

“Escape”: Ragtime and American National Identity in the Process of “Mobility”

HUI Saiyide^{[a],*}

^[a] College of Literature, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China.
* Corresponding author.

Received 22 August 2023; accepted 14 September 2023
Published online 26 October 2023

Abstract

Ragtime represents the difficult transformation of the modern national identity of American. Doctorow portrays early twentieth-century American society in the process of modernization as an “era of mobility”, and uses the magician Houdini’s “escape” as a lead to connect a series of “escapes” of many characters, which not only deconstructs the “myth of progress” but also shows that the American nation has lost its “center” of cohesion. By using the fluid representation of “escape”, Doctorow conveys a double reflection on the identity of the American nation: first, he denies the significance of “escape” for the construction of cultural identity. On the other hand, he recognizes the pragmatic values and conciliatory political attitude contained in “escape” as a roundabout and resourceful survival strategy, and reshapes the ideal of “melting pot”, revealing an optimistic outlook on American national identity, and ultimately calling for a hybrid and integrative American national identity.

Key words: E. L. Doctorow; *Ragtime*; Escape; Mobility; American national identity

Hui, S. (2023). “Escape”: Ragtime and American National Identity in the Process of “Mobility”. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 27(2), 21-25. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/13151>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/13151>

Ragtime (1975) is a novel about American historical, political, and social conflicts. E. L. Doctorow sets the main plot of the novel between the assassination of Stanford White in 1906 and the entry of the United States into World War I. This is the period when ragtime music

took the American popular music scene by storm and is in step with what historians have defined as the “Progressive Era”. Against this backdrop, the novel tells the stories of WASP family of “Father”, Jewish family of Tateh, and the black family of Coalhouse Walker, and integrates many real characters from history into fictional narratives, making it a work between fiction and history. Douglas Fowler noted that the theme of the book was to depict “the invasion, from below and within and without, of a smug and secure American WASP family.....a family which is a microcosm of American self-conception at about the turn of the century. The novel is indeed a family and national Bildungsroman account of the nature of the American national character and the transformation of its identity” (Fowler, 1992, p.58). Fowler’s review pointed out the novel’s implicit reflection on the American national identity, but he failed to explain it specifically. In addition, Fuller’s focus on this theme is only from the single perspective of the WASP family in his work, and therefore he cannot draw a comprehensive and unifying conclusion for this “polyphonic” work. Other researchers have focused on the novel’s historical perspective, its critique of American social phenomena, and comparisons with ragtime music, but the theme of American national identity has not been adequately explored.

Sautter stated, “A great number of E. L. Doctorow’s stories include characters who attempt somehow to escape their immediate surroundings” (Sautter, 1993, p.1). My article argues that the novel used the magician Houdini’s “escape” as a trigger to link the “escapes” of many characters. These acts of escape are the concrete manifestation of the proposition of “mobility” in the novel. They constitute the core metaphor for the survival of Americans in the Ragtime era, and echo the theme of “American national identity” at a deeper level. So, through the plot construction of the characters’ “escapes”, what kind of characteristics of the era does the novel express, what kind of buried historical truth does it reveal, and

what does it ponder about the characteristics and essence of the American national identity? This paper will attempt to answer the above questions

CAUSES OF ESCAPE : DECONSTRUCTION OF THE “MYTH OF PROGRESS” IN THE AGE OF MOBILITY

The United States at the beginning of the twentieth century was in the midst of a period of modernization, and progressivism permeated society. Richard Rorty summarized the tenets of progressivism in *Achieving Our Country* as follows: “This America would be one in which income and wealth are equitably distributed, and in which the government ensures equality of opportunity as well as individual liberty.” (Rorty, 1999, p.8) Against this grand backdrop of the times, *Ragtime* demonstrates the “absurdity” of historical discourse.

