime* cannot bear the scrutiny of second or third reading; namely, that it lacks a sustaining power for reflective thought. It projects a fascinating moment of Americana, but its drift is self-contained and intensive. Both of these commentaries flow from a theory of literature which insists on “idea” and corporate “value,” namely, that literature will lead us to the light. *Ragtime* offers no ready references of ethical directions or indirections. Like a host of contemporary writers, Doctorow places the burden of interpretation upon the reader, who must merge the fictional experience with the evolving richness of his own unique and peculiar experience, a fusion, different for each reader, an interpretation of experience which is self-creating. In the novel *Ragtime*, Doctorow has invented and made actual the felt experiences of our national heritage, a perplexing and often confusing clash of ideals and dreams. Doctorow has said that *Ragtime* is his private response to an age that prizes nonfiction over the power of imaginative literature. His success is absolute in *Ragtime*. Doctorow’s literary tastes as in what they indicate about the relative weights which he assigns to historical and fictional elements in his narrative. The first half of *Ragtime* may provide a highly entertaining survey of notorious historical figures of the day, but it is willfully chaotic in its sudden shifts of character and locale: only in the second half, with the mounting crisis of Coalhouse Walker’s story, does the novel attain momentum. However amusing history may be, Doctorow seems to be saying, it does not provide a sufficiently coherent. He subordinates the fates of his invented characters to the “plot” of history itself. Although Doctorow subordinates historical particulars to a structural pattern which is clearly fictional, he aims less at constructing a fully convincing representative picture of the Progressive era than at enhancing the historical self-consciousness of his readers.

Doctorow’s particular method of playing fast and loose with the materials of history has a definite appeal. *Ragtime* is distinguished from most other music by its use of rhythm, its syncopation. As the pianist opposes syncopations in his right hand against a precise and regularly accented bass, the delayed and misplaced accents and their

conjunction with regular meters set up their complex polyrhythm's of ragtime. These subtle conflicting rhythms with their own free "inner voices" provide both the structural and metaphorical basis for E.L. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime*.

In the novel *Ragtime* metonymic style is "his handling of three icons of the age: the upright piano, the Model T Ford and film. Of the three, the piano may serve as the best example. It is special significance since the assault of black ragtime on white respectability used the queen of instruments, the piano, which was considered a Victorian "moral institution." According to the New York Times of the day "the piano more than any other single object will be looked upon in the years to come as the emblem of the Victorian age. The production figures bear this out. In 1909, the year when some of the most important events in the novel unfold, the sales of upright pianos reached an all-time peak. It was also the year when Congress passed a copyright law to secure income for composers from music serialized on piano rolls. The choice of a black pianist as protagonist of the novel is not incidental.

In composite social portraiture from history, sociology, and psychology have settled into conventional wisdom. These recycled narrative units are in Doctorow's words "industrialized forms of storytelling," which he brings into his own. This creates an effect, which might be called the narrative equivalent of syncopation. The overall organizing principle is in ragtime, a system of contradictions, most abstractly between metamorphosis and stasis, a system which deals with all sorts of concrete oppositions. In terms of narrative timing, there is both a forward drive and a holding back, an "accelerando" and "ritardando." The novel moves, in Doctorow's own words, "at an absolutely relentless pace" (10). On its most metaphysical level, the novel is a meditation on the psychopathology of the culture industry caught between a desire for progress and a dread of change of typical modernization in the Progressive era. It is necessary to take another look at the entire musical story this novel tells.

