

Research on Transportation in *Ragtime*

Yuxiang Huang

College of Literature and Language The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Britain

Abstract

E.L. Doctorow's Historiographic Metafiction *Ragtime* is studied from the narrative function of transportation, the various significances in the writing of Postmodern Literature on transportation is explored. Trains are both path for social mobility and the American dream and reveal the alienation and disillusionment of the modern subject, ships not only carry the logic of imperialism and capital expansion but also embody global hegemony and cultural plunder, cars, as products of modern industrial production, reflect racial plight and dignity demand. The novel revealed the contradictions and crises behind the myth of mobility through three types of representative transportation, reflected the multidimensional complexity of history, society, and politics, and embodied postmodernism's questioning and deconstruction for grand historical narratives.

Keywords

E.L. Doctorow; *Ragtime*; Transportation; Mobility Historiographic Metafiction.

1. Introduction

Transportation "belongs to the hardware part of constructing urban space, it means the movement of people and logistics" [1], "transportation is the carriers of historical memory in specific contexts, which strengthens the existence significance and inner state of specific people in a certain period of history, or leaves pictorial vivid evidence for the tenacious existence of a certain historical memory." [2] In the mobility turn of literary research field, the relative between transportation and literature has become even closer, French cultural critic Michel de Certeau, in his *L'Invention du quotidien*, compared mass transportation to novel narration, because "the two coherently organize different places to form space, and organize a symbolic system into sentence pattern to produce meaning" [3]. As a representative of historiographic Metafiction, Doctorow's *Ragtime* used various transportation to form a flowing social picture, recreated American society before World War I, as the author sets the tone in the opening: "Trains and steamers and trolleys moved them from one place to another. That was the style, that was the way people lived." "Meanwhile men were beginning to take planes into the air, or race automobiles that went sixty miles an hour." [4] This paper takes transportation means as the entry point to analyze the three most important types of transportation in *Ragtime* and explore their roles in the narrative.

2. Train: Class Mobility and Identity Alienation

"Train makes the modern subject break away from one kind of temporal and spatial constraint but places subject in another kind of confined space," and it is a "transportation technology that integrates multidimensional significance and paradoxical relationships". [5]. In *Ragtime*, train is not merely a type of transportation but also a metaphorical channel for characters' identity flow and transformation of social classes. The paradoxical spatial structure it makes the flow direction of characters within it present completely opposite narrative trajectory. On the one

hand, train is channel for class mobility and social integration; on the other hand, it is catalysts for radical ideas and revolutionary consciousness.

In Tateh's narrative thread, train symbolizes the dual migration of geographical and social spaces. He was once the "president of the Socialist Artists' Alliance of the Lower East Side" (Doctorow, 1985), active on the stage of the workers' movement. Under the high pressure of life, Tateh left New York and got the train down to the south to Philadelphia, where he earned the first pot of gold by selling comic books. "Thus did the artist point his life along the lines of flow of American energy." (Doctorow, 1985), in the process, the train became a symbolic carrier of his social mobility, transforming him from a poor in the lower class to a successful businessman conforming to the logic of capital. It is noteworthy that after achieving the American dream, Tateh deliberately erased his ethnic identity and even "invented a barony for himself..." Instead of having to erase his thick Yiddish accent he need only roll it off his tongue with a flourish." (Doctorow, 1985)

In contrast, the trajectory of Younger Brother. The novel describes him as "standing between the cars on the milk train going up to New Rochelle" (Doctorow, 1985), he produced a self-destructive impulse in the swaying and roaring of the train, "considering throwing himself under the wheels." (Doctorow, 1985), however, under the confined space of the carriage and under the cold moonlight, he heard a song called "a suicide rag" from the loud noise of the train running, and ultimately transformed this destructive impulse into revolutionary passion, thus completing a thorough transformation from a middle-class youth to an anarchist revolutionary. For the Younger Brother, the train was no longer a tool for social mobility but a paradoxical space that awakens the experience alienation and political consciousness of modern subject.

