

**TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY**

**Parodizing American Progressive Era in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime***

**A Thesis Submitted to the Central Department of English  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master in Arts in English**

**By**

**Prakash Bhandari**

**Central Department of English**

**Kirtipur, Kathmandu**

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**Tribhuvan University**  
**Central Department of English**  
**Kirtipur, Kathmandu**

**Letter of Recommendation**

Mr. Prakash Bhandari has completed his thesis on **Parodizing American Progressive Era in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*** under my supervision. He carried out his research paper from August 2009 to March 2010. I hereby recommend his thesis to be submitted for viva voce.

---

Mr. Krishna Prasad Sapkota

Supervisor

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Tribhuvan University**  
**Central Department of English**  
**Kirtipur, Kathmandu**

**Letter of Approval**

This Thesis entitled **Parodizing American Progressive Era in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*** submitted to Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by **Prakash Bhandari** has been approved by the undersigned members of research committee.

Research Committee Members:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Internal Examiner

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

External Examiner

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Head of the  
Central Department of English  
Tribhuvan University,  
Kathmandu

\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Prakash Bhandari

## **Abstract**

The present thesis seeks to analyze the novel *Ragtime* from the discourse of parody. The notion of parody heavily verges on the theoretical base of Linda Hutcheon. This research foregrounds that the device of parody employed in *Ragtime* subverts the basic chant of Progressive Era represented in the official history. By exposing the bleakness of the social conditions, Doctorow, in his novel *Ragtime* parodizes the notion of equality justice and progress that are associated with American Progressive Era .The centrality of this novel lies in its representation of the official historiography through critical revisiting and ironic dialogue of the past.

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## Chapter I

### An Introduction to the American Progressive Era

The present research undertakes to study the novel *Ragtime*. It presents the economic injustice, racial discrimination, violence, sexual oppression and poverty. Through the characterization, Doctorow exposes hardships and addresses many minority groups including African -Americans and immigrants that have been oppressed and sidelined in American main stream ruling system. By exposing the bleakness of the social conditions, Doctorow, in his novel *Ragtime* parodizes the notion of equality, justice and progress that are associated with American progressive era to subvert the dominant ruling system. The reality of poverty injustice and inequality have been historicized and contextualized around the civil rights movements of the sixties. He playfully explores the continuing promises of the American dream and digs out the contradictions.

Widely regarded as one of the America's pre-eminent novelists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, E.L. Doctorow known for his works with philosophical probing, adventurous prose style and the use of historical and quasi historical figures, situations and settings, politically active and outspoken. In *Ragtime* Doctorow rewrites the rule of the historical novel in his inventive story, set at the turn of the 20th century and incorporating the real events and actual personages. The novel is set one the decade prior to World War I, weaving together a number of interconnected story lines, featuring both real life and imaginary characters.

*Ragtime* is a unique adaptation of the historical narrative genre where Doctorow presents powerful and impressive ways; the life pattern of an upper-middle class family, the wretched condition of an immigrant Jewish family by poverty and the tragedy of a black ragtime musician, Coal House Walker. The tragedy of Walker

family is gives the picture of early twentieth century America. Numerous themes and characters are introduced in this novel. Characters include a small family of a father, a mother, her younger brother and a son; the proud musician who loves a stubborn woman who abandoned her baby; a cuckolded immigrants and his small child trying to find their place in America; the search for a more meaningful life by a socialite whose celebrity is akin to being a great-great grand mother of the Paris, Hilton phenomenon. Doctorow includes historical figures as his characters .Themes ranges from the emergence of the American century, the rise of the celebrity culture and press , the integration of immigrants into the American identity, the rise of the Women's libration and music of the ragtime genre. With the deft skill, Doctorow addresses these issues with in the contexts of his many plots and characters while also provided humor, human pathos, sex and a thrilling manhunt. In this connection Dean Polling writes:

E L .Doctorow has written novel where the story meanders in and out of the fictional characters' lives. He pulls in fictionalized accounts of real people, especially Houdini and Morgan. Eventually all the different story lines twists together in a book that's easy to read and very thought provoking. Life's answers aren't always easy .Neither are the answers in *Ragtime*. (2)

One of the distinguished postmodern American fiction writers, E. L .Doctorow published *Ragtime* in1975. Since its publication, this novel has read and re-read. It has received copious appreciation and criticism from the arena of critical scholarship. The book blurb reads the novel as “An extra-ordinarily deft and lyrically rich novel that catches the spirit of America... in a flute and musical way that is original (*Ragtime*). This novel has been interpreted by Green Martin as a work of “nostalgia politics”.



However, according to him, “this nostalgia is ... playful and ironic and sophisticated” (841). But another critic Barbara Foley argues that the novel is about the “historical Consciousness” and opines that the novel “contains numerous sketches of historical Personages, e.g. Theodore Dreiser and Sigmund Freud who remain peripheral to the main action of the fiction (87). As the same way, John Parks interpret this novel as the “Historical composition”. According to him “*Ragtime* is about the death of the father, of patriarchy, at least of a certain kind. By the same token emergence of women into the new equation of the twentieth century” (198).

Another critic Brain Roberts interprets the novel from the perspective of “Jewish identity”. In this regard he writes:

We should look a text that addresses the problematic of the blackface tradition of Jewish performance [...]. The vaudeville magician’s final tower scene, I argue, is a sympathetic gesture, undergoing Jewish similarities with blacks in spite of Jewish phenotypic whiteness. (41)

This research tries to foreground how the novel *Ragtime* parodizes the American progressive era. *Ragtime* is specially a post modern parody in its intertextual relation to the traditions and conventions of the genres involved." Post modern art and the aesthetics of post modernism have claimed parody as a central structuring device and the word has been used to describe many different artifacts"(22). Parodic text is essentially reflexive in the sense that it represents another representation. In other words, its primary referent is not some extra discursive object but another sign system: consequently, parody evidences one of these moments .When language speaks about itself and fiction becomes metafiction. As Bakhtin put it "in parody two legs are crossed with each other, as well as two systems, two linguistic points of view, in the final analysis two speaking

subjects"(41). Post modernism's main interest might seem to be on the processes of its own production and reception as well as in its parodic relation to the art of the past.

According to Linda Hutcheon:

Post modernism is a fundamentally contradictory enterprise in its art forms (and its theory) use and abuse, install and then subvert convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and of course to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past.(12)

*Ragtime* is a historical novel, representing approximately the year 1902 until 1921. It is known as progressive era in American history. This period was the beginning of many things: zoning, federal regulation of alcohol, immigration restriction, involvement in the overseas war (World War I), the drafting of men to be sent overseas, and more. For the realization of American dream in this Era Doctorow uses an array of literary devices and genres in addition to post modern techniques especially parody in his novel *Ragtime*.