The years from 1896 to 1917 mark the period of intense modernization in American culture. In music and in industrial production, and surely in their unique fusion

that gave us American popular music and its cultural industry, this is a transitional period. By 1896, industrial production had nearly consolidated, but there was not a culture of consumption to match it. By the 1920s, however the mass cultural industry was firmly in place. In terms of music history, ragtime fits between the older era of music and the modern age of the player piano, the record player, and the radio. The dominant sound technology of the ragtime era is piano rolls. It is a transitional nature. Piano rolls and the player piano which were marketed on a large scale after 1902, marked the beginning of the age of automation in the reproduction of sounds. The production of player pianos had risen constantly from the introduction of the Pianola by the Aeolian Company in 1902, to 1923, when 56 percent of all pianos were automated. Piano sales tapered off after 1909 and declined drastically in the 1920s, when the improved recording technology facilitated not only the recording by microphone and the reproduction of performed music by relatively cheaper record players, but also its dissemination by radio. By 1929, production figures were down to 35 percent of the earlier high in 1923.

The novel *Ragtime* is transitional in another sense. The novel popular songs were all of one generic kind. They were essentially based on the European lied tradition. His innovations did not catch on, nor did they settle into the racist tradition of coon songs. In classical music, there was no American-born classical composer of note with the exception of Louis Moreau Gottschalk. He was ignored. The classical canon was dominated by Europeans. The class division between classical and popular musical cultures depends increasingly as classical music. With the coming of ragtime and jazz, two indigenous American musical grammars arose, which ignored, these class and cultural barriers. Which held great appeal for the new ethnics, particularly for Jews. Neither jazz nor ragtime produced an exclusively mass cultural or elitist type of music. To be sure, both could be trivialized for mass cultural purposes, yet they also allowed the highest musical achievement. Both jazz and ragtime were indeed commoditized. The music ragtime and jazz also yielded a crop of creative artists, and inspired many classical composers. In terms of cultural history, ragtime marks a transitional phase in the coming of age of an

Afro-American musical aesthetic, which would find its classic form in jazz. Gunther Schuller writes:

rhythmically 'ragging' melodies and themes was only one step removed from loosening them (musical pieces) up even further through improvisation and melodic embellishment. Thus, many of the earliest jazz musicians were essentially ragtime players. To put it more precisely, musicians who were transitional in the progress from a relatively rigid, notated, non-improvised music (ragtime) to a looser, more spontaneously inventive performance Jazz style. (20)

The Afro-American aesthetic initiated by ragtime and jazz does not represent a specific genre of music, but rather projects a world view, namely a uniquely urban, modernist attitude of improvisation, invention, and "bricolage." The pastoral and small town tradition of nineteenth-century song, America acquired in ragtime a music in tune with city life and its new ethnic populations. This world of rarified Victorian virtues that Father and Mother live in inspires Doctorow to savage satire. Sex is taboo, when encountered, causes fainting spells. Procreation continues after a fashion with a bad conscience on the part of the male with, closed eyes and a prayer on the lips of the female. Much later in the novel, after Mother learns to swing, she begins to push back, much to the surprise of Father, who thought this was a habit of Eskimo women. Father is the image of prosperous frustration. He drops out of Harvard then becomes a frustrated explorer with Peary and Henson. The account of Father's sexual encounter with Eskimo women is by no means fanciful fiction. Harvard University recently invited Henson's son and grandchildren for a commemoration of the black explorer. Peary's entire enterprise has been called into question. Recent scholarship expresses some doubt that he ever made it to the North Pole, to the center that holds. Doubly frustrated Father returns to a life defined by the sudden appearance of a deserted black baby. Whom Mother takes. Followed by the mother of that baby and by Coalhouse Walker, the father, is upset the harmony of the previous, Victorian world. Before, Father fully appreciates, what has

happened to his life-style, he sinks with the Lusitania, taking his world, his culture, and his weapons with him.

John Philip Sousa is also mentioned in the novel. It gave America its imperial and ceremonial music, such as "President Garfield's Inauguration March" of 1881. His name should alert us that ethnics were not entirely innocent in the creation of such music. Sousa's father was Portuguese, his mother Bavarian. This type of marching music was a European derivative. It represented, as an American improvement of a European tradition. Sousa's brand of music is influence on Joplin and other ragtime composers.