The novel shows the railroad tracks that run throughout the major cities. The increasingly mature modern transportation has accelerated the movement of people between cities and even internationally. The mobility of social space makes individuals lose the solid coordinates of self-orientation, resulting in changes in people’s way of life: “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 were no Negroes. There were no immigrants.” (Doctorow, 1975, pp.3-4) At the same time, the main characters are in a state of mobility. Houdini, the magician, occupies an extremely important narrative significance in the novel, and the “escape trick” is Houdini’s masterpiece and an abstraction of the act of escaping. As a result, the novel shows the various escapes of different characters: the Younger Brother, who rejects middle-class life and its values, flees to Mexico and becomes a revolutionary; Evelyn elopes with a ragtime dancer; the Jewish Tatch leaves New York City on a streetcar; the black musician Coalhouse Walker flees after his Ford Model T is destroyed by white firefighters, waiting for the opportunity to retaliate against a racist society.

As two ways of representing mobility, what is Doctorow’s intention in juxtaposing gathering and escaping? *Ragtime* is not a historical novel in the usual sense, but a retelling of early twentieth-century American history from the standpoint of a later generation. The “retelling” is in fact “an interventionist writing, with a political significance of balancing and correcting history”(Yü, 2022). The writing of history in *Ragtime* is to “prevent the power of the regime from monopolizing the compositions of truth, from establishing a monological control over culture” (Parks, 1991). Doctorow writes

about both gathering and escaping in order to explore the inner texture of the different facets of both.

The essence of “mobility” is “the quest to cross borders and build relationality” (Liu, 2020). The aggregation of people not only facilitates the establishment and expansion of interpersonal relationships, but also shapes a certain kind of exclusive circle. In fact, behind all the parades, dinners, and hikes lurk the WASP ideology and political vision of “no Negroes, no immigrants”, and the prosperity at the turn of the century is merely a false illusion of a constructed national community. According to Jiang Ningkang, “The interaction between American national cultural identity and imaginative narratives does carry certain political implications, as the mainstream culture is responsible for suppressing unorthodox historical interpretations and upholding national narratives centered on Anglo-Protestant culture, so as to maintain the political correctness of the writing of the nation-state” (Jiang, 2008, p.5). In essence, in the polyphonic American cultural environment, the WASP group established the legitimacy and supremacy of the middle-class model in American society and culture by excluding marginalized groups from the dominant narrative discourse, and thus constructed its own dominant position in the American national identity.” Apparently, there were Negroes. There were immigrants” (Doctorow, 1975, p.5) reveals the arbitrariness of this national discourse.

In fact, this period of history intercepted by the novel is the time when new immigrants flooded into American society, bringing with them a more complex cultural state and sense of identity for the American nation. The arrival of the new immigrants exacerbated the contradictions and divisions in American society, and the Progressive Movement signaled an attempt at healing and repair. What *Ragtime* reveals is that this movement was only a “myth of progress” constructed by the official historical discourse. The escaping of the marginalized from society time and time again represents a reversal of the “myth of progress,” pointing to the cruel reality behind the myth: the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century was so riddled with social problems that the marginalized, who were outside the mainstream, had to escape to avoid the dangers and difficulties of their daily lives.

Survival dilemmas do not only exist among the marginalized and disadvantaged, and escape is not the “privilege” of the characters at the bottom of the social ladder. The novel purposely depicts the aimless escape of two white men, the father of a middle-class family owner and the financial tycoon J.P. Morgan, who do not seem to have the urgency to run away compared to the marginalized. Father’s family is intact and harmonious, but instead of craving peace and quiet, he follows an expedition to the Arctic Circle. While traveling in the Atlantic, he stumbles upon a liner full of immigrants heading for the continental United States. At the moment

when the departing and entering routes briefly intersect, a wave of sadness surges through Father's heart - doubts and anxieties about his American citizenship and social status; J.P. Morgan, unable to tolerate the mediocrity of the people around him, decides to escape to Egypt, where he stays alone in the pyramid chambers the whole night, and ends up with nothing but a bunch of bedbugs biting at him continuously. More absurdly, Morgan sees New York baseball players scrambling to the top of the Sphinx. Morgan is also trapped in American society and culture; he can't hide from his fellow Americans, whom he despises, nor can he avoid the fact that he is also a member of the American citizenry. Thus, the story of the Father and Morgan suggests that the dominance of the white Anglo-Saxon middle class and its Protestant traditions in all spheres of American life is no longer as solid and secure as it once was.

