

Expressive Montage in *Ragtime*: Characterization of the Confused Mainstream Group

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Abstract—*Ragtime* written by E.L. Doctorow was a classic of postmodern novels, in which the author employed montage technique in film production to shape typical characters like the three white male figures. Doctorow mainly adopted psychological montage, lyrical montage and metaphorical montage methods to show the mental crisis of the middle-class white men under the tremendous social change including immigrants influx and labor capital conflict, who were usually assumed the most privileged group in the United States. This paper used Eisenstein's montage theory to analyze the promotion of character portrayal through the use of montage techniques and the confusion, struggle or lost state of the mainstream group in the United States in the early 20th century, which worth people's reflection as the problems still exists in the current American society.

Keywords—characterization, montage, *Ragtime*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ragtime written by E.L. Doctorow tells the story of three families, respectively white family, Jewish family and black family in the early 20th century. It revealed the phenomena of immigration influx, labor capital clash and racial conflict in the context of market prosperity during the period of great industrial transformation in the United States, demonstrating that American society was not a happy and peaceful society [1]. Under the surface of the rapid development of large-scale industry and the extreme prosperity of the market lied the turmoil, suspicion, and instability of the society. Under such social circumstances, the mainstream group, namely the middle-class white male community in the United States was impacted by the social changes such as immigration and mechanization, leading to psychological problems like confusion and anxiety. There were three main white male characters in *Ragtime*: Mother's Younger Brother, Father and The Little Boy. As the most privileged members in the American society, they also faced mental crisis and was confused of who they were. Some of them were carried forward by the tide of the time, some tried to fight against the unfairness of the society, and some stood aside the time and observed it confusedly.

The author Doctorow employed the technique of montage and took advantage of film media to depict three vivid characters. Doctorow's cross-media writing technique enhanced the aesthetic value of *Ragtime*, allowing readers to better understand the characters' psychological state and development. This paper will focus on the mental crisis of the mainstream American group, namely middle-class white men, and the promotion of character portrayal through the use of montage techniques.

II. MONTAGE AND LITERATURE

The original meaning of "montage" in French was "put together". In film production, when different shots are pieced together, they usually generate specific meanings that each shot does not have when it exists alone [2], "montage doesn't connect things unrelated, but is a certain demonstration of the theme" [3]. In the mid-1920s, the montage school, represented by Soviet film master and film theorist Eisenstein, established the theory of film montage. Eisenstein proposed that montage is not only a technical method of film production, but more importantly, a mindset and philosophical concept. He pointed out that two montage shots put together are not the "sum of two numbers", but the "product of two numbers". In other words, the juxtaposition and interaction of lens (A) and lens (B) on the screen give rise to concept (C). A and B are specific shots and images, while C is an abstract or implicit concept. In Eisenstein's words, it is "something that is difficult to depict with images", and the realization of C is left to the audience. In many cases, this undecided approach can have a stimulating effect on the readers or audiences [4].

According to Eisenstein's montage theory, montage has narrative and semantic functions. Eisenstein divided montage into three basic types: narrative montage, expressive montage, and rational montage. The first type is a narrative technique, while the latter two are mainly used to convey meanings. A second level division can be made on this basis. This paper focuses on the use of expressive montage in *Ragtime*, exploring how the author Doctorow employed this technique to depict the psychological states of the three main white male characters in the novel, and discussing the spiritual loss of the American mainstream white community. Expressive montage can be divided into: lyrical montage, psychological montage, metaphorical montage, and comparative montage.

Lyrical montage refers to the process of combining various elements in a narrative, appropriately incorporating symbolic emotional shots while continuing the narrative and description in order to elevate the theme and ideas; Psychological montage refers to the use of a series of rhythmically jumping shots to depict a character's psychological state; Metaphorical montage refers to highlighting a certain similar feature between things by switching lenses, triggering readers to think and imagine; Comparative montage is the process of combining shots that conflict with each other, giving readers a strong sense of contrast and highlighting the creator's intentions.

