

“... as if history were no more than a tune on a player piano”: Chronotopic Representations in *Ragtime* and *Billy Bathgate*

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Abstract

It has been over four decades since E. L. Doctorow's number-one bestseller, *Ragtime* (1975), established him as one of America's most celebrated novelists. Over the course of the decades, Doctorow produced a valuable body of works which, despite their thematic and structural differences, reflect a unique view of American life and values. While some critics state that Doctorow saw capitalism as the evil foundation of the American society, others contend he was more preoccupied with the stylistic techniques which enabled him to represent a fictionalized history of the United States. The present article aims to explore temporal and spatial relations in Doctorow's *Ragtime* and *Billy Bathgate*. The study employs the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of chronotope, which signifies the interconnectedness of temporal and spatial elements in a literary work. Thus, the current study explores physical as well as psychological manifestations and significations of chronotope in the above novels. The research demonstrates that the evolution of key characters in both novels would be impossible without the development of the temporal-spatial elements in the narratives.

Keywords: Chronotope; Capitalism; Temporality; Spatiality; Fictionalized history

I. Introduction

Bakhtin is credited to have introduced several critical notions including dialogism, chronotope and carnival, each of which has been adopted as an analyzing tool for investigating varied phenomena and various events. Given the expansive nature of Bakhtin's work, there is an evolving realization among his scholars that any attempt to discuss his major ideas within a general study is doomed to failure and will probably obscure more than it reveals. That's why many recent commentators have abandoned discussing Bakhtin in general; instead, they are trying to employ one of his key ideas or concepts in their literary or non-literary studies. Although Bakhtin is one of the most cited and much acclaimed literary theorists today, he spent most of the twentieth century in obscurity. Apart from a few scattered minor articles in periodicals, only the two editions of Bakhtin's now famous studies of the works of Dostoevsky, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*

(1963) and *Rabelais and His World* (1965) were published in his own lifetime. Successive publications of his works in the West, however, introduced Bakhtin to academic and non-academic readers. As David M. Bethea notes, “Bakhtin's terminology has entered into the critical lexicon mainly in connection with Dostoevsky, whom the philosopher saw as a culminating point in the history of European culture's drive toward ‘novelization’” (185).

The present study aims to explore representations of Bakhtinian chronotope in E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* and *Billy Bathgate*. The next section discusses the concept of chronotope as elaborated on by Bakhtin and highlights its position within Bakhtin's overarching theory of dialogism. The article then discusses the significance of chronotopic representations in *Ragtime* and *Billy Bathgate* respectively. The final section of the article draws upon the key strands of the discussion and wraps up the paper.

2. Bakhtinian Chronotope; There Is Nothing but Space and Time

The process of mixing time and place in literature has a long but unorganized history. The chronotope can, very simply, refer to ways in which spatial and temporal elements in a narrative are intermingled in a way to reinforce the thematic line of the story. In other words, the chronotope can be interpreted as an inclusive term for the intricate temporal relations of story and discourse as they form themselves within the space of a narrative text. Moreover, the chronotope is also the dialogic interaction of time and space where human beings are tied with layers of historical time which are themselves conceived in dialogic interaction with one another. Finally, there are chronotopic perspectives that emerge from the reflections of one narrative's inevitable associations with the time-spaces formed by other narratives that are contemporary with it.

Bakhtin states in his comprehensive and insightful essay on chronotope that "we will give the name chronotope (literally, 'space-time') to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (*Dialogic* 84). The interconnectedness of temporality and spatiality goes beyond stereotypical delineations of time and space to entail the manifestations of man in literary works. The representation of man in literature is also to a great extent determined by chronotope which is considered as a structural element. The representation of man, thus, always has a chronotopic nature.

In his *Shakespeare and Carnival after Bakhtin*, Ronald Knowles opines that Bakhtin's immersion in the world of Dostoevsky created the third phase of in his oeuvre, which culminated in the publication of *Dialogic Imagination*. The most important concept mentioned in this book, Knowles underscores, is chronotope. Though Bakhtin considers chronotope as an analytical tool for studying genre division in the history of Western novel, it is now widely applied not only to studies concerning novel, but in narratology, speech-act theory, cognitive approaches to literature, and even in gender studies. For Bakhtin chronotopic domain could transcend representations of time and space to reflect the impact of social time and historical space on the imaginative process underlying the work: "The work and the world

represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers" (*Problems* 254). Bakhtin stressed that this process of exchange was essentially chronotopic: "It occurs first and foremost in the historically developing social world, but without ever losing contact with changing historical space" (*Problems* 254). The chronotopic relation between fictional and real worlds is, thus, dialogic and dynamic.