American dream is based on these assumptions: equality, justice and progress .But, ironically all the characters in the text are facing economic crisis, injustice and inequality. One of the ragtime figures Coal House Walker, Jr. wants to progress but the force of the American racism ultimately destroys him. Through Coal House Walker's character, Doctorow establishes a commentary on race relations during this time in American history. On Freud's visit to the U.S, he sees many sights of the city but feels continuously agitated due to the level of noise in the streets. Relieved to return Vienna Freud concludes that America is a "gigantic mistake". The narrator discusses the horrible labor conditions of the average worker at this time. Child labor in particular occurs quite often. The situation of Negroes of the time

involves continued social, racial and economic discrimination and often violence.

While many wealthier citizens of the America began to pretend to have a conscience about the growing issue of poverty, their concern superficial and meaningless.

Doctorow describes the adventure of Tateh and the little girl as they travel along the Eastern Sea Board. And incredibly dynamic character Tateh here first begin to challenge to his old life and seek a better one. He realistically asses the value of life such as the one he has had and has shown his daughter, and finds the hardships outweigh the joys. Emotionally Tateh has begun to see the toll life in New York has taken on him. At this point in the novel, Tateh reaches the pinnacles of his disillusionment with American dream. Although earlier in his life and his stay in United States he has possessed idealism and sense of promise, loses the hope as his efforts towards the social equality, consistently fail to reap substantial rewards. The conditions under which he and his daughter's life constitute a veritable helplessness, economically and as a result, physically and emotionally.

Father's character plays an allegorical role in the novel; his, however, differs significantly from that of Coal House Walker. Father represents the traditional norms of late nineteenth century America. As such, he finds it difficult to come to terms with the changes he witnesses in progressive era. His feeling of isolation and bewilderment reflect an attitude prevalent among many Americans at this point in history. Signs of ancient Egyptian culture grow quiet popular during the progressive era, while father finds them repulsive.

The progressive era (1902-1921) in which this novel is set was a time marked by rapid technological development and industrialization. These years brought a heavy influx of immigrants as well as an increasingly urban American landscape. Technological advancements enabled increased efficiency and mass

production. However, Doctorow clearly brings into question the consequences of this new technology for the average American worker. He clearly addresses the potential for technology to undermine the value of the individual and his abilities.

This novel entails representation of injustice in America and Doctorow consistently suggests that the progress namely that the progress of a few often coexists with the misery of many, that the technological progress and the rewards of progress are not available to all. In this way, *Ragtime* addresses the concerns of hardships of many oppressed groups including African-Americans and immigrants. Doctorow employs parody a discursive to debunk prejudices, injustice, racism and moral decadence which juxtapose with American progressive era.

## Chapter II

### Postmodern Parody

Irrespective of the traditional notion of parody, this research hugely relies on the critical insight of the Hutcheonian notion of postmodern parody which legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies because it “is doubly coded in political terms” (101). Irony turns to be its discursive tool to signaling difference at the heart of similarity. Parody, which can be interchangeably used with mimicry, is one of the most delightful, natural, satisfying and often the most effective forms of satire. In contemporary usage, a parody is a writing that imitates another work in order to ridicule, ironically comment on, or poke affectionate fun at the work itself, the subject of the work, the author or fictional voice of the parody, or another subject. As literary theorist, Linda Hutcheon puts, “parody [. . .] is imitation with a critical difference, not always at the expense of the parodied text” (6). Hutcheon argues that a postmodern version of parody does exist and it is “a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations” (90). What Hutcheon insists that parody entails an ironic stance on representation, genre, and ideology which serves to politicise representation.

Parody has come to be a privileged mode of formal self reflexivity because its paradoxical incorporation of the past into its very structures often points to these ideological contexts somewhat more obviously, more didactically, than other forms. Parody seems to offer a perspective on the present and the past which allows an artist to speak to a discourse from within, but without being totally recuperated by it. For this reason, parody appears to have become the mode of the marginalized to subvert the centre and insist their ideology. So parody has certainly become a most popular

and effective strategy of black, ethnic, and feminist artists, trying to come to terms with and to respond, critically and creatively, to the predominantly white, Anglo, male culture in which they find themselves.

Parody works to foreground the politics of representation. Hutcheon argues that few commentators on postmodernism use the word parody simply because they think it is tilted with 18<sup>th</sup> century notions of wit and ridicule. However, we should not be restricted to such period limited definitions of parody and that 20<sup>th</sup> century art forms teach that parody has a wide range of forms and intents –that from witty ridicule to the playfully ludic to the seriously respectful.

Postmodern parody is contesting revision of the past that both conforms and subverts the power of representations of history. That's why parody is a paradoxical conviction of the remoteness of the past and the need to deal it in the present. Many novels today similarly challenge the concealed or unacknowledged politics and evasions of aesthetic representation by using parody as a means to connect the present to the past without positing the transparency of representation, verbal or visual. Postmodern parody is fundamentally ironical and critical, not nostalgic in its relation to the past. Against the modernist assumptions about closure, distance, artistic autonomy, and the apolitical nature of representation, postmodernism sets out to uncover and deconstruct. In post modern parody, Burgin writes:

Modernist pretensions to artistic independence have been further subverted by the demonstration of the necessarily 'intertextual' nature of the production of the production of meaning; we can no longer unproblematically assume that 'Art' is somehow 'outside' of the complex of other representational practice and institutions with which

it is contemporary –particularly, today; those which constitute what we so problematically call the 'mass-media. (204)

Modernists take parody as a kind of ahistorical and apolitical pastiche.

Contrary to this view, post modern art uses parody to engage the history of art and the memory of the viewer in a re-evaluation of aesthetic forms and contents through politics of representation. In this regards Dominick LaCapra has forcefully argued that:

Irony and parody are themselves not unequivocal signs of disengagement on the part of an apolitical, transcendental ego that floats above historical reality or founders in the abysmal put of aporia. Rather a certain use of irony and parody may play a role both in the critique of ideology and in the anticipation of a polity wherein commitment does not exclude but accompanies an ability to achieve critical distance on one's deepest commitments and desires. (128)

Parody, as a form of ironic representation, is doubly coded in political terms: it both installs and subverts that which it parodies. Parody can be used as a self reflexive technique that reflects art as art. We can take parody as a way of investigating the history and historical truths: it becomes a way of ironically revisiting the past –of both art and history. Most often feminist artist used postmodern parodic techniques to deconstruct the history and historical powers of those cultural representations. So, it challenges the conventional and the authoritative power practices. The structure of parody enables that past is to be admitted as inscribed, and also subverted at the same time "it is the complicity of postmodern parody-its inscribing as well as undermining of that which it parodies –that is central to its ability to be understood "(101 Hutcheon).

Postmodernism's central question is of the ideology's relation to subjectivity where a modernism has investigated the grounding of experience in the self; its focus is on the self seeking integration amid fragmentation. In other words, its focus on subjectivity was still within the dominant humanist framework, however the extensive quest for wholeness itself implies the beginning of what would be a more radical postmodern questioning, a challenging brought about by the doubleness of postmodern discourse. So, postmodern parody works both to underline and to undermine the notion of the coherent, self-sufficient subject as the source of meaning or action. Postmodern novels seem to be particularly open to the referential complexities of parody.