In the 20th century, the relationship between literature and film were very close, and there were wide mutual borrowing and imitation between the two. Literature was the basis of movies, while the techniques of movies also provided

inspiration for literature. According to the American critic Wilson, some “serious novelists” were influenced by movies, although not wrote for it [5]. The modernists and postmodernists in the 20th century “used filming techniques to update their writing methods”. These writers’ integration of various art types into novel creation led to the innovation of novel narration [6]. In *Ragtime*, Doctorow adopted the montage techniques to shape typical characters and improve the novel’s aesthetic value. This employment of montage technique took advantage of the expressive power of different media and enhanced the story narration and characterization of the novel. This paper focuses on the montage technique’s enhancing effect on characterization of the white male characters and reveals their confusion and perplexity behind their elite appearance.

III. MONTAGE AND THE MIDDLE-CLASS WHITE MALE CHARACTERS

While middle-class white men were generally assumed as the most privileged people in the United States, under the circumstance of immigrant influx, racial conflict and labor capital clash, they also felt confused and developed some psychological problems. There were three main white male Characters in *Ragtime*: Mother’s Younger Brother, Father and The Little Boy. To shape these three characters, the author Doctorow adopted montage techniques, especially the lyrical montage, psychological montage, metaphorical montage, and comparative montage. Through analyzing the montage techniques, readers can find the beauty of cross-media narration and the mental crisis of the American mainstream group in the early 20th century.

A. *Mother’s Younger Brother: Struggle in Vain*

Mother’s Younger Brother was a radical and sentimental young white man. He stood against the social phenomena such as class polarization and racial conflicts. He took radical acts like the feverish pursuit of Evelyn Nesbit, a famous model and the extremist attack led by the black man Coalhouse Walker. Mother’s Younger Brother pursued equality and was against the unfairness in the society. However, his struggle against the social problems was in vain and he died in the radical acts.

At the beginning of the novel, Doctorow wrote, “Mother’s Younger Brother was a lonely, withdrawn young man with blond moustache, and was thought to be having difficulty finding himself. Mother’s Younger Brother in his white linen suit and boater rolled his trousers and walked barefoot in the salt marshes” [7]. Then Doctorow changed the image to the painting of Winslow Homer, “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 rocks and shoals of the New England coast. There were unexplained shipwrecks and brave towline rescues.” Doctorow used metaphorical montage here. The painting of Homer showed gloominess and confusion, which hinted the mental state of Mother’s Younger Brother.

Doctorow wrote about Mother’s Younger Brother’s love, “Mother’s Younger Brother was in love with Evelyn Nesbit. He thought about her all the time. He was desperate to have her.” Then Doctorow changed the writing to a drawing pinned on his wall drew 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. This metaphorical montage

indicated that for Mother’s Younger Brother, love was a question to answer all through his life, and which had a span of his whole life.

Mother’s Younger Brother tested the bomb he designed. He stood up a bare pace or two from the fuse. He stood as if in a shower bath, his face upturned to the water. He held out his arms. The bomb exploded. The birds turned in widening circles, soaring out over the Sound, swooping over whitecaps and hovering on the wind. Then Doctorow changed the description to that Evelyn abandoned Mother’s Younger Brother and went off with a professional ragtime dancer. The psychological montage here showed the confusion and pain of Mother’s Younger Brother after the lost of his love.

The man visited Emma Goldman after the leaving of Evelyn, and Goldman advised him to give up the obsession for Evelyn. Goldman asked him, “Why can’t you accept your own freedom? Why do you have to cling to someone in order to live?” Then Mother’s Younger Brother found himself staring into the faces of Goldman and Reitman. They peered at him, curious and interested. Goldman said He reminds me of Czigosz. Reitman said He is educated, a bourgeois. But the same poor boy in the eyes, Goldman said. The same poor dangerous boy. Younger Brother saw himself standing in line to shake the hand of William McKinley. A handkerchief was wrapped around his hand. In the handkerchief was a gun, McKinley fell back. Blood dyed his vest. There were screams. Doctorow used the technique of psychological montage to stick the image of Mother’s Younger Brother talking with Emma Goldman and the image of assassination of McKinley together, which reflected that Mother’s Younger Brother was influenced by Emma Goldman and he might become a radical later.