After this deconstruction, the progressive era in WASP's vision of endless traffic, crowded parties, and booming everything has turned into an era that has lost the "core" that could bring the American nation together. Corresponding to the restless reality, Americans from the top to the bottom, from the rich to the poor, and from the mainstream to the margins have to escape to join this "moveable feast". The American self-concept needs to be redefined, and the American national identity must be reorganized. Thus, the cultural dimension of "who I am" is raised as a question that have to be answered.

THE DIFFICULTY OF ESCAPE: IDENTITY MOBILITY FAILURE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY DILEMMA

"Escape" implies the possibility of continuous self-creation of the escapee in the process of transmigration and migration, and the search for identity and exploration of one's own position in society are the cultural connotations of the poetics of escape. In fact, "escape" is a consistent theme in American literature, rooted in the cultural tradition of the American nation. From *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby Dick* to the post-World War II novels *On the Road* and *Rabbit, Run*, these classic works carry the desire to escape and the thought of identity with literary imagination. Stout has explained the tradition of "escape" in American fiction, arguing that "escape" usually symbolizes "a triumph" (Stout, 1983, p.33). In other words, the character uses the act of escaping to override the banal and unsatisfactory realities of the situation, and this act implies the catharsis of individualism and the promotion of the spirit of freedom. However, Doctorow parodies the "heroic act" in Stout's eyes.

On the way of escape, the difficulty of identity mobility often exhausts the people of the Ragtime era,

and most of their identity searches end up in vain. The paradoxical nature of "escape" is already hinted at in the novel's description of Houdini's escape: "His escapes were mystifying because he never damaged or appeared to unlock what he escaped from." (Doctorow, 1975, p.8) It can be seen that the "mysterious" escape is just a "trick" prepared by Houdini to make a name for himself. In the real world, this legendary magician is just a clumsy actor who is gesticulating on the stage.

Like Houdini, most of the characters try to escape from the status quo and are caught in the dilemma of self-definition and creation. Since the political, economic, and cultural mechanisms of modern America suppress the possibility of identity mobility, fleeing loses its validity as a search for identity, since its effect is not to correct social ills or change the existing order, but merely to alleviate the urgency of one's own predicament. Thus, the failures of Houdini, Evelyn, Younger Brother, Father, and Morgan reveal the illusory nature of "escape". We see that "escape" is no longer a "triumph" but a futile struggle. The multitudes no longer possess the individual heroism of Huckleberry Finn or Ishmael, nor do they deserve the disillusionment of lofty ideals. In *Ragtime*, Doctorow brings together characters of all kinds of identities and performs a "carnival of predicaments" full of irony and sighs.

The dilemmas of race, class, and gender identity are ultimately rooted in the unresolved question of the cultural identity of the American nation at the time of the founding of the United States, i.e., whether the American nation is "thirteen separate peoples who agree or one national people" (Bercovitch, 1997, p.473). The novel is about the difficulties of identity mobility in the individual sense, but on the whole, it reveals the dilemma of the American national identity that has continued since the founding of the nation and has become more complicated. When the Mayflower arrived in New England in 1620, carrying English colonists eager to rebuild their homes in the New World, the American national consciousness began to emerge. It was not until the signing of The Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, that the modern concepts of freedom, equality, and human rights in the Western European Enlightenment became the common values and mainstream ideology, and participated in the construction of the cultural identity of the American nation. The acceptance of these concepts became the "naturalization ceremony" for generations of immigrants who aspired to become U.S. citizens. However, *Ragtime* exposes the illusory nature of this sense of identity: it masks the "rootlessness" of the American nation, because the Enlightenment values on which it is based are not native to the American continent, but are foreign concepts constructed by the WASPs' early immigrants and imbued in the cultural DNA of the American nation. The "thirteen separate peoples who agree" defined the "common

nationality” of the American nation, but the endogeneity, continuity, and indigeneity that are essential to the national consciousness were relegated to the status of “otherness”. The Father is a descendant of early WASP settlers and an amateur explorer who traveled across continents. The narrator highlights the dilemma of the Father’s cultural identity as “rooted in otherness”, when the father looks in the mirror at home after returning from the Arctic trip and sees “a man who lacked a home” (Doctorow, 1975, p.124). The Father’s story ends with death: “He arrives at the new place, his hair risen in astonishment, his mouth and eyes dumb. His toe scuffs a soft storm of sand, he kneels and his arms spread in pantomimic celebration, the immigrant, as in every moment of his life, arriving eternally on the shore of his Self.” (Doctorow, 1975, p.368) By linking his father’s adventure to the cultural memory of the early WASP settlers who discovered the North American continent, the narrator sees him and the WASP group as eternal immigrants who have never been admitted to any continent, breaking down the potential dislocation of endogeneity and continuity in the sense of American national identity.