Therefore, the train presents a dual semiotic significance in the novel: on the one hand, it is a symbol of progress in the narrative of American modernization, and carries the myth of mobility that the American dream admires; on the other hand, it also reveals the disillusionment and crisis bred by this mobility. The novel playfully sang "Tracks!" Tracks! It seemed to the visionaries who wrote for the popular magazines that the future lay at the end of parallel rails" (Doctorow, 1985), and questioned the single logic of the mainstream narrative through the departure of fate trajectories of two characters, it revealed the two-way flow between the center and the periphery, as well as between conservatism and radicalism, it not only carried the promise of "flow of energy" in American society but also exposed the fate of identity drift and alienation of modern subject. *Ragtime* represented and deconstructed the narrative of the American dream through the image of the train,, first, it established that "the national imagination of the United States is built on the promise of mobility, and the American dream is the carrier and symbol of this promise of mobility" [6], then, continuously weakened the stability of this myth through contradictory narratives,, thereby presenting the complex situation of the modern subject in the historical tide.

3. Ship: Imperial Expansion and Capital Hegemony

Compared to train, the narrative function of ships in *Ragtime* is more distinctive and imaginative. The navigation of ship not only symbolizes spatial transcendence and global mobility but also deeply symbolizes the expansion and conquest of imperialism and monopoly capitalism around the whole world. In the novel, when Theodore Roosevelt "now sent a fleet of white battleships steaming around the world, battleships as white as his teeth" (Doctorow, 1985), this is not only an exaggerated rhetoric of American military power but also reveals the strong imperialist color behind maritime hegemony. In the text, ship is not merely physical existence of transportation but often serve as symbols of the United States.

The father's Arctic exploration ship Roosevelt he takes is a typical example. This ship is both a fruit of modern technology and a product of the rapid development of American capitalism. The

novel emphasizes its materiality and fantasy through symbolic descriptions: "The members of the expedition lived in surprising comfort aboard the Roosevelt, which had been lifted in its berth by the winter floes until it sat like a walnut in icing." (Doctorow, 1985), this vivid depiction highlights the romanticized shell of the ship, while its internal structure reveals social inequality and racial stratification: the expedition leader Peary resided in the most comfortable exclusive cabin, even equipped with automatic piano, meanwhile, "The Eskimo families lived all over the ship, camping on the decks and in the holds." (Doctorow, 1985), this space distribution highlights the hierarchical separation between white explorers and marginalized groups.

It is noteworthy that Peary's feat of conquering the North Pole actually relied on the labor and sacrifice of his black assistant Matthew Henson and a large number of Eskimos. However, Peary constantly otherized them in his narration, "Peary defined the virtues of Eskimos as loyalty and obedience, roughly the same virtues one sought in the dogs." (Doctorow, 1985), this narrative way reveals the deep logic of racism in Imperialist discourse: the contributions of minorities are systematically erased or belittled, while the success of exploration is attributed to the will and wisdom of white subjects. Therefore, the Roosevelt is not only the symbol of maritime technology, but also a microcosm of American racism and imperial expansion, the allocation and operation mechanism of its internal space vividly reproduces the deep-rooted racial hierarchy in American society.

Roosevelt echoes the financial oligarch Morgan's capital integration in the maritime sector. The novel describes "He had combined the White Star Line, the Red Star Line, the American, Dominion, Atlantic Transport and Leyland lines into one company numbering 120 ocean-going ships." (Doctorow, 1985), Morgan's monopolistic integration of the shipping industry not only reflects the highly centralized trend of American capitalism in the early 20th century, but also reveals how the ocean has been transformed into a fluid space that can be manipulated and exploited under the logic of capital. For Morgan, the function of ship has transcended mere transportation and has become a visible symbol of capital accumulation.