After talking with Emma Goldman, Mother’s Younger Brother stood between the cars on the milk train going up to New Rochelle. He considered throwing himself under the wheels. He listened to their rhythm, their steady clacking, like the left hand of a rag. The screeching and pounding of metal on metal where the two cars joined was the syncopating right hand. It was a suicide rag. The cars jumped under his feet. He held his face up to the sky between the cars. In this depiction, Doctorow stick the image of the train, keyboard and the young man’s face together, showing that Mother’s Younger Brother’s life resembled the rhythm created by the right hand, while the progressing of mainstream society like the rhythm created by the left hand, and the two of them conflicted. Mother’s Younger Brother took the train symbolizing mainstream society, but he was unwilling to move along with the train of mainstream history. This metaphorical montage showed the pain and struggle of Mother’s Younger Brother.

B. *Father: Lost in the Tide*

Montage in the novel also contributed to the characterization of father. Father was a successful businessman and explorer. It seemed that father’s life fitted the development of his country and the society at that time. However, father felt lost and confused constantly, which showed that he was swept into the tide passively, and was lost mentally.

The novel started with the house built by father in New York. Doctorow wrote that the best part of Father’s income was derived from the manufacture of flags and buntings and other accoutrements of patriotism, including fireworks. Then Doctorow used montage to change the image into American

society, "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 theatre, operas, ballrooms. There seemed to be no entertainment that did not involve great swarms of people. That was the style, that was the way people lived. There were no Negros. There were no immigrants." The adoption of metaphorical montage technique here showed that father's success had great connection with the prosperity of society, and indicated that his concept and behavior were regulated by the American mainstream society.

The image of buntings appeared in the novel several times through the technique of metaphorical montage. Doctorow depicted a parade led by a candidate. At Rye everyone disembarked for another parade to the Pavilion, where at picnic tables the traditional fish chowder was served by a small army of waiters in white full-length aprons. After the luncheon speeches were made from a band shell. Then the image changed to the patriotic bunting decorating the band shell, which had been provided by Father's firm. The montage technique used here showed the connection between father's life and the country's progressing.

Father strode to City Hall. He went in the door as a widely respected businessman in the community. His career as an explorer had been well reported in the newspapers. Then the image shifted to the flag that flew from the cupola on top of the building, which had been his gift to the city. The metaphorical montage of this flag showed the accordance of father's life and the American mainstream society.

The train occurred several times in the novel. When the family saw father off, Doctorow wrote about the family first. Some of the office staff was there, and Father's chief assistant made a short speech. There was a spattering of applause. Then the image shifted to the train, "The New York train arrived, five varnished dark green cars pulled by a Baldwin 4-4-0 with spoked engine truck wheels." The train indicated that the country kept progressing, and Father complied with the demand of the country's development to explore the Arctic, and the flag business father ran also adhered to the progress of the country.

In description of father's journey to the Arctic, Doctorow used psychological montage to show father's change of mindset. At first, father saw "Fireboats sent up sprays of water which misted in rainbows as the early morning sun rose over the city. As he stood at the railing there was transmitted to his his bones the awesome unalterable rhythm of the ocean." At that moment father looked forward to the exploration in the Arctic. At the start of the 20th century Americans were passionate with exploration, and as an explorer father was patriotic. Then the image shifted, "The Roosevelt passed an incoming transatlantic vessel packed to the railings with immigrants. It was a rag ship with a million dark eyes staring at him. Father, a normally resolute person, suddenly foundered in his soul. A weird despair seized him." Then Doctorow used psychological montage technique again and shifted the image to the sea, "The wind came up, the sky had turned overcast, and the great ocean began to tumble and break upon itself as if made of slabs of granite and sliding terraces of slate." The change of image here showed that the coming of immigrants lashed upon father's heart. Father was a native mainstream white man and the flow of immigrants generated his feeling of uneasiness. This shot showed father's confusion and scare derived from the coming of immigrants,

which indicated the black family's impact on his own family later.

