

Research on the Anti-myth Narration in Doctorow's *The March*

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Abstract: In the novel *The March*, the well-known American writer E.L. Doctorow, through the concrete manifestation of his historical perspectives and with the assistance of the anti-myth narrative strategy, has carried out subversive rewritings of the existing narrative patterns of three myths: the myth of southern women, the myth of America's sacred founding, and the myth of the just war between the North and the South. This is a bold and incisive literary exploration. By deconstructing these well-established myths, Doctorow challenges the traditional understanding and interpretation of history. He shows that the official grand narrative often simplifies and distorts the complexity of historical events. By returning the right of speech to the creators of history, namely those ordinary people, he gives a voice to the silent majority. This allows readers to see history from a different perspective, one that is more in line with the real experiences and emotions of individuals. It is as if he has opened a hidden door, leading readers into a world where history is not just a collection of facts and dates but a rich tapestry of human stories and struggles. This new way of understanding history not only enriches our knowledge but also makes us reflect on the nature and meaning of history itself.

Keywords: E.L. Doctorow; *The March*; Anti-myth; Historical Perspective; History Creators

1. Introduction

E.L. Doctorow had a rich body of works throughout his life. Works such as *City of God* and *Ragtime* are all set against historical events and vividly represent the living conditions of the general public under the influence of many historical events in the United States from the 19th to the 20th century.

Published in 2005, *The March* is set against the march commanded by "the Devil General" Sherman at the end of the Civil War, which was aimed at destroying the southern slavery system. It vividly portrays the different responses of black slaves, ordinary white people, and high-ranking officials under the influence of the war. In the novel, Doctorow interprets the Civil War from a marginal perspective through the eyes of many fictional lower-class characters, and realizes the disenchantment of the American historical myth by deconstructing the grand narrative.

2. The Disenchantment of the Myth of Southern Women

In the traditional southern women's myth, many stereotype images are created: in addition to the most standard narrative of southern ladies, there are also pious peasant women, black nannies, and so on. As a vulnerable group in war, women's voices are always buried by history. Through detailed descriptions, Doctorow makes four characters who seem to have the images of traditional southern women's myths, namely, Mrs. Marty Jameson, the plantation owner's wife, Pearl, the mulatto, Emily Thompson, the southern lady, and Wilma, the black servant, speak out, showing their resistance to the discourse power of the traditional southern female image and presenting to readers the impact of the civil war on identity recognition and its influence on the construction of American national identity.

Facing Sherman's march, Marty Jameson, who is about to leave her hometown, experiences an extremely great identity recognition crisis. For her, Sherman's troops destroy not only the material traditions but also all the values and lifestyles believed in by the southern slave owners. As a representative of traditional southern white plantation owner women, Marty shows signs of collapse from the very beginning. Through her collapse,

Doctorow reveals the subversion of the lives of white people, especially plantation owners, by the Civil War, indicating that after the eradication of slavery, white people who cannot survive will eventually be eliminated by society.

The novel shows Pearl's appearance through Marty's perspective. Marty thinks Pearl is "terrifying" and "arrogant".[1] As a mulatto, Pearl is terrifying because there is no trace of black people ancestry in her appearance, but she has black blood in her bones. This represents that she cannot integrate into the white society at that time, and her only way out is to integrate into the black community. Therefore, Pearl is a typical representative of black slaves attacking white slave owners. However, Pearl has been unable to truly accept the fact of the upcoming liberation. As Sherman's troops march, Pearl experiences a lot, but she still harbors resentment about being essentially black. We can see her changes in the novel, although this change is not complete, which is also Doctorow's brilliance.

Honestly speaking, it is almost impossible for a person who has been born and accepted as a slave since childhood to change their thinking in just a few months and completely equate themselves with free whites. The problem of the discrimination from the white against the people of color and the inferiority complex of minorities in the United States has not been solved until now [2]. Therefore, Pearl's incomplete transformation is precisely Doctorow's correct understanding of human nature. This imperfect description also subverts the myth in traditional history about the rapid transformation of African Americans after liberation, expressing Doctorow's concern for the psychological state of color people in American society.

Emily Thompson is a typical southern lady, and Sherman's march also makes her face a huge transformation in her living environment and values. But unlike Marty, Emily completely abandoned the traditional image of a lady and became the one who actively changed among the white plantation owners. In Emily's eyes, a vagrant life is a life without dignity and does not conform to the identity of upper - class people. But when she saw the soldiers of the northern army leaving their homes and marching in the south, she began

to admire these people and no longer thought that being homeless was a bad thing.