Bakhtin identifies three chronotopes that define generic distinctions. In the first type, which appears in Greek romance of adventure, the connectedness of time and space does not have "an organic but a purely technical (and mechanical) nature" (*Dialogic* 99). In other words, chronotope does not have a significant function in the development of the story or characters. It only provides a backdrop for the narrative to move forward. The second type of ancient chronotope can be described as the chronotope of the "adventure novel of everyday life" (*Dialogic* 111). Unlike the first type, the second category of chronotope is foregrounded in the narrative. As Keith Harrison states, "in these kinds of narratives, the protagonist is altered at crucial moments, and the significant moments of change are shown in connection to specific elements of the setting" (28). In other words, chronotope leaves the background of the narrative and enters relations that dominate lives of its characters.

The role of chronotope is even more crucial in the third type which deals with works of fiction "influenced by biographical models" (*Dialogic* 130). The impact of chronotope on the events of the story and lives of characters reaches its climactic point in this type. According to Bakhtin, this type of chronotope entails "biographical time and a human image constructed to new specifications, that of an individual who passes through the course of a whole life." (*Dialogic* 130; emphasis original). This chronotopic constituent is best exemplified in novels primarily concerned with the main character's formative years or spiritual development.

In addition to these major types of chronotopes, Bakhtin describes some minor ones such as the

castle, provincial town, road, threshold, etc. Although these chronotopes lack the generic quality of major ones, they function as the locus of action in a literary work. Any changes in these chronotopes in a single work signifies important alterations in the total ambiance of the work. These alterations, in turn, suggest crucial turning points in the course of events and fate of characters. In other words, chronotopic alterations in the story are not restricted to temporal and spatial shifts; rather, they imply transformations in the ethical and even ideological context of a particular text.

In her essay “Bakhtin’s Concept of the Chronotope: The Viewpoint of an Acting Subject”, Liisa Steinby elaborates on the concept of chronotope. She argues that unlike the traditional belief, chronotope is not primarily concerned with different ways of perceiving temporality and spatiality, but rather it “presents a version of how a work of art brings together two aspects of an individual’s existence which are theoretically irreconcilable: his or her being determined by natural and social circumstances and simultaneously free as an ethically acting subject” (121). Due to its dialogic nature, the chronotope transports an individual to a network of discourses in which spatial and temporal forces interact with his / her personal values as well as communal discourses. The result of this interaction is manifested in the individual’s decision to act – or not to act – in a certain way. Therefore, the literary chronotope can affect, or even determine, the outcome of characters’ decisions.

3. Temporal and Spatial Orientations in *Ragtime*

Ragtime (1975) is perhaps the most well-known contribution of E. L. Doctorow to the genre of historical fiction. The novel artistically blends historical figures and incidents with fictional ones. It is frequently ranked among the top novels of the twentieth century, with many critics and scholars hailing Doctorow’s subtle

combination of history and fiction in a narrative that is set in New York City and spans a decade approximately from 1902 to 1914. As Doctorow’s fourth novel, *Ragtime* narrates controversial issues including racism and gender through its dispassionately toned omniscient narrator. The way that Doctorow names his major characters (Father, Mother, Grandfather, etc.) gives the work an allegorical aura and buttresses its universal aspect which moves far beyond its narrative time. Thus, the question of temporality and spatiality is a significant dimension of the novel that has rarely been explored in Doctorow scholarship. The present section of the article is set to analyse the interrelatedness of time and space in Doctorow’s novel and the significance of this interconnectedness in the traumatic stress of characters throughout the narrative. In other words, Bakhtinian chronotope will help explain the role of temporality and spatiality in the novel with particular focus on the myriad of characters who are treated harshly by the society due to their marginal race, religion, gender, and social class. Chronotopic representations also demonstrate why characters of the novel show certain behaviors or make certain decisions in any given time or space and why, as María Ferrández San Miguel maintains, they manifest resilience, “the ability to bend without breaking” (154) in the face of multiple difficulties and miseries.