The fundamental confrontation of postmodernism, according to Hutcheon, is that of "documentary historical actuality" with "formalist self-reflexivity and parody"(54). These contradictions are certainly manifest in the presence of the 'past'. Postmodern art ironically rethinks the history. All forms of postmodern art and thoughts are known as post modernist contradiction. Post modern novels are both intensely self-reflexive and yet lay claim to historical events and personages, its self awareness of the history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past. Post modern both metafictionally self reflexive and yet speaking powerfully about real political and historical realities. This self reflexive and self conscious about its literary heritage has become a kind of model for contemporary writers. Hutcheon is arguing that "all parody is dual –coded, all post modernism is dual-coded. Therefore all parody is postmodernism and all post-modernism is parodic"(220).



Postmodernism celebrates the absence of a center. Jameson and Hutcheon both start from this idea but take two different ways in pursuing it; Jameson focuses on politics, economics, and history; Hutcheon focuses on aesthetics, decentering and narrative. Jameson takes a post industrialist position, which views the eradication of the centre as a cultural logic of late capitalism. Hutcheon presents a post structuralist stance, which sees the absence as an opportunity created by decent ring moves designed to open up ideology and social life to an appreciation of difference. Just as houses built on similar foundation may look very different from one another.

Hutcheon argues her aversion to closure and totality; as a post structuralist she seeks to open up contradictions and develops a self renewing list of questions. Jameson, however, sees definitive causes and effects attendant to post modern culture and society. Hutcheon, of course, is astutely aware of the lack of any consensus on the interpretation of postmodernism. This conflictual spirit in fact energizes the main thrust of her argument, a defense of postmodernism against critics such as Fredric Jameson, who accuse it of trivial kitchiness, depthlessness, "aesthetic cannibalism," or a lack of "genuine historicity." In her defense, Hutcheon focuses on the two mass-media representations, fiction and photography. Of the two, fiction receives more attention in Hutcheon's discussion of "historiographic metafiction". Postmodern fiction not only interrogates historical representation but also stresses the political nature of its own act of narrativity. Responding to some Marxist critics' charges that postmodernism is ahistorical, Hutcheon refers to a wide array of contemporary fiction such as E.L. Doctorow, Salman Rushdie etc to accentuate postmodernism's engagement with issues of historiography, albeit in ironical, parodic ways. As Hutcheon suggests, instead of a single unified history, postmodern fictions offer "the histories (in the plural) of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional (and

colonial) as well as the centrist, and male as well as female"(66). According to Hutcheon Postmodernism's political assertions occur in the context of parody; therefore, her devotion of a chapter to the exploration of its politics, which she interprets as a deconstructive effort to revise or reread the past in paradoxical ways that simultaneously affirm and challenge historical representations.

Within the postmodern moment, the traditional ideas that every history is viewed as the coherent, objective, and continuous unity have been strongly questioned and challenged by the postmodernists who doubt the validity of the representation of the history and examine the factors manipulated behind it: "It was the literary text not as somehow unique but as a kind of discourse situated within a complex of cultural discourses religious, political, economic, aesthetic which both shaped it and, in their turn were shaped by it" (Habib 761). For the postmodernists, history no longer serves as a transparent medium through which one can have a full picture of the past; rather, it works for a particular class or ideology and therefore it is always contaminated, oblique and subjective. According to Jameson, postmodernity involves the spread and "logic" of late-capitalism, the growth of multinational corporations that disseminate a new economic, cultural and political hegemony coupled with the technological advances that enable the rise of a postindustrial, information-age society of consumerism. This is a "depthless" society that has "forgotten how to think historically" (ix) and can be seen as the logical conclusion of the modernizing process, a "purer stage of capitalism" (3), which has seen the exhaustion of modernism. For Jameson it is essential to see postmodernism as a "cultural dominant" (4) rather than an aesthetic style based upon the global economic system that has emerged specifically from the United States in the postwar era. Jameson suggests this is so because of the "fundamental shift in the perception of art and its modes of

production" (178). Symptomatic of this development is a lack of "depth" in society that is concerned too much with the "surface" of consumer consumption. Jameson suggests this has led to various "crises"--of identity, of historicity, of reality, of representation. He connects these crises to larger themes such as the disappearance of the subject, the effects of post-industrial society on the individual and, of course, cultural production as a commodity.

But Hutcheon argues that postmodern novels use irony to subvert but not reject history and the idea of historical objectivity as a means of rethinking or reworking of the past. For Hutcheon, postmodernism questions both historical objectivity and artistic subjectivity without denying either one. Hutcheon believes that postmodernism serves a particularly important role by problematizing subjectivity. For her, the perceiving subject can no longer be assumed to be coherent discrete meaning-generating entity. In her version of postmodernism:

The decentered perspective, the marginal and ... the ex-centric...take on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith(that is middle class, male, hetero-sexual, white, western) we might have assumed . The concept of alienated otherness ...gives way...to that of differences that is to the assertion of not centralized sameness, but of decentralized community-another post modern paradox. (12)

For Jameson, loss of the centre equals the death of the subject, and it engenders a crisis arguing the death of meaning, history aesthetic inquiry, and temporality. These deaths manifest themselves in various ways central to the key terms of Jameson's critique- simulacrum, pastiche. Jameson and Hutcheon are very different stances towards cultural authority and criticism. As a woman, Hutcheon

draws more effectively on the attention to difference and the questioning to divisions between public and private raised by feminist critics as a generative move in the creation of postmodernism itself. As a feminist, Hutcheon speaks from the stand point of someone who stands to gain voice and power by postmodern cultural ideologies. Jameson, conversely, for all his oppositional intentions, stands and even threatening to Jameson because it questions, problematizes, and even renounces the values, status, and centrality of people. Hutcheon, however, sees the same processes as producing new possibilities and opportunities.