The ocean ships controlled by Morgan not only carried the expansion of commercial capital but also become repositories for cultural capital and symbolic power. The novel says, "The holds of his ships were filled with collections of paintings, rare manuscripts, first editions, jades, bronzes, autographs, tapestries, crystal." (Doctorow, 1985), these cultural objects that transcend regions and history are the products of Imperialism's plundering and the transformation of cultural capital. Here ships are no longer merely technical transportation but have been transformed into mobile museums for American financial capitalists to construct global cultural hegemony. Morgan seized the achievements of civilizations in Europe, Egypt, and even more distant regions through ship, thereby achieving possession and monopoly on over both material and cultural aspects.

The ship writing in *Ragtime* reveals two interwoven narrative threads: one is the logic of imperial conquest and racism carried by the Roosevelt; the other is capital concentration and cultural hegemony embodied in Morgan's shipping empire. The former reflects the expansion and violence of the United States in the geopolitical dimension through exploration activities, while the latter reveals the deep connection between culture and economy under modernity through capital operations. Train emphasizes people movement and class changes within the domestic space, while ship highlights expansion and hegemony in the transnational space. At this point the ship narrative in the novel reveals the hidden global logic behind the American modernization narrative, namely the construction of an image of the United States itself through the flow and conquest in the ocean space.

4. Car: Modern Production and Racial Dilemma

With the popularization of Ford's assembly line production model, large-scale mechanized production of cars has become a reality, and "cars have become the carrier and medium for people to show their wealth and social position". In *Ragtime*, car, as modern transportation, is both the product of capitalist mass production and is given deep symbolic significance in character narratives. For African pianist Coalhouse Walker, that new Ford car is not only an extension of his body and a support for his life, but also an externalized form of his social position and personal dignity. The novel comments from a white perspective: He seemed to be able to transform the customary deferences practiced by his race so that they reflected to his own dignity rather than the recipient's" (Doctorow, 1985), and the material support for this dignity comes from his car which symbolizes modernity.

However, there has always been a hidden racial barrier behind the myth of American mobility freedom. "Another important manifestation of American mobility politics is racial disparity. The freedom of mobility stated by the United States is actually only a privilege for whites, and African-Americans themselves are the sarcasm of the the myth of American mobility freedom." [8] The tragedy of Coalhouse comes from his behavior and self-respect, as well as his car that symbolizes equality and modernity. During a trip, he was harassed and humiliated by volunteer firefighters: they cooked up an excuse of toll fees to deliberately obstruct his progress and ultimately disrespect his dignity by destroying his car. The core of this plot lies in revealing that as a black person, Coalhouse is not included in the so-called free mobility system of the United States, and his rights and dignity can only be excluded and ridiculed.

More symbolically, the ultimate form of humiliation directly falls on the car itself: "It was spattered with mud. There was a six-inch tear in the custom pantasote top. And deposited in the back seat was a mound of fresh human excrement." (Doctorow, 1985), this is not only the destruction of private property, but also the white societies' degradation and denial for blacks's dignity. Faced with the judicial and institutional inaction, Coalhouse was forced to respond to the humiliation with violent resistance and embarked on the path of revenging against his enemies through terrorist attacks. In this process, the novel presents a highly symbolic scene: his sunken car "the sunken structure of the Model T appeared and disappeared as the water" (Doctorow, 1985). This flickering image implies that Coalhouse's existence and demands as a black person are always in a state of being difficult to be truly recognized in the mainstream society, and only through rebellion can his voice be faintly heard in the historical narrative.