The above reasons have laid the foundation for the identity dilemma of the modern American nation, and the result is that, both the WASP group and the marginalized groups in the fiction escape for the sake of the freedom of identity mobility, but most of the time to no avail; although they live in the same land, they cannot obtain a common belonging under the contradictions and divisions caused by the deep-seated identity dilemma of the nation.

“GETTING INTO TROUBLE AND GETTING OUT AGAIN”: PRAGMATIC VALUES AND REINVENTION OF THE “MELTING POT”

Doctorow’s reflections on American national identity are not decidedly pessimistic. To this end, he writes about the “identity transformation” of his Jewish Tateh, and set up a happy ending - Tateh succeeds in reconstructing his cultural identity by getting out of the New York ghetto, acquiring wealth and fame as a filmmaker, and claiming to be an aristocratic The Baron Ashkenazy of European ancestry, rather than a poor Slavic immigrant.

Since the launch of *Ragtime*, there has been a great deal of controversy surrounding the character of Tateh, centering on the morality of his escape. Specifically, Tateh’s success is based on the treacherous act of betraying his radical past. This is a morally repugnant move, so one interviewer asked Doctorow if he wanted to criticize Tateh morally. Doctorow replied, “No, I love that character, but also understand him.....very often a man who begins as a radical somehow with all his energy and spirit and intelligence and wit by a slight change of course

can use these gifts to succeed under the very system he’s criticizing” (Trenner, 1983, p.45). To understand the true meaning of this quote, one needs to discern Doctorow’s political outlook. Doctorow has always presented himself as a “radical Jewish humanist” (Trenner, 1983, p.3), but while he has maintained a radical left-wing stance, he has also reflected on this stance. Scholars represented by Xu Zaizhong have pointed out that there is a certain tendency of “reconciliation” in Doctorow’s political outlook (Xü, 2019). Compared with other left-wing radicals, Doctorow is wary of any kind of ideological fanaticism, and does not reduce his novels to rigid ideological illustrations and hypocritical moral propaganda manuals. As Cooper puts it, Doctorow’s novels “becomes not the elucidation of a principle but the exploration of the always dynamic interaction of the individual and society, of the believer and reality” (Cooper, 1993). In the journey in pursuit of identity, the different choices of the novel’s main characters can be broadly categorized into three groups: Walker and the class of workers seek their position in American society through resistance, but are unable to change the ugly views of the whole society; Evelyn, Younger Brother, Morgan and Father choose to escape. Instead of creating themselves, they are vainly pursuing the empty “signifier”; only Tateh abandons the false fantasy and adopts a more practical way of earning a living, and finally obtains the success in the secular world. Therefore, we can discover another layer of connotation of “escape”: a kind of cunning wisdom to circumvent conflicts by roundabout and skillful means, a kind of pragmatic value and survival strategy.

Reconciling political attitudes and pragmatic values means breaking down the sharp dichotomy between self and other, mainstream and periphery, strong and weak, and opening up another vision of American national identity: hybrid and integrative. Although *Ragtime* is written with a great deal of tragic events, it has a comedic ending in which different racial, class, and gender groups break down the boundaries of their own cultural identities and form a new family: Tateh and Mother form a new family and entrust the future of this family to the new generation consisting of the little boy from the original WASP family, the little Jewish girl, and the African-American descendants of the Walkers. Eventually, the Jewish father gets the idea to make a new movie, and a picture of mixed and blended cultural identities emerges: “A bunch of children who were pals, white black, fat thin, rich poor, all kinds, mischievous little urchins who would have funny adventures in their own neighborhood, a society of ragamuffins, like all of us, a gang, getting into trouble and getting out again.” (Doctorow, 1975, p.369)