Jameson defines post modernity as "an age when people have forgotten how to think historically"(ix). Because the modernist concept of the alienated subject is no longer appropriate, capitalism has created a new fragmented subject. He argues that post modern art constitutes a meaningless, centerless simulacrum. Surface is everything in a simulacrum; i.e. truth and reference are replaced by surfaces which results in fragmentation of the subject and the loss of distinction between inside and outside. In contrast, Hutcheon sees the simulacrum as more than meaningless. She says truth and references still exist. In her view, post modern art problematizes representation, not to reduce it to a meaningless simulacrum but to call attention to the dangers and possibilities of the act of representation itself. She sees the post modern as an "attempt to re-historicize- not de-historicize-art and theory" (225). She uses the historical novels to disprove the charge that post modern novel is necessarily ahistorical, naïve, or nostalgic. In her interpretation, historiographic metafiction refuses a search for transcendent truths, and, in the process confronts and contests the modernist duality of either discarding or recuperating the past. Hutcheon explains direct response to Jameson,

Most theorists of postmodernism who see it as a "cultural dominant" ...agree that it is characterized by the results of late capitalist dissolution of bourgeois hegemony and the development of the mass culture . I would agree and, in fact, argue that the increasing uniformization of mass culture is one of the totalizing forces that postmodernism exists to challenge. Challenge but not deny. But it does seek to assert, not homogenous identity... the very concept of difference could be said to be a typically post modern contradiction ; "difference" unlike "otherness" has no exact opposite against which to define itself. Post modern culture than has a contradictory relationship to what we usually label our dominant, liberal humanist culture. Postmodernism differs from this, not in its humanistic contradictions, but in the provisionality of its response to them; it refuses to posit any structure or... master narrative...This does not mean that knowledge somehow disappears. There is no radically new paradigm here, even if there is change. (6)

Thus, Hutcheon states that postmodernism is a useful way of questioning how and why we think to know about the past, while Jameson suggests that there is a known past that postmodernism is obliterating. And Jameson finds the disappearance of historical referent in it. But Hutcheon finds the historical referent to real and powerful. For her post modern art entails an ironic contestation of an author's right to inscribe timeless or universal values. Indeed, postmodern art stresses the context dependence of all values and makes them constructs, not givens. In ironic mode,Hutcheon presents parody as:

A perfect postmodern form... it paradoxically... incorporates and challenges that which it parodies [and forces]... reconsideration of the notion of originality that is compatible with other postmodern interrogations. ...While theorists like Jameson ... see this loss of the modernist unique ,through pastiche, it has been seen by postmodern artists as a liberating challenge to the definition of subjectivity and creativity that has for too long ignored the role of history in art and thought.(11)

Jameson argues that the collapse of high-modernist ideologies of style leave producers with nowhere to turn but to the past, to the imitation of dead styles that turns the world into a series of images of itself. This is pastiche, the reproduction of the past styles that leaves them devoid of any meaning and allows no norms but fragmentation. For him, cultural production has become a process of commodification. The logic of late capitalism accelerates the march of commodification into all areas of society and culture, and destroys any thing meaningful. Hutcheon's postmodernism sees the creation of many postmodern centers as an opportunity for innovation and creativity in art. Jameson sees all cultural production as an outgrowth of politics, technology and economics- -the hallmarks of capitalism in its present stage. But Hutcheon uses poststructuralism to read the same circumstances as an opportunity to promote a decentered multicultural society.

Postmodern fiction has certainly sought to open itself up to history. The intertext of history and fiction take a parallel status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of the both history and literature. The textual incorporation of these intertextual pasts as a constitutive structural element of post modern fiction. It would appear that it is only its constant ironic signaling of differences at the very heart of

similarity that distinguishes postmodern parody from medieval and renaissance imitation. Today the embedding of both literary and historical texts in fiction has made problematic by overtly metafictional assertions of both history and literature as human construct. "The intertextual parody of historiographic metafiction entails, in a way, the views of certain contemporary historiographers; it offers a scene of the presence of the past, but a past that can be known only from texts, its traces –be they literary or historical"(Hutcheon 125). Because of the paradoxical nature of the subject, postmodernism these days do seem more prone than most to confusing self-contradictions. This is the postmodern paradox. The typically contradictory intertextuality of postmodern art both provides and undermines context. In Vincent Leitch's terms:

Intertextually posits both an uncentered historical enclosure and an abysmal decentered foundation for language and textuality; in so doing ,it exposes all contextualizations as limited and limiting, arbitrary and confining, self-serving and authoritarian, theological and political. However paradoxically formulated, intertextuality offers a liberating determinism. (162)

Postmodern fiction demands the reader for not only the recognition of textualized traces of the literary and historical past but also the awareness of what has been done –through irony –to those traces. The reader is forced to acknowledge not only the inevitable textuality of our knowledge of the past, but also the value and limitation of the inescapably discursive form of that knowledge. Postmodern fiction reveals the kind of powerful impact, on both a formal and ideological level that parodic intertextuality can have. The question of originality obviously has a different meaning within the postmodern idea of writing. Now, I will be talking briefly about

the interrelation between history and literature, especially Hayden White's notion of metahistory.

Post modernist art reflects the social, cultural and aesthetic changes that have taken place in the last three or four decades. Historiographic metafiction in particular focuses on the problem making sense of the events of history and the ways in which historiographic is another kind of narrative construction. Historiographical metafiction plays upon the 'truth' of the historical records while posing questions about both the conventions of narrative discourse and the nature of historical knowledge. In an attempt to de-naturalize history, historiographic metafiction explodes the notion that history can obtain an objective truth and exhibits an awareness of historical representation as an unavoidably ideological and hence political project which imposes artificial order on the events of the past.

Hayden white takes historiography as "objective" and "semi-scientific" discourse (27). Like the novel, he claims, historical narratives "wish to provide a verbal image of reality"(122). As a discourse, this always involves an act of interpretation on the part of historian, who attempts to determine from a known chronology of events and their significance in the scheme of things. In other words, a particular meaning is imposed upon a text, which in turn dictates the kind of story he or she will tell. Because of the necessary imposition of this kind of a plot structure onto the events of history, White comes to the conclusion that historical narratives are "verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found"(82). For White, what is at stake is recovering for historiography and the possibility of creating a kind of knowledge about the past that is both understandable and relevant, which he contends is still possible:



... to say that we make a sense of the real world by imposing upon it the formal coherency that we customarily associate with writers of fiction in no way detracts from the status as knowledge which we ascribe to historiography .it would only detract from it if we were to believe that literature did not teach us anything about reality, but was a product of an imagination which was a product of an imagination which was not of this world but some other, inhuman one. (99)

Thus there is not so much a conflation of reality and fiction, but rather an acknowledgement that our knowledge of that reality must unavoidably be mediated by fictional elements. It is the blurring of fiction and reality that Linda Hutcheon emphasizes in her two books on postmodernism. The post modern self –conscious writing exposes the ways in which reality itself is constructed through various types of narratives, whether they are historical or ideological.

Hayden white points out that historical event are not subject to either experimental or observational controls. Most generally, his thesis is that historical narratives are verbal fictions, the contents, of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences. Hayden white says that every work of literature has both a fictional and a thematic aspect. When this fictional projection is dismissed, and the theme is overtly articulated, the writing becomes more discursive than literary writing. When fictional element is inserted, it cases to be history, and eventually it becomes a bastard genre. The past and written history are not he same thing. Because we can not directly encounter the past, we employ narrative as the medium of exchange in our transactions with it. The discipline of history is best

viewed as a literary artifact producing knowledge as much by aesthetic as by any other criteria. White maintains historical narrative can not carry the reality of the past because its story is not discovered, but imposed by the historian. He argues strongly that historian employs the historical imagination when depicting the past. In other words, the historian relies on the narrative strategies of a literary writer. In fact, white applies theories of fiction to historical writing. His theory attempts to blur the disciplinary distinctions between historiography and literature.