The music ragtime had a new musical grammar, marked by syncopation, which could be found in music before the ragtime craze. However, the "constant collision between internal melodic and underlying rhythms was its one of the stylistic features." This permanent tension in melody and rhythm reflected and spoke to a different libidinal structure. This may be read as a black touch "chorus" and "dance." The composer and author was Ben Harney, who has remained somewhat mysterious figure. makes the actions of Brother in the novel, who "blacks up" as a radical inversion of a minstrel Sambo. Harney was introduced on the cover of the song as "the Original Introducer to the Stage of the New Popular *Ragtime* in Ethiopian "Song." Eubie Blake, a black ragtime pianist, claimed that Harney was a black man, who had passed for white, prefiguring James Weldon Johnson's "ex-coloured man," another fictional ragtime pianist. Harney was a white man, who passed for a black man passing for white. Harney left no record that would clearly establish his genealogy. The eruption of black rhythms are the mainstream of music and the gradual take over by blacks of its musical grammar. The *Ragtime* was the musical "high yell" black baby left at the doorsteps of white folks, who gladly adopted it, some of them not even realizing that it was black. There is another significant historical fact: Ben Harney's ragtime song was published by a company of second generation German Jews by the name of Witmark. He belonged to a new breed of blacks, who were willing to challenge the system of overt and covert racism. Race relations were at an all-time low at the turn of the century. The year of Harney's hit was

also the year of the Plessey. Ferguson decision of the Supreme Court, which cemented segregation. In the musical market writes Sam Dennison, "cover illustrations adorning sheet music of the 1890s became more colorful and more insulting to blacks than at any other time in the history of American popular song." The range of "revolutionary cultural possibilities" for Afro-Americans was clearly limited. The black agents of this era negatively when compared to those of the Harlem Renaissance or the Black Cultural Revolution of the sixties, whose achievements in "advancing the race" were more visible. The "black and proud" was much harder in 1896. The Ragtime overcomes the unthinking racism of minstrelsy inscribed in musical taste as in cultural behaviour.

Coalhouse Walker Jr. was the representative of a new group of urban blacks. One has to read the novel carefully for the many subtle data of musical history. On Coalhouse's first visit to the house in 1909, he is asked by Father to play one of the popular "Coon Songs." These were popular tunes of the day, which emerged with minstrelsy and which made seemingly innocent fun of blacks. Coalhouse Walker Jr. quite firmly refuses. He also carefully wipes the keys of this middle-class white piano before starting to play. he does not select a tune already popular with white audiences, but pointedly chooses "The Wall Street Rag" by Scott Joplin, a new composition hot the presses in 1909, which foreshadows Walker's later challenge to the capitalist system embodied by the J. P. Morgan Library. The concession to white folks, he encores with a well-known hit, "Maple Leaf Rag." The "new negro" was a few years hence, there was already a new breed represented by figures such as George Walker, the brothers James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson, Bob Cole, Will Marion Cook, and James Reese Europe. Their historical role has not been properly acknowledged by mainstream historians of American culture. These young blacks represented a recognizable urban cohort that was subversively active in the creation of new types of American popular entertainment. The irony and the subversion lie in the fact that the Americanization of music through ragtime resulted in the blackening of the American musical grammar at the worst possible moment in race relations. Most American music in the twentieth

century is black-derived, but ragtime marks that crucial moment, when black music began to set the agenda.

This brings us to a second theme of the novel, which also captures the chief ambition of black ragtime players between 1900 and 1917. Frederick Douglass defined the black political agenda as the quest for literacy and freedom. These quests are reflected in ragtime. The *ragtime* is a composed. That is literate and music. Though a popular genre in terms of its public appeal, ragtime draws its rules of composition and performance from the discipline of the classical tradition. These black musicians, whose expressive-repertoire was limited by the tyranny of white expectation, Coon songs were played as rags and ragtime songs retained the "jingle with the broken tongue," as Paul Laurence Dunbar called the pseudo black dialect in which, white readers expected him to deliver his poetry. But latent in the music was a new revolutionary option, which would eventually mature and graduate from the minstrel show.