After father's exploration in the Arctic he went back home. At night father and mother held each other into sleep. Then the image shifted downstairs. Brigit put a record on the Victrola and listened to John McCormack sang "I Hear You Calling Me". Here Doctorow used metaphorical montage to show the alienation of father and mother. As the name of the song, father seemed to hear an Esquimo woman calling him. Father had attachment to an Esquimo woman in the Arctic. Although father was together with mother, he heard the calling from the Esquimo woman. It indicated that though the exploration in the Arctic helped father to know the physical world better, it couldn't save him from the lost state and confusion.

Father condemned himself most for the neglect of his son, so he took the boy to see a game of baseball. Doctorow wrote about the stadium, "Cigar smoke filled the stadium and, lit by the oblique rays of the afternoon sun, indicated the voluminous cavern of air in which he sat pressed upon as if by a foul universe." Then Doctorow changed the image, "Out in center field, behind the unroofed or bleacher seats, a great display board indicated the number of outs and the inning and the hits and runs made." Doctorow used montage technique to change the image from stadium to the display board, showing that the smoke resembled father's own problems, and the numbers coded clearly was an elaborate representation. Through this psychological montage readers might find the confusion of father in the relationship with his family.

C. The Little Boy: Observe Confusedly

Doctorow adopted the montage technique in depiction of the little boy's mental state. The little boy was an observer of the society, who always pondered over the things he saw, but in a confused way.

The little boy "felt that the circumstances of his family's life operated against his need to see things and to go places". He was restless and began to measure the length of the porch. Then Doctorow used montage technique and turned to depict the escape artist Harry Houdini, "Houdini went all over the world accepting all kinds of bondage and escaping. He escaped from a Siberian exile van. From a Chinese torture crucifix. From a Hamburg penitentiary. From an English prison ship. From a Boston jail." Then Doctorow shifted the image again, "The little boy stood at the end of the porch and fixed his gaze on a blue bottle fly traversing the screen in a way that made it appear to be coming up the hill from North Avenue. The fly flew off." The combination of these images suggested that the little boy want to go to places outside and get rid of the bondage, but even the escape artist Houdini was confused in his heart like a fly, and couldn't escape the confusion in his heart, so the confusion of the little boy became obvious.

When Houdini left the white family, the chauffeur was waiting, the car was parked correctly. Houdini climbed in the seat next to the driver and waved. Then the image shifted to the little boy "gazing at the distorted macrocephalic image of himself in the shiny brass fitting of the headlight." This metaphorical montage reflected the confusion of the little boy, wanting to see his image but only found the distorted one.

As the little boy grew up, he developed some strange hobbies. When he was alone, he listened to the Victrola and played the same record over and over, whatever it happened

to be, as if to test the endurance of a duplicated event. Then the image shifted to the mirror. The boy took to studying himself in the mirror. He couldn't see that he was taller than he had been even a few months before, or that his hair was darkening. In fact he continued the practice not from vanity but because he discovered the mirror as a means of self-duplication. He would gaze at himself until there were two selves facing one another, neither of which could claim to be the real one. The sensation was of being disembodied. He was no longer anything exact as a person. He had the dizzying feeling of separating from himself endlessly. He would entrance himself so deeply in this process that he would be unable to come out of it even though his mind was lucid. This psychological montage showed the little boy's curiosity toward the world, but he felt confused.

IV. CONCLUSION

E. L. Doctorow was a great master of postmodern arts. He employed montage—the technique of film production to shape the characters in *Ragtime*. The cross-media writing took advantage of the image media, which made the characters in this novel more vivid and enhanced its aesthetic value. The three white male characters in *Ragtime* was typical and mirrored the psychological problems of the mainstream group in the American society when facing social changes, which also exists in the current American society and worth people's reflection.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Shijia Du conducted the research and wrote the paper; Yu

Sun gave advice to the paper; both authors had approved the final version.

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