White blurs the distinction between the traditionally drawn cartography of history and fiction. By blurring the distinction between history and fiction, he interrogates into the objectivity and reliability of history. He argues that no history is absolutely objective that refers to teleological truth. He contends that history suffers from the syndrome of fiction. Therefore history becomes fiction and vice versa. He seems to draw "link between the realities of the past events with the historiographic text"(427). So, he converges fiction and historiography. In line with White, Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction dramatizes the theme of fiction and history. According to her:

historiographic metafiction first establishes and then crosses, positing both the generic contracts of fiction and history. The interaction of the historiographic and metafictional foregrounds the rejection of the claims of both authentic representation and inauthentic copy alike, and the very meaning of artistic originality is as forcefully challenged as is the transparency of historical referentiality.(110)

Post modern parody also deals with the seemingly binaries between historiography and fiction. A relatively unproblematized view of history, historical

continuity and the context of representation offer a stable plot structure. But, parody interrogates this very stability and intends to problematize the smooth representation. Post modern texts use parody to foreground conflictual elements through ironic contradictions. And it allows for some distance and critique, especially of notions such as competence originality and authorship. So postmodern parody both enshrines the past and questions it.

## Chapter III

### Parodizing the American Progressive Era

The progressive era characterized by exploitation has been obliterated by official history. Official history highlighted the progress, rapid economic development and racial harmony. So, Doctorow playfully parodizes the notion of equality, justice and progress that are associated with American progressive era. He addresses the several societal problems in turn -of-the-century in his novel.

Rather than imaginatively render a historical event *Ragtime* mingles actual historical events (such as the strike in Lawrenceville, Massachusetts) with historical characters in fictional situations (Freud and Jung in the Tunnel of Love), and invented characters. *Ragtime's* style of fictionalizing history is described by Linda Hutcheon as "historiographic metafiction," work that is both metafictional and historical in its echoes of past texts and contexts. Such work situates us within historical discourse without surrendering its authority as fiction, and thus satisfies a desire for grounding while querying the very basis for that grounding. *Ragtime* does establish some tentative truths, and thus may be seen as another work of midfiction. *Ragtime* is, in fact, a highly playful parodic book. As a postmodern novel, it represents the another representation .The novel is short, sometimes humorous, and highly accessible prose that might be called "mock historical" writing which mimics the prose of history texts. Consider, for example, the following passage:

Everyone wore white in the 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. On Sunday afternoon, after dinner, Father and Mother went upstairs and closed the bedroom door. (3-4)

The apparent simplicity here is deceptive, because the typicality of the life being described, the relationship between individual families and larger society, and society's blindness to racial problems. Moreover, while the novel begins with the vision of white middle-class America (no Negroes, no immigrants) it quickly revises itself to state that there apparently were Negroes and immigrants. In a sense, *Ragtime* is a revisionist historical novel including the stories of women, immigrants, labor, and others excluded from standard histories until very recently. The apparent ease of reading *Ragtime* coupled with the complex themes and social commentary that are subtly introduced are likely what account for the commercial and critical success of the novel.

Doctorow clearly presents the ragtime era history of America which was claimed to be progressive, peaceful and just. But, there were crimes, there were turmoil and there were injustices. Female were dominated. There was no gender equality." runaway women died in the rigors of ecastacy. Stories were hushed up and the reporters paid off by rich families"(4). This shows how women were viewed then. This parodizes the so-called gender equality in progressive era. The progress of the era was nothing other than exploitation. Doctorow playfully shows the horrible labor conditions of the average worker at that time. The situation of Negroes of the time involves continued social, racial and economic discrimination and often, violence. the narrator describes this grim situation thus:

On the tobacco farms Negroes stripped tobacco leaves thirteen hours a day and earned six cents an hour, man, women or child. Children suffered no discriminatory treatment .they were valued everywhere they were employed. They did not complain as adults tented to do.(39)

He further lists statistics about wages and numbers of deaths to convey the extremity of the social conditions. "One hundred Negroes a year were lynched one hundred children were mutilated. There seemed to be quotas for these things. There seemed to be quotas for death by starvation (40). Doctorow, in this way presents the pitiful and helplessness characters in an ironic ways.

Not only the condition of labors but also the condition of immigrant was not less pitiful. Tateh (Jewish immigrant) suffers a great deal of the economic injustice in America during the progressive era. He abandons his wife. He migrates from one place to another place in search for the economic justice in the era of progressivism and prosperity. The problem of the unemployment of the time cried loudly as expressed in this way "this same winter found Tateh and his daughter in the mill town of Lawrence, Massachusetts. They had come there the previous autumn, having heard there were jobs"(120). This shows the scarcity of opportunities for the people in the land of vast prosperity and opportunities. The situations under which he and his family live constitute a pathetic condition of immigrants. Narrator describes:

The girl had straight black hair that fitted her head like a helmet. She had olive skin and eyes so brown they were blacks. She gazed Evelyn without curiosity [...] a piece of clothesline was tied around her wrist. Evelyne stood up, followed the clothesline, and found herself looking in to the face of a mad old man with a closely cropped grey beard. The end of line was tied around the old man's waist. He wore a threadbare coat. One sleeve was torn. (42)

This passage shows the very pathetic condition of Jewish immigrants. Tateh tied the rope with her daughter because young girls in the slums are stolen every day from their parents and sold into slavery. Although earlier in his life and in his stay in

United States, he possessed idealism and a sense of promise, he loses hope as his efforts towards social equality. So an economically ruined family of Jewish immigrant Tateh, Mameh and their daughter ironically represent the true picture of the condition of the immigrants in progressive era. Due to the poverty Mameh compelled to sell her body to her employer: " one day with two weeks rent due she let the man have his way one the cutting table. He kissed her face and tasted the salt of her tears"(16). Tateh, Mameh, and The Little Girl come to America to realize the American dream of comfort, prosperity, and freedom from repression. Instead they find abject poverty in New York. Mameh and The Little Girl sew pants, for seventy cents a dozen, every day, from the time they get up to the time they go to bed, and Tateh sells his paper silhouettes on the streets. Their labor proves insufficient for their survival, their rent becomes delinquent, Mameh reluctantly sells her body for money, and Tateh— banishing his wife from the family because he views her as a whore—sets out with The Little Girl to find a secure home and an escape from the fate of the working class. They move from New York to Massachusetts to Philadelphia, and it is in the last-named city that Tateh sells his invention (“movie books”) and signs a contract for future productions of his creations.

In *Ragtime* Doctorow uses post modern parody to comment on the progressive era. The blend of historical and fictional characters along with the experimental prose allows Doctorow to make a detached, but nonetheless powerful critique of American society and the possibility of true progress in an era of rapid and apparent advances. Doctorow's adaptation of the post modern parody in *Ragtime* radically disrupts the surface elements of history, chronology, and believability, but it does so while clearly suggesting that there are definite, observable incidents of injustice. One of the *Ragtime*'s most compelling figures, Coalhouse Walker, Jr. wants

to progress, but ultimately he gets destroyed by American racism. Doctorow debunks the falsity of the belief that many upper class citizens have the correct sense of morality. Mother is surprised to discover Sarah's certainty in her moral action and belief because Sarah is a homeless, identity less, poor and uneducated black girl.

Doctorow severely ironizes the democracy of the progressive era, Emma Goldman a female revolutionary, advocates equality and freedom. But she has been often stopped from speaking and putting her thought in front of the public. She has been arrested time and again for advocating the freedom. She was arrested by the police authority for her involvement in coal house's siege of the Morgan property; however she in fact has had no role in that incident. Doctorow uses this police action to parodize the tendency of the authorities to unfairly accuse leaders.

Ironically then the former socialist activist epitomizes the problem for radicals that Emma Goldman saw embodied in Evelyn Nesbit as an object of desire:

I am often asked the question How the masses permit themselves to be exploited by the few. The answer is by being persuaded to identify with them. Carrying his newspaper with your picture the laborer goes home to his wife, an exhausted workhorse with the veins standing out in her legs, and he dreams not of justice but of being rich. (50)

Doctorow parodizes the notion of social equality in the progressive era. There has been a large gap between race and class .i.e. in the novel the status of father as a white and. the status of Coal house Walker as black. Father's interaction with the fire chief, Willie Conklin shows the clear picture of racist thought ;"Willie Conklin's assumption of social equality was galling... once he actually put his hand on father's shoulders, a gesture of such alarming brotherhood that it felt like an electric shock"(219). This reaction emphasizes his rigid definition of class. A Father's act



represents the many Americans at the turn of the century. Conklin discovers that his white skin does not constitute an advantage sufficient for his continued acceptance in town. In addition, it also speaks to the situation of the Irish population in the United States, who remained for decades a minority suffering from significant prejudices. The juxtaposition of unlikely characters and events in *Ragtime* represents a mosaic in which the lives of different kinds of Americans are placed next to one another. Evoking the image of the mosaic implicitly undercuts the idea of America as a melting pot, complicating ideas of assimilation. Although the lives of characters from diverse backgrounds intersect, they meld unevenly. Evelyn Nesbit disappears from Tateh's life; Ford and Morgan have no sustained interaction; Emma Goldman has little influence outside her radical sphere. Yet when some characters interact with others from different backgrounds, lives are permanently changed: most notably when Sara and Mother interact, and Tateh and Mother meet. Hence, *Ragtime* represents the complex and unpredictable nature of interaction in a multicultural society.

The novel's pastiche quality and the many varied personages within it also foil impulses to totalize history and raise questions about the depictions of periods in other historical texts. The complexity of characters' motives thwart simple analysis; for example, we are uncertain whether to admire Tateh for his adaptation or scorn him for betraying his ideals; we condemn Walker's terrorism but admire his uncompromising self-respect. The accidental nature of many events, such as Mother finding the baby, makes it highly unlikely they would recur, so they could not be predicted. In contrast, Coalhouse Walker's response to society's refusal to treat him justly--although it is extreme--might be predicted, given his character and the racial climate of the times. Hence, although *Ragtime* depicts many contingencies and certainly acknowledges that

some events may be beyond human control, the novel as a work of mid fiction affirms some degree of causality.

*Ragtime* foregrounds individual families. These families represent different ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes: the WASP Mother and Father's family, the Jewish immigrant Tateh and Mameh, the African-American Coalhouse Walker and his girlfriend, Sara. Black people have penchant for racial assimilation, however, they fail because of the racial bigotry imbibed by the white people.

Father's arrogant attitude toward nonwhites in the Arctic predicts his attitude toward Coalhouse Walker. Although Father tries to negotiate with authorities on Walker's behalf, Father clearly dislikes him, undoubtedly because the musician is not subservient, and indeed will fight for his rights. That Walker's terrorist gang is alien to Father which may at first not be surprising, but on reflection one realizes that at the time of his death Father was smuggling armaments on the *Lusitania*, engaging in the illegal transport of weapons for what he believed to be a just cause, which is not so different from Walker's actually using weapons for his cause. Father lost the connection to the struggles of his own immigrant ancestors and their ability to change as needed. He is a perpetual beginner. But unlike other characters, Father cannot choose a new beginning appropriate for the time. Rather, his "beginning" is continual repetition of previous actions in new guises, futile attempts to reassert his old status. Ironically, his temperament will not allow him to progress.

The poor and dangerous conditions Tateh endures--poverty, so stark his wife succumbs to her employer's sexual advances and streets so dangerous Tateh works with his daughter tied to him so she will not be kidnapped--are the results of industrialization. During the period between the Civil War and World War I, the urban rich in New York moved uptown while the poor stayed downtown in the slums,

a development that intensified class stratification. Yet the rich were geographically not that far away from the poor. Such proximity explains the impoverished who in *Ragtime* peer into the banquets of the wealthy, separated by a glass window they know they will not penetrate. Because of the visibility of the slums and the glaring distinctions between owners and workers, cities embarrassingly exposed the falsity of a classless society in America, revealing divisions by race and nationality as well.

Cities also have been the points of arrival for new immigrants, and between 1890 and 1910 over one million immigrants settled in the United States. Immigrants who came to America in search of a better life were often shocked at their exploitation and pitiful living conditions. Millions of European immigrants were living in poverty. So Doctorow problematizes this condition by portraying several injustices. Of course, immigrants were supposed to be able to rise from poverty, or at least see their children achieve better lives. Indeed, Tateh himself achieves the American Dream. But his and many other "metamorphoses" in the novel are at least partially attributable to privilege associated with a character's gender, race, and ethnicity. Tateh is particularly interesting for the kinds of people he represents: an artist trying to make a living from his sketches, an entrepreneur, and, importantly, an impoverished Jewish activist. The account of Tateh's participation in labor struggles vividly illustrates the class struggle, but erased in the text-book accounts of American history.

Strike involvement might be a turning point in which a character would become more committed to radical action; here it is the point at which Tateh abandons his labor affiliation, even though the strike was successful. When the strike ends, Tateh realizes the essentially conservative goals of American Labor. Narrator says:

Tateh began to conceive of his life as separate from the fate of the working class. I hate machines, he said to his daughter. He stood and she stood and took his hand and together they looked for the exit. The I.W.W. has won, he said. But what has it won? A few more pennies in wages? Will it now own the mills? No. (131)

Since he now perceives the Labor movement as tied to the status quo, and has often been at odds with labor leaders who wanted "inspirational art," it is not surprising that Tateh decides to "point his life along the flow of American energy(134)" to become an entrepreneur and decides to leave New York City, "the city that has ruined his life,"(91) hoping for a more comfortable life on the urban outskirts, as did many who fled the cities after World War II. His decision is further suggested in his fears for his child's future, "Every once in a while he would look at his child and seeing the sure destruction of her incredible beauty in his continuing victimization, he would clutch her to him and tears would fill his eyes. (94)" His desire to provide his daughter with a respectable bourgeois life is further reflected in his revulsion for Emma Goldman's views, as well as in his abrupt rejection of his sexually exploited wife. His radical sympathies do not extend to women's fights, and from his perspective his radical followers have negative influences on his daughter. Consequently, he metamorphosizes or recomposes himself and his art.

Tateh's decision to sell his silhouettes to the Franklin Novelty Company has a few important components. First, it raises the question of how a socialist cause might deal with individual talent. Factory workers are interchangeable in their work; an artist presumably is not and thus must be involved in a different kind of struggle for justice. Also, commodification of art becomes an issue. In a capitalist nation, some commodification is necessary and Tateh commodifies the kind of art that he can

effectively market because it is fight for the time. Sketches on the street attract little attention. Silhouettes, on the other hand, are appropriate for the age that is discovering how to create the illusion of moving images and that itself might be represented as a rapidly changing image. Although he is a self-made man in the Gatsby mold, he senses he must remake his identity to be accepted in some segments of society. Hence, he becomes a displaced noble rather than formerly penniless Jewish immigrant.

Ironically then the former socialist activist epitomizes the problem for radicals that Emma Goldman saw embodied in Evelyn Nesbit as an object of desire.

Through the Coal House Walker's character, Doctorow establishes the commentary on race relations during that time in American history. Walker was an African –American black musician. He has been treated badly by the white racists which leads him to violence and the end of his own life. His moderate way of behavior sometimes makes father think that;

That Coal House Walker Jr. didn't know that he was a Negro. The more he thought about this the more true it seemed. Walker did not act or talked like a colored man. He seemed to be able to transform the customary difference practiced by his race. (162)

Coal House Walker did not fit to father's white American eye as a Negro. Father, though a liberal white man, is also not completely free from the latent thought of white superiority over black.

The fates of Coalhouse Walker and other characters in this novel have become victimized by the then period. Walker had owned a model T\_Ford, an expensive auto mobile which was the symbol of equality to white in material

prosperity of a black man which provoked some white racists to stop him literally as well as symbolically. The following extract of the novel substantiates it:

Coalhouse Walker drove off to New York in his ford. His route took him along Fire House Lane, past the station house of merald isle Engine , a company of volunteers fireman known for the dash of their parade uniforms and the liveliness of their outings... he was not unaware that in his dress and as the owner of a car he was a provocation to many white people(174).

While passing the route his road was blocked abruptly by the volunteers of the fire house. He was "reined, causing him to brake his car abruptly "(175). The fire house volunteers demanded him either to pay or to prove that he was the resident of that town. He was asked to pay \$25 as if he had trespassed other's land in his own country America in the time of prosperity, peace, harmony and democracy. He decided to resist the Fire House Chief, so he asked two colored boys playing near the pond to look after his car and went to the police station for a complaint. Police ignored his complaint, for he was a black man and his complaint was against a white man and his company. Coal House Walker returned to the site of blocked and found his car off the road in the field and found "it was spattered with mud. There was a six – inch tear in the custom pantasote top. And deposited in black seat was a mound of fresh human excrement"(177).

It was the extreme point of in human act by the white racist. White people thought that black man was inferior to them. By hearing the laughter of willy Conklin and company, the police arrived. The Fire house Chief, a white man was heard by the police. He said to the police, "The nigger parked his damn car in the middle of the road in front of the fire house. We had to move it. It's a serious business blocking a

fire station, ain't that's so, boys?"(178). His false story is taken literally by police because the story teller was a white man. Walker didn't agree the police and repeated his demand again, "I want the car cleaned and the damage paid for"(178). The police got annoyed and irritated with Coal House Walker and threaten him "to charge of driving off the road, drunkenness, and making an unsightly nuisance"(178) .Coal house Walker replied promptly, " I don't think. I did not drive my car off the road nor slash the roof off nor defecate in it. I want the damage paid for and I want as apology"(179) this was enough for the racist police. They arrested Coal house walker and put into the custody. After, his bail Coal House Walker seeked those two black boys whom he had asked to look after his car before he went to police station to make complaint. He found out the parents of those "boys only to [...] refusing to [...] involved in the matter "(179). They knew the terror of standing against the white people being black. Coal House Walker was determind to sue a case against the fire chief willy Conklin. He searched for some black lawyers but there was none. He tried all and every peaceful way to bring the Fire house Chief in front of the justice, "he went to see three different attorneys recommended by Father. In all cases they refused to represent him. He was advised to recover his automobile before it was totally wrecked and forget the matter "(183).

Coal House Walker's desire for justice through legal means became impossible when the three attorneys, the justice providers, suggested him to forget the matter as if nothing has happened. Coal house Walker wanted to sue the case at Harlem court but the attorney of the Harlem didn't want to proceed the case for he knew, "wily Conklin, was a stepbrother of the judge of the city court and nephew of a country Alderman in White plains"(184). The Harlem attorney indicated that there would be no justice for blacks. The requirement for justice was not the abiding of

laws but the wrapping of the body. In this way Doctorow employs irony to express his disapproval of such prejudices. It is enough to know the condition of blacks in the progressive era even though they paid of the damage or apology for minor thing they will be arrested by the white American policeman. While Tateh is successful in transforming himself into a personage more acceptable to wealthy Americans than a Jewish immigrant--Coalhouse Walker is destroyed partially because he does transform himself.

Furthermore, aside from the fact that he comes from St. Louis, we know little of Walker's past: he seems Gatsbyesque in that he comes from the Midwest with a firm sense of himself. The source of his dignity is thus very different from Booker T. Washington's, the esteemed African-American leader who tries to persuade Walker to surrender, for Washington preached "the Negro's advancement with the help of his white neighbor" to provide vocational training and the resulting opportunity for hard work. (Interestingly, Walker tells Washington that they are both "servants of [our] color" demanding respect.) For Walker, dignity rests upon his identity as a musician, his desire to be with Sara and his child, and his sense of justice. Like Tateh, he is an artist and a family man, but unlike Tateh he cannot change his appearance and name to change his social standing. His refusal to play the part of a servile, timid black man causes whites either irritation (Father) or outright hostility (Willy Conklin). In the personage of Coalhouse Walker, Doctorow thus suggests the depth of discrimination against African-Americans--they cannot even try to assimilate into the white middle class (not that doing so is necessarily desirable) because their skin color marks them as different, and many whites will not tolerate deviation from race-assigned roles.

Walker's self-made status is represented in a number of ways--through his fine clothing, his self-assured manner, and his calm assessment of situations. This



previously law-abiding man becomes a terrorist only after the law proves unresponsive to him and after his fiancée is accidentally killed by authorities. When Walker resorts to violence, the violence itself is carefully planned, thereby undercutting stereotypes of black men as impulsive and uncontrollable.