In the end of the novel, when the rain makes her garments cling to her body, her mature sensual form is visible to an appreciative Tateh. Who has by this time in the novel overcome his rigid orthodox mores. Ragtime stood for more than just musical change. It is white listeners. It reconstructs the libidinal charge of ragtime at this historical reaction to ragtime by mainstream classical musicians.

The *Ragtime* may seem innocent enough. This music encores in classical concerts. In the musical and libidinal liberation, that ragtime sets in motion. The little boy, "there seemed no other possibilities for life than those delineated by the music"(40). The reaction to ragtime by established musicians in the early part of this century was related to the pervasive feeling of decline common among the ruling classes as expressed in Madison Grant's *From their perspective*, ragtime had to appear as a pathological, immoral, patently sexual, and subversive instrument of decline. The composer Daniel Gregory Mason thundered "Let us purge America and the Divine Art of Music from this polluting nonsense"(50). Hans Muck, the director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra concurred, "I think that what you call ragtime is poison. A person

inoculated with the ragtime fever is like one addicted to strong drink."(50). It has led to permanent brain damage. It also would wreck the nervous system, "Its greatest destructive power lies in its power to lower the moral standards"(52). A man named Walter Winston Kenilworth wrote a letter to the Paris editor of the New York Herald-Tribune in 1913, which was later reprinted in the Musical Courier. It sums up negatively, what the novel is all about:

America is falling prey to the collective soul of the negro through the influence of what is popularly known as "rag time" music?. If there is any tendency toward such a national disaster, it should be definitely pointed out and extreme measures taken to inhibit the influence and avert the increasing danger if it has not already gone too far. The American "rag time" or "rag time" evolved music is symbolic of the primitive morality and perceptible moral limitation of the negro type. With the latter sexual restraint is almost unknown, and the widest altitude of moral uncertainty is conceded.(60)

A New England music critic concurred in jumbled prose, which mirrors his nativist angst, continued the argument by defining the role of the Jew in this farious plot to destroy Aryan America :

Ragtime is a mere comic strip representing American vices. Here is a rude noise, which emerged from the hinterlands of brothels and dives, presented in a negroid manner by Jews most often, so popular that even high society Vanderbilts dance to it. All this syncopated music was not American, it is un-American. The Jew and the Yankee stand in human temperance at polar points. The Jew has oriental extravagance and sensuous brilliance. However, ragtime is a reflection of these raucous times. It is music without a soul. (80)

These apocalyptic reactions are by now familiar in the history of jazz and popular music. They articulate a latent fear of instability and libidinal freedom associated with the

threatening other, and represented at this time by blacks and Jews. To white cultural custodians ragtime may have heralded the decline of the West, to black middle-class musicians, most of all to Scott Joplin and James Reese Europe. It was a conscious departure from debasing minstrelsy and an entry into serious, literate, and classical black music. The meaning of black musical emancipation, a drama of mistaken motives, white musical power structure the “libertinism” of ragtime threatened to destroy the moral fiber of the nation and indicated a lowering of moral standards. The blacks acceptance as serious music was part of a political struggle for dignity. Coalhouse Walker Jr. is the pianist in Jim Reese Europe’s Clef Orchestra, which was the finest black brass band, dance, and symphony orchestra of the time and the first black orchestra to storm the citadel of high culture, Carnegie Hall, in 1914.

Within larger orchestras the piano has always been a central instrument. The pianist in the orchestra is the arranger, he can read, and he is in charge of literacy. Coalhouse Walker Jr.’s job gives us his professional profile within the black culture of the day. For Walker’s subsequent behaviour in the novel, the sequence of incidents leads to the bombing of the fire stations. Morgan’s library, there is no historical parallel, but it may be taken as an objective correlative in present day terms of the deep symbolic hurt and anger of urban blacks such as Joplin. Joplin was a serious artist, who wanted nothing more than to be recognized as a composer of serious music, “Do not play this piece fast. It is never right to play ragtime fast,”(30). This exasperated warning, which Joplin had printed on many of his compositions, which Doctorow calls the epigram of the novel. It is a sentence loaded with musical and historical meaning. Joplin makes such a fuss over those interpreters, who play his music as if the name set a fast metronome. Joplin prefaced an edition of his music without any of the modesty, which in those days was expected of blacks of any station :