In terms of themes and leitmotifs, *Ragtime* is a continuation of Doctorow’s previous novels and bears similarities with the novels that appear later in his oeuvre. However, Doctorow has expressed his common themes in a remarkably different and sometimes experimental way. In addition to crossing the boundary between history and fiction in terms of real or fictitious events, which has been fully investigated in recent scholarship¹, Doctorow has challenged several other borderlines in *Ragtime*. He has concentrated on three families comprising historical personages and invented characters. However, any analysis of the characters in the novel will be incomplete if it fails to situate them

¹ For more information about the historical accuracy of the novel, see Cushing Strout’s *The Veracious Imagination: Essays on American History, Literature, and Biography* (Middletown, Conn., 1981). In this work, 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” (188). More recent articles of note include “Doctorow’s *Ragtime*: A Breach in the Frame of History” (1997) by Jesús Benito Sánchez and “History/ Fiction: An Intertextual reading of E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*” (2014) by Zohreh Ramin and Seyyed Mohammad Marandi.

within the time period and major setting of the narrative. As Michelle M. Tokarczyk observes, “*Ragtime* is as much about the era itself, a period of rapid change, as it is about any families or individuals. Partially for this reason, the position of the narrator is far less defined than in other Doctorow fiction; though the narrator is generally believed to be the Boy, he is never clearly identified as such” (89). The “era” of the novel is not merely a passive timeframe in the background of the action but an active constituent in the discursive network in which the novel operates.

Doctorow’s use of imagery in order to illustrate the era and the embryonic status of American Dream within it contributes to his juxtaposition of character who manipulate power and those who are portrayed as marginal. Take, for instance, the following lines from the novel: “I am often asked the question How can the masses permit themselves to be exploited by the few. The answer is by being persuaded to identify with them” (122). Here again Doctorow undermines another distinction, i.e. the boundary between the masses and the few. His acute attack on capitalism gains more significance when it is viewed within the era of the narrative, an era which is often referred to as the Golden Age, the *Belle Époque*, of Capitalism. Roberto Marchionatti avers that

The twenty-five years preceding the Great War were the final period of the epoch of classical liberal capitalism in much of Europe and other parts of the globe after the first Industrial Revolution. Given its success in the economic sphere, this period is known as the *Belle Époque* of capitalism. It was a period of rapid and stable economic growth in a world economy that was more integrated than it had ever been before. According to economic historians, the high degree of integration achieved in the world economy depended on several factors, and critically on two: the general adherence to the gold standard as the international monetary system and the prevalence of free trade. (15)

For Doctorow, however, such a broad generalization of the period does not make any sense. He shows that within the golden epoch of capitalism not so many things for Coalhouse Walker and other individuals who do not belong to the mainstream power structure were golden. For these people the early twentieth century in the USA was more than a time of “white

complacency, imperialism, and racism” (Juchler, 97). Juchler adds that by making a narrative that links fictive characters to actual political events and social tensions, “Doctorow creates a rich cross-sectional study of US life at the time, so vivid and multifarious that we can liken it to a diorama; the figures in it and their conflicts illuminate the political challenges thrown up by social inequality, racism, and American imperialism” (97). This idea of brutality hidden under a veneer of calmness and prosperity is evident in the novel right from the beginning. Doctorow first narrates the story from the perspective of a white person for whom the era is one of progress and tranquillity:

The population customarily gathered in great numbers either out of doors for parades, public concerts, fish fries, political picnics, social outings, or indoors in meeting halls, vaudeville theatres, operas, ballrooms. There seemed to be no entertainment that did not involve great swarms of people. Trains and steamers and trolleys moved them from one place to another. That was the style, that was the way people lived. Women were stouter then. They visited the fleet carrying white parasols. Everyone wore white in summer. Tennis racquets were hefty and the racquet faces elliptical. There was a lot of sexual fainting. There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants. (3)

However, Doctorow is quick to remind his readers that this is a fake, unreliable image of the age: “Apparently there *were* Negroes. There *were* immigrants” (5; italics original). Doctorow’s emphasis that there *were* Negroes and immigrants in the ignorant white American society foreshadows the ensuing catastrophe. It also demonstrates how the matrix of time and space, the chronotope, can foster a certain kind of action or reaction. It is against this suppressive, calm-looking environment that Coalhouse Walker rebels. He is the victim of a power system that is driven by racially motivated injustice. The white-dominated environment allows no room for people like him. The status of immigrants was not much different either. Doctorow focuses on the miseries and filthy lives of immigrants in the USA mainly through the character of Tateh and his family. This is how he depicts the (lack of) integration of immigrants into the communities in New York City:

Most of the immigrants came from Italy and Eastern Europe. [. . .] They went into the streets and were somehow absorbed in the tenements. They were despised by new Yorkers. They were filthy and illiterate. They stank of fish and garlic. They had running sores. They had no honor and worked for next to nothing. They stole. They drank. They raped their own daughters. They killed each other casually. Among those who despised them the most were the second-generation Irish, whose fathers had been guilty of the same crimes. Irish kids pulled the beards of old Jews and knocked them down. They upended the pushcarts of Italian peddlers. (13)