By depicting Emily's transformation from a spoiled white lady to a non-conformist independent woman, Doctorow shows that, compared with Marty, the shaping of young southern white women by the war is more positive, transforming the female other identity into a conscious self.

Wilma, Emily's former servant, as a black servant represents the image of a black nanny in the southern women's myth. The victory of the Civil War liberated black slaves and gave Wilma freedom. She could eat with unknown black people and could also fry oysters and serve them with real bread. As a black slave, Wilma found freedom, love, and a way to be self-reliant in this march. She no longer depended on white slave owners and had her own consciousness. This transformation is a great subversion of the image of black nannies in the traditional southern women's myth [3].

The four southern women created by Doctorow in *The March* include both older-generation white slave owners and younger-generation white women. There are both long-term oppressed black slaves and underage young black slaves. Through the specific experiences of the four in the Civil War, Doctorow has disenchanted the traditional southern women's myth through the collapse of traditional slave owners, the transformation of new-generation women, and the awakening of black consciousness. While showing that women have obtained historical discourse power, he also expresses his thoughts on the impact of the Civil War on American nationality, especially the transformation of female identity [4].

3. The Disenchantment of America's Sacred Founding

James Rhodes wrote in *A History of the American Civil War: 1861-1865*: "Northerners fought for the Union and believed that most southerners were oppressed by a small number of powerful and shameless people. In fact, they did not want to secede and loathed the civil war. If southerners were protected and encouraged, they would surely join the movement to defend the country." [5] Traditional historical education tells the American people that the American Civil War has its greatness and justice.

Therefore, the generals and soldiers participating in it must also actively devote themselves to the lofty dream of building a perfect country and eradicating the cancer of slavery. However, in Doctorow's writing, the federal military operations were not for the Union and national unity, nor for abolishing the black slave system. This is an anti-myth disenchantment of the strong cohesion of the American Union and the image of a unified American country.

In the eyes of Quartermaster Clark, the army is somewhat unscrupulous in order to win battles. "Generals also often issue some orders recklessly in order to create records." This is contrary to American democratic thoughts [6]. Freed black slaves follow this quartermaster team, but Clark knows they are a burden. The federal army burns and loots all the way. It neither establishes a new government nor leaves a way out for the people. It is also followed by guerrilla forces of the Confederate army. The black people who fall behind are in danger of being attacked at all times. This kind of description breaks the traditional founding myth. The Northern Federal Army, which maintains the integrity of the United States, brings not happiness but death and the impossibility of continuing to live wherever it passes.

Sherman, as a famous general during the American Civil War, his gambler-like "march of death" accelerated the end of the American Civil War and became the last battle of the Civil War. This founding myth is seen in history. But in Doctorow's writing, he is not an abolitionist. His "march of death" is fighting for the sake of fighting. During the march, although there was an order from President Lincoln's "Emancipation Proclamation" stipulating that blacks could join the army, Sherman refused to recruit them into the army and at most let them do some inferior labor. "Using them as laborers is the best way." This is Doctorow's satire on American predecessors and on the American founding myth [7].

Sherman's cavalry general, Kilpatrick, is dissolute and lustful for money and women. When advancing as the vanguard into South Carolina, he "accumulated wealth until he had his own personal large convoy filled with spoils." He lived in the best bedroom in the best house in the city, with the softest mattress,

the fluffiest pillow, and the warmest blanket. This is not only a symbol of corruption but also a typical style of white slave owners, showing no sign of being a liberator of blacks. In addition, he regards life as worthless. "The mortality rate of the troops he commanded is much higher than that of the troops of other generals."

Kilpatrick in Doctorow's writing is simply a warlord, without any trace of a liberator. After the publication of Dale Carnegie's *Lincoln the Unknown*, people all over the world got to know this president in American history who can be compared to Washington even better. In the biography, Carnegie repeatedly uses Lincoln's tone to explain that the hardships of life had created his indomitable character and contributed to the glorious image that although there were consecutive defeats in the early stage of the Civil War, Lincoln never gave up and finally won. But in Doctorow's writing, President Lincoln is a figure eroded by life. He has aching eyes and an almost gloomy appearance. This is very different from the "resolute and full of fantasy" northern propaganda photo of President Lincoln.

By bringing historical giants down from their pedestals, Doctorow portrays Sherman, Kilpatrick, and even President Lincoln as flesh-and-blood people, and emphatically describes their flawed sides as human beings. He exposes the weaknesses of the generals of the Northern Army, such as being lustful for money and women, bloodthirsty, or physically weak, to the public. While breaking the myth of the sacred founding of the country by American heroes, he reflects his doubts about history and his wish for people to have a clearer understanding of history, thus exploring the possibility of solving current social problems with the pragmatic American nationality.