However, this resistance itself carries a deep irony. The novel uses considerable space to introduce the mass production process of Ford cars, emphasizes that as a typical example of mechanical reproducibility, it transforms the production of cars from technical labor with artistic integrity into semi-technical labor. It means that Walker's pride and dignity are actually built on the high replicability of capitalist assembly line production. What he defends is not unique value, but an industrial product that can be infinitely reproduced. Therefore, when he makes demands as the "President of the Provisional American Government", his core request appears extremely small and specific: hand over the fire chief who humiliated him and return the Model T Ford with its custom pantasote top (Doctorow, 1985) exactly as it was. As a symbol of industrialization and modernity, the car symbolizes progress and prosperity in the eyes of the white society; however, for blacks, it is both a materialized dignity support and a direct target of oppression and humiliation. Walker attempts to regain his dignity through violent resistance, but this demand for dignity is still confined within the material symbols recognized by the mainstream society. His resistance ultimately fails to break free from the framework of the white discourse system, Younger Brother's angry question, "Is the damn Ford your justice?" (Doctorow, 1985), directly reveals this limitation: although Walker's struggle has a tragic epic color, it lacks higher-level political ideals and ideological depth. In this sense, *Ragtime* presents

a cold irony through the Coalhouse incident: under institutional oppression, even the resistance of black individuals is full of passion and sacrifice, inevitably falls into the dual shackles of modern capital logic and racial discourse, although the black civil rights movement has the effect of subverting the mainstream discourse, in fact, its foundation still relies on these discourses.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of Linda Hutcheon's postmodernism theory, this paper analyzes the three transportation that represents mobility and modernity, it is an important narrative device that highlights the characteristics of Ragtime Historiographic Metafiction. Postmodernism does not elevate the margins to a new center but uses their contradictory and dual positions to make comments- Tateh and Younger Brother's identity and situation are just in this dual position, they are both inside and outside, the train becomes the movement channel between the center and the edge. As Historiographic Metafiction, *Ragtime* excels at placing the narrative within the broader historical, social, and political context implied by this act, on the one hand, the father's and Morgan's navigation activities form self-referential intertextuality within the text, and on the other hand, it also corresponds to specific American history. The father, this fictional character, participated in the polar expedition, which echoed Robert Peary's arrival at the North Pole in 1909, Morgan's image combined the characteristics of the American financial oligarch John Pierpont Morgan, and his art collection eventually became the important foundation of the New York Morgan Library. Thus, the shipping narrative in the text not only reflects real historical figures and events but also symbolically refers to the colonial expansion and global plunder of the West, while revealing the formation and establishment of the capitalist world system in the marine space. Postmodernism only raised doubts and did not provide affirmative answers or sought a unified vision, Historiographic Metafiction just shakes the single authority of history through this questioning attitude and constantly reflects on and deconstructs its own narrative legitimacy. It not only questions the stability of grand historical narratives but also exposes its own uncertainty through internal contradictions. The key position of the car in the Coalhouse incident just embodies the postmodern confusion and contradiction.

References

- [1] Chen Jianhua. Literature Carries the Vehicle: Brief Biography of Trains in the Republic of China[M]. The Commercial Press, 2017.
- [2] Li Yanshu. Literary Functions and Aesthetic Implications of "Transportation"[J]. Literature & Art Studies, 2016 (10).
- [3] Yanzi. Generation of New Transportation Vehicles and New Experience Spaces: Centered on Shanghai Style Novels [J]. Academic Journal of Liyun, 2011 (1).
- [4] Doctorow, E. L. Ragtime. London: Picador. 1985.
- [5] Liu Ying. Mobility and Modernity: Train and Re-ordering of Times and Spaces in American Novels[J]. Nankai Journal (Philosophy and Social Science Edition), 2017(3).
- [6] Liu Ying. Mobility Studies: A New Direction in Spatial Literary Studies[J]. Foreign Literature Studies, 2020 (2).
- [7] Liu Chang. Brief Analysis of the Symbolic Significance of Cars in The Great Gatsby [J]. Overseas English, 2017 (14).
- [8] Bai Weizhen. The Themes of "Mechanical Replication" and "Transformation" in Ragtime[J]. Journal of School of Chinese Language and Culture Nanjing Normal University, 2018 (4).