Doctorow has confessed that the real historical figures in this novel are actually fictional, and that Mother, Father, Tateh, little boy and little girl are the “historical figures” in his mind. Through these “historical figures”

Doctorow tries to construct and predict a new identity of the American nation, which tends to be hybrid and integrative. In other words, Doctorow reinvents the ideal of the “melting pot”. The term “melting pot” has been used by a number of cultural researchers to describe the hybrid qualities of the American nation. Since the 18th century, when the Crèvecoeur coined the concept, “melting pot” has encompassed the cultural ideals of identity of peoples melting together in the New World to form a new nation. However, in the actual process of social and cultural development, “Melting Pot” has evolved into a discursive strategy with cultural hegemony, i.e., the promotion of “uniculturalism”, which advocates the inheritance and development of the monoculture formed since the founding of the United States, which is dominated by the WASP” (Wang, 2019, p.201). On the basis of retaining the original meaning of “Melting Pot”, Doctorow “melts down” the original class status, cultural patterns and discourse authority of the WASP family, and by doing so, remodels the ideal of “melting pot”.

Ragtime is a novel with quite a lot of realistic references. In Doctorow’s view, the social problems of the 1970s, such as racial conflicts, gender antagonisms and class conflicts, are like a repetition of the fallacies of the turn of the century. In order to enter the real “Progressive Era”, Doctorow fiercely criticizes the serious social problems, at the same time, through the contemplation of “escape”, he also offers a “prescription” for the American nation in the midst of identity dilemmas: to rebuild the ideal of the “Melting Pot” through the recognition of differences and mutual tolerance. Only in this way can this “once-getting-into-trouble” nation “get out again”.

CONCLUSION

Overall, *Ragtime* expresses the difficult cognition and transformation of the “self-concept” of the modern American nation. Through the performance of “escape,” Doctorow expresses both a pessimistic reflection and an optimistic outlook on the American national identity. *Ragtime* can be seen as an attempt by Doctorow to use the power of literature to imaginatively reconcile the multiple individual identity dilemmas that really exist in American society. In the process of deconstructing the authoritative narrative, Doctorow constructs a postmodern politics of difference, and in the collage of fragments he integrates and collects the many issues of the mobility of the American national identity. While giving humanistic attention to the distinctive individual, it also applies

colorful and heterogeneous pigments to the homogeneous American nation, ultimately calling for the formation of a hybrid American national identity. This not only reflects Doctorow’s sense of social responsibility and sense of historical responsibility, but also helps readers to understand his work more deeply, and provides a reference for us to understand the postmodern multiculturalism of the United States.

REFERENCES

- Bercovitch, S. (1997). *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, Vol.1: 1590-1820. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- COOPER, S. (1993). Cutting Both Ways: E. L. Doctorow’s Critique of the Left. *South Atlantic Review*, 20(02), 111-125. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3200971>
- Doctorow, E. L. (1976). *Ragtime*. New York: Bantam Books, Inc.
- Fowler, D. (1992). *Understanding E. L. Doctorow*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Jiang, N. K. (2008). *Literature & National Identity in Contemporary America*. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press.
- Liu, Y. (2020). Mobility Studies: A New Direction in Spatial Literary Studies. *Foreign Literature Studies*, 42(2), 26-38.
- Parks, J. G. (1991). The Politics of Polyphony: The Fiction of E. L. Doctorow. *Twentieth Century Literature*, 37(4), 454-463. <https://doi.org/10.2307/441658>
- Rorty, R. (1999). *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Sautte, S. (1993). *The Dynamic of Escape in the Writings of E. L. Doctorow*. Canada: McGill University. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/dynamic-escape-writings-e-l-doctorow/docview/304113829/se-2>
- Stout, J. P. (1983). *The Journey Narrative in American Literature*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Trenner, R. (1983). *E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations*. Princeton: Ontario Review Press.
- Wang, E. M. (2019). *Multiculturalism in America: Theories and Practices*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Xü, Z. Z. (2019). Race, Gender and Class: An Exploration of E. L. Doctorow’s Compromising Politics in *Ragtime*. *Foreign Literatures*, (03), 125-135+160.
- Yu, J. H. (2022). Novel, History, and Historical Critique of American Fiction. *Journal of English and American Literature*, (02), 143-153.