What is scurrilously called ragtime is an invention that is here to stay.
That is now conceded by all classes of musicians. That all
publications masquerading under the name of ragtime are not the

genuine article will be better known, when these exercises are studied. That real ragtime of the higher class is rather difficult to play is a painful truth which most pianists have discovered. Syncopations are no indication of light and trashy music and to shy bricks at “hateful” ragtime no longer passes for musical culture. To assist amateur players in giving the “Joplin Rags” that weird and intoxicating effect intended by the composer is the object of this work. (70)

Joplin complained that imitators tended to aylorize his music, giving it the sound of a machine, when in fact syncopation and its “weird and intoxicating effect” upset the regularity of a mechanical beat. Joplin’s warning may have been the first inadvertent acknowledgement of a basic difference between European-American and black music making. Due to the improvement of instrument technology and due to the premium placed on technical mastery, a tacit context seems to have developed among Western musicians in the period of modernization to step up the speed of music-performances, which has given us Zez Confrey and Liberace in popular music, and Glenn Gould in the classics. it has been in the realm of technical mastery, where white imitators of black jazz musicians have succeeded best, namely in doing fast numbers, where many break down is in ballads and blues. The difference lies not in the choice of pace, but in “timing” on the one hand and in “attack” or “sound” on the other, which show up best in slow numbers. Afro-American timing, attack and sound, which are the parts of a rhythmic grammar of white jazz musicians it is the essence of what is called black “soul.” Joplin’s dogged insistence on correct timing therefore has black cultural nationalist implications.

It also brings to the foreground a contradiction between the conflicting goals of political emancipation and of the quest for a black cultural identity, which surfaces for the first time in American culture during the period. The dilemma was that before ragtime could be accepted beyond a black ethnic horizon, it had to shed just enough of the roughness of the “black country” and adopt just enough of the sophistication of the

“white city” without losing its “innovative” appeal. Ragtime had to adapt to “compromise with” the tyranny of classical musical norms to the extent of becoming competitive and compatible within a larger market. A black cultural pioneer such as Joplin, whose goal was the political emancipation of his music, had to master these norms through the music. It is not to succumb to their hegemony by a slavish compliance with the dictates of a Western metronome. His political balancing act was to retain as much of the Afro-American pace and sensibility as the market would accept. Hence, his dogged insistence on “timing” as the important Afro-American cultural marker.

Conclusion

The *Ragtime* is revolutionary by introducing an Afro-American structure of feeling to Western music and dance. To attract promoters Joplin had shortly before his death, staged a concert version of his opera. It failed miserably. The ragtime pianist Coalhouse Walker Jr. is clearly a representative of the ragtime age. Joplin is a master of choral composition and brings to opera the complicated rhythms, and response patterns of black folk music, indeed “verse,” “chorus,” and “dance.” His detailed instructions for the choreography set the stage for jazz dance. Which would have established him as the first black cultural nationalist. the black opera *Treemonisha* was a logical step in the quest for literacy and freedom implicit in ragtime. The libretto of the opera reflects Joplin’s abiding belief that the black path to dignity and civil rights lay through education. Like, the black baby in the novel, the heroine of *Treemonisha* was found by her foster parents as a baby under a tree, hence the name *Tree-Monisha*.

Scott Joplin died in 1917, a frustrated and angry man. Even a cursory look at Joplin’s work and biography would have laid to rest the claim that the novel’s sense of history is contrived. Coalhouse Walker Jr. is “in no way typical of the prewar years.” The novel merely translates Joplin’s anger and frustration as a creative Afro-American of his time into action and plot understood in our time.

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