The lack of proper integration with the local community leaves immigrants with no options but to steal, drink, and kill each other in a desperate attempt to survive. They are always at the threshold and never a part of the society. Their position in the society is best exemplified in what Bakhtin describes as the chronotope of threshold. For Bakhtin, the chronotope of threshold marks one of the significant manifestations of the interrelatedness of time and space. He regards the threshold as the “places where crisis events occur, the falls, the resurrections, renewals, epiphanies, decisions that determine the whole life of a man” (*Dialogic* 248). In *Ragtime*, almost all major characters including Harry Houdini, Emma Goldman, and Evelyn Nesbit emerge from the margins, the thresholds, of the dominant narrative of American history. These characters are not allowed to enter the society and Doctorow highlights their alienation through juxtaposing them with affluent capitalists such as Harry K. Thaw, Henry Ford and J. P. Morgan. When they face the dehumanizing force of capitalism, they either accept to remain at the threshold and continue living in poverty and misery or they rebel against the oppressive system. Coalhouse goes for the latter and disrupts, albeit temporarily, the established social structures. His occupation of elite New York is aimed at moving out of the threshold into a territory that is occupied by white capitalists. In a carnivalesque moment, he even manages to find his way into the main power structure but capitalist discourse is obviously more powerful and widespread to be shaken by individual rebellious moves.

The name of the novel refers to a music style popular in the early decades of the twentieth

century. This music style never was endorsed by the mainstream always remained at the threshold. J. E. Smyth posits that “ragtime, more than anything else, is an African American style developed from a meshing of African, slave, march, and riverboat music played in the South and in the brothels of Mississippi River towns by Ernest Hogan, Scott Joplin (who Rollins mimics as he sits before the white family’s piano), and Jelly Roll Morton. It’s Coalhouse’s native style” (8). The music points to the background of Coalhouse; it is a form that can be endorsed by the mainstream only when it is played into its rhythm and meter. In addition to showing the marginal position of Coalhouse, ragtime music stresses once again the importance of the larger chronotope of era in the novel. It manifests the characteristics of ragtime era, a time of seemingly calmness when dissident voices were silenced. It is the music that enables individuals at the threshold to find a voice in the complicated discourse of power in a capitalist society. Berndt Ostendor also refers to the socio-political significance of ragtime, arguing that the term identified “that 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” (579). Ostendor also opines that regardless of the historical accuracy of the novel and objectivity of Doctorow, “*Ragtime* is true enough to salient, though neglected facts of American music history. For it picks up some of the zany contradictions of ethnicity and class at that particular juncture in the development of American popular music” (583). There, Doctorow’s use of ragtime music in the novel is even significant when studied in the context of American music history.

4. Billy Chronotope: Temporal-Spatial Matrix in *Billy Bathgate*

With *Billy Bathgate*, Doctorow produced another work in the genre of historical fiction, showing once again that his primary concern was neither history nor fiction but narrative. Matthew A. Henry avers that Doctorow “is neither a radical experimentalist nor a traditional social realist, though his works contain features of both. As a historical novelist, Doctorow is concerned foremost with the cultural myths of the immediate past and their role in contemporary American culture” (32). In *Billy*

Bathgate, Doctorow concentrates on the evolution of his protagonist from childhood to adulthood in a socio-cultural environ that intermingles historical accounts with fictional interventions.

We learn from a flashback that Billy won the trust of Dutch Schultz and found his way into his gang by juggling. He sees himself “not only the juggler but the only one to appreciate what the juggler was doing” (25). The act of juggling is significant in the temporal and spatial matrix of the novel as Billy moves yo-yos between past and present, between fact and fiction, as he experiences his development in Doctorow’s mafia narrative. When he finds himself in different temporal or spatial situations, he behaves differently, making decisions that reflect the effect of time and space. In fact, the narrative puts Billy at various junctures where he faces ethical dilemmas. A crucial aspect of Bakhtin’s chronotope is ethics. Dick McCaw contends that chronotope involves “the evolution of a certain mode of representation where the individual consciousness is involved in a living engagement with the historical environment. The ‘chronotope’ is a concept borrowed from biology and refers to when an individual organism co-evolves with its environment” (7). Liisa Steinby has maintained that chronotope is ‘chairlogical’, explaining that it is “time and place not in the physical sense but in the sense of the (right) moment for certain kinds of human action” (143). Similarly, Hassanzadeh Javanian and Rahmani argue that “if a certain chronotope calls for a certain experience or decision for a character, it also rules out other experiences as well. Therefore, the decisions taken by human subjects, their experiences, and their characteristics are very much under the influence of their surrounding time and space” (143).