4. The Disenchantment of Just War

Since the Puritans immigrated to the United States, the American nation has gradually formed the myth of building a "city on a hill" in this "promised land" of America. Under the influence of this traditional mythical thought, "many Americans believe that America is the only land on this planet chosen by God, and they must undertake a certain mission." Therefore, American history should be a story

of building a “city on a hill” and becoming a “beacon of freedom” [8].

Under the influence of this traditional historical concept, the American Civil War, which brought freedom to blacks, naturally took on the myth of a just war and became a great and just war that sets an example for people all over the world. However, Doctorow questions the justness of this war from two aspects: the deterioration of the living environment of civilians and the descent of historical greats from their pedestals.

The turmoil brought by the war and the huge changes in lifestyles and values have worsened the living environment of civilians. In the eyes of military doctor Sartorius, this army is “an animal with a hundred thousand feet”, and General Sherman is the brain of this animal.

Doctorow uses Reid to express the world in the eyes of the high-level military. That is, ordinary soldiers are like cells in the body. The death of a soldier is like the death of a cell, which is a normal metabolism. What the brain has to do is to find another soldier to replace this dead soldier, just like new cells replace old cells. This is a great irony. The American Civil War is defined as a just war that brings happiness to ordinary people, especially black slaves. However, the high-level military does not treat soldiers as human beings. Justice has to be exchanged at the expense of people’s happiness. This is Doctorow’s satire on war.

Sherman’s army, in order to get rid of the pursuit of the Confederate army, cut off the pontoon bridge after crossing the river and left the black slaves following the army to the Confederate army. The Confederate army “maltreated the black people who fell behind, shot them dead, or captured them and made them slaves again.” So many blacks directly jumped into the river for the hard-won freedom, with cries and shouts filling the air. What a tragic scene! This description directly breaks the tone set by traditional historical records for the American Civil War. The Federal Army fought the American Civil War under the slogan of liberating black slaves, but abandoned black slaves for the victory of the war. If all the black slaves died after this war, then this war would become extremely ridiculous. This is Doctorow’s direct

challenge to the justness of the American Civil War.

In *The March*, Doctorow not only focuses on the great disaster brought by the war to civilians but also expresses his doubts about the justness of the war by bringing two historical figures down from their pedestals, President Lincoln and William Sherman, the two great figures who played a decisive role in *The March*. Doctorow portrays President Lincoln as a politician who sacrifices the people for politics. As the saying goes, “A general’s success is built on the bones of ten thousand soldiers.”

This portrayal of President Lincoln really has something to do with portraying Lincoln as a “cold-blood politician” and can even lead readers to doubt the nature of the American Civil War and President Lincoln’s original intention of overthrowing slavery. Doctorow dispels the image of Lincoln as a liberator shaped by traditional historical records and questions the justness of the war with the goal of liberating black slaves. Doctorow pulls Sherman down from the pedestal of the valiant general of the Northern Army and portrays him as a slovenly general who is unkempt, mistreats prisoners of war, and doesn’t understand politics. In *The March*, Sherman “doesn’t look like a soldier at all. His army jacket is covered with dust and his buttons are half open.” In contrast to him are his subordinates with tall images. Sherman loves to wear slovenly military uniforms and always sleeps in a small tent. During the daytime march outside Savannah, the rebels laid landmines on the road. General Sherman actually ordered his prisoners of war to use shovels and picks to clear the mines. This is a typical act of mistreating prisoners of war. It is both a destruction of General Sherman’s historical image and a questioning of the justness of the war.

Under the support of the historical myths of “the city on a hill” and “the beacon of freedom”, the justness of the American Civil War in liberating black slaves is continuously strengthened. However, Doctorow shows readers a completely different interpretation of the American Civil War from different perspectives such as white slave owners, freed blacks, Lincoln, and Sherman [9]. In Doctorow’s writing, the justness of the war is questioned and the mythical coats of historical

greats are taken off, allowing readers to evaluate that period of history more realistically.

5. Conclusion

Through the disenchantment of the southern women's myth, the American sacred founding myth, and the just myth of the American Civil War, Doctorow shows his doubts about history. He emphasizes that history is not absolutely objective and fixed but has subjectivity and relativity.

History is a narrative way, a kind of discourse power, and is formed through people's choices, interpretations, and constructions. Readers shall break the authority and singularity of traditional historical writing, prompt readers to re-examine the nature of history, boldly explore the corners neglected or covered up by mainstream historical narratives, interpret and present history from different angles, pay attention to the stories of social marginal figures and vulnerable groups, and let them become the narrators of history, thus revealing the multiplicity and complexity of history.

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