Given his rationality, it is both interesting and puzzling that Walker goes to such lengths to get his Model T restored. A band of African-American men (and Younger Brother) do support his cause, but the reaction of an African-American lawyer is probably typical of many African-Americans who have seen far greater miscarriages of injustice than what Walker endured. The narrator describes this situation as:

The counselor stood up behind his desk and told him to leave. I have charity cases you know nothing of, he shouted. I want justice for our people so bad I can taste it. But if you think I would go to Westchester County to plead on a colored man's behalf that someone deposited a bucket of slops in his car, you are very much mistaken.(184)

Walker's attitude toward his car can be understood only by considering the importance Americans assign material goods to signify identity as well as status. While Doctorow is likely unaware of it, the persecution Walker suffered because of his car has a historical basis. In addition to suggesting relative material comfort, the automobile represents an affinity with progress, allying Coalhouse Walker with figures such as Mother and Tateh rather than Father. Walker's attachment to the car is also consistent with the repeated themes of manufacturing and production in the novel and the implication that those who manufacture are crucial to progress. Furthermore, in the United States especially, the car has become a symbol of mobility and freedom,

and geographic mobility itself has often been associated with upward mobility. Immigrants coming to the United States to escape poverty (rather than to escape political persecution) exemplify this association. Hence, an African-American who owned a car in the early 1900s was signaling his desire to better his socioeconomic status.

Coal House Walker chooses to express his identity through a commodity such as an automobile rather than through his music. Marshall Bruce Gentry in "Ragtime as Auto Biography" posits that references to Henry Ford and his assembly line suggest associations between the interchangeability of parts on Ford's assembly line and the interchangeability of people who purchase cars. Walker acts because his dignity is disrespected the item itself is not crucial. Yet Walker has made a very deliberate purchase at a time when Model Ts were not common; it seems more likely that Walker is using the car to express his individuality as people in capitalist countries especially often use material possessions such as clothing or cars to distinguish themselves. Thus through his demeanor, possessions, and the values they imply, Walker signifies his comfort with progress and his desire to gain the trappings of bourgeois society. Walker is resisting his assigned status as an African-American male, but he is resisting in ways that possibly reinscribes existing inequities.

*Ragtime* indeed represents racism in various guises: from the working class hatred of Willy Conklin, to the opportunistic ruthlessness of the District Attorney Whitman, to Father's smug condescension. That Walker responds to racism with terrorist acts is jarring not only because his actions are violent, but also, because they are anachronistic, characteristic of the period when the novel was written rather than the one in which it is set. They viewed as a warning for the age reading the novel that if races are not treated equally and fairly eventually there will be violence.

Particularly because the Coalhouse Walker story is the most developed subplot in the novel, it prompts us to consider the relationship between surface and deeper meaning, between the fictional story and the reality of racism in America that make it plausible. The failures of American justice are suggested in Coalhouse Walker's life story, and Mameh's sexual exploitation.

Indeed, the Coalhouse Walker subplot raises questions as to who actually holds power and influence in the democratic United States. Instead of seizing an elected official's home, Walker takes J. P. Morgan's library. According to the narrator, Morgan is "at the top of the business pyramid (137)." To Walker, he is understandably the most powerful man in the United States. Indeed, Morgan bailed out the United States government with a loan during the panic of 1907. He, more than any government agency or official, profoundly affected the nation's welfare. The scope of his actions, coupled with his belief in reincarnation and conviction that he must be descended from great rulers, indicate both his power and elitism. Morgan as a man of supreme confidence; a man who, in response to a question about what his yacht costs, replied if one had to ask one couldn't afford it. Such self-assuredness and conspicuous consumption are traits ---shared by Coalhouse Walker. In seizing Morgan's library, Walker is challenging the epitome of white power as an equal. Moreover, that Walker is satisfied to hold Morgan's property rather than the man himself hostage again indicates the importance of material possessions. (His seizing the building is highly praised by Emma Goldman, who sees it as a first step toward toppling the status quo.) Morgan's own advice to law enforcement officials, while ruthless and pragmatic, also acknowledges the importance of recognizing property rights: "give him his automobile and hang him"(299).

Walker ultimately is destroyed because he is an African-American man trying to assimilate into American society. The representation of different fates for Tateh and Coalhouse Walker suggests an examination of the different position of Jews and African-Americans in the United States. Furthermore, while Walker certainly receives the harshest treatment in the novel, some other characters also fare badly: Younger Brother is killed in the Mexican revolution, Evelyn Nesbit disappears into obscurity, Emma Goldman is deported, and Father sinks on board the Lusitania. Taken together, the fates of the characters who endure as compared with those who do not suggest first that the ability to adapt to change is crucial. In this ability explain the differences between Father and Tateh. Furthermore, the enduring, differences landscape of *Ragtime* is like the enduring landscape of American political debates: it is composed of families with middle-class values. Those on the periphery--anarchists, radicals, sensational beauty figures--eventually disappear from the novel. And finally, in the figures of J. P. Morgan, Henry Ford, and Harry K. Thaw, the power of money to buy influence and justice is depicted. Harry K. Thaw marches in the Armistice Day Parade long after Coalhouse Walker has been shot down. So, *Ragtime* to suggest how progress and social change might be accommodated, as well as to suggest the serious limitations, especially along race lines, as to who is allowed to progress.

The ambiguity of the narration as well as the continual reversals and changes in the plot complicate a simple reading of history, that *Ragtime* consistently raises questions about the nature of power and inequity, and prompts us to consider them. Coalhouse Walker's apparent desire to assimilate as well as his terrorism will likely be continually debated by readers, as will Tateh's metamorphosis into Baron Man. In considering the fates of the various characters, perhaps especially the "disappeared," readers may ponder not only their history but their complicity in current political and

social problems. Houdini, lamenting that unlike the manufacturers and leaders of his time he cannot produce a "real world" act, has been seen as an artist figure, but *Ragtime* does not lament the illusory quality of fiction. Rather, it uses illusion to raise questions about what is considered reality.

In her work on the political aspects of postmodernism Linda Hutcheon sees intertextuality in the novel *Ragtime* as drawing attention to the impossibility of constructing rigid boundaries between art and the world, and the impossibility of knowing either (Poetics). The intertextuality of history and fiction is created by blurring real and imaginary characters and events.

In *Ragtime* Doctorow playfully explores the continuing promise of the progressive era. In an era of rapid change and urbanization, the dream is more available to those who can metamorphosize themselves, both by transforming their talents into something the era appreciates and by transforming themselves into acceptable personages. Tateh is able to make the latter transformation; Coalhouse Walker is not permitted to aspire to this dream. His and Sara's deaths reflect the many, often unrecorded lynchings and similar murders of African-Americans who aspired to upward mobility.

*Ragtime* is Doctorow's most playful, amusing novel. It is most marked by the ironic distance that characterizes