McCaw’s stance on chronotope as the co-evolution of an individual with their environment does apply to the development of Billy in Doctorow’s narrative. During his journey, Billy needs to make multiple ethical decisions but he knows that whatever route he takes his life cannot be detached from that of Schultz. As a result, at several moments of the narrative, he realizes the inevitability of enduring pain and inflicting pain in his journey:

How I admired the life of taking pains, of living in defiance of a government that did not like you

and did not want you and wanted to destroy you so that you had to build out protections for yourself with money and men, deploying armament, buying alliances, patrolling borders, as in a state of secession, by your will and wit and warrior spirit living smack in the eye of the monster, his very eye. (67)

He has to co-evolve with the environment; otherwise, there will be no evolution for him. In fact, Billy sees Schultz and Otto Berman as two father figures who have “rage of power” and a “calm administration of numbers” (58). These two strong father figures are always in his mind whenever the narrative demands an ethical decision from him. Their ubiquitous presence in Billy’s life illustrates his longing for being identified with a strong group where his self is saturated by the communal identity, here the gangster group. Being part of a gangster group allows Billy to develop his individual self based on the specifications and implications of his group membership. In other words, the self and group start to merge and eventually become fused such that the independent individual self vanishes. According to DaJung Woo et al., “identifying as a gang member becomes a permanent part of social awareness for those who become involved in gangs. After joining a gang, the group’s views become central to the individual’s life, shaping their identity and personality” (140). The gangster group, therefore, creates a unique chronotope in the narrative which directs not only Billy’s individualistic decisions and behaviours, but also his sense of identity.

A major instance of chronotope, according to Bakhtin, is the chronotope of road. The road and the associate encounter signify “the collapse of social distances. The chronotope of the road is both a point of new departures and a place for events to find their denouement. Time, as it were, fuses together with space and flows in it.” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 243–244). A significant part of Billy’s evolution takes place on the road during his journey to upstate New York. Minako Baba states that “this part of the journey, basically grounded on the historical fact of Dutch Shultz’s trial in the remote town of Malone, New York, represents both the young hero’s geographical and social initiation into the heart of an America hitherto unknown to him, and his psychological initiation into the depths of the underworld” (38). The underworld that

Baba mentions as part of Billy's psychological journey is a quest into his own psyche, an internal conflict which traumatizes him henceforth. Billy's most important encounter on this journey, is with himself as finds himself drawn by forces that both encourage and discourage his way forward. When he is eventually in New York, he is less an orphan-protagonist than an existential protagonist struggling to survive the physical and psychological aspects of the chronotopes that define his journey.

At different stages of the narrative, Billy admits that he cannot overcome the chronotopic relations that surround him. Near the end of the novel, his confession is more explicit than ever: "I have many times since my investiture sought to toss all the numbers up in the air and let them fall back into letters, so that a new book would emerge, in a new language of being.... But...always it falls into the same Billy Bathgate I made of myself and must seemingly always be" (321). For a person whose last name even reflected the chronotope of the street (he was named after his neighbourhood street Bathgate), it is quite clear that his evolution is tied to the evolution of the overarching chronotope in which he lives.

5. Conclusion

The present article attempted to investigate the representations of Bakhtinian chronotope in E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* and *Billy Bathgate*. The research showed that in *Ragtime* the socio-political climate of the early twentieth century in the USA plays a key role in the textual and contextual decisions of the novelist. The study argued that the chronotope of threshold is a significant chronotope in *Ragtime* as major characters of the novel are all on the threshold of the society (and not a proper part of it), the struggle is aimed at penetrating the mainstream, and even the domineering titular music form reveals the attempt to challenge the dominance of the white capitalism. Doctorow demonstrates how characters like Coalhouse who are kept at the threshold of the society fight against the racism and sexism of a capitalist society that conceals all its evils under a veneer of hope and prosperity.

Bakhtinian chronotope provides key insights about *Billy Bathgate* too. To begin with, the last

name of the titular character refers to his neighborhood street, a prominent chronotope for Bakhtin. His trip to New York also signifies another Bakhtinian chronotope: road and the associated encounter. Both the street and the road have important imprints in the development of the character of Billy from a playful teenager to an experienced adult. However, it is not the physical manifestation of time and space that matters most; rather, the ethical decisions that Billy needs to make at every significant juncture of time and space determine his co-evolution with the environment surrounding him. By presenting textual evidences, the article attempted to show how Billy acknowledged the impact of the temporal and spatial matrix at the end of the novel when he looked back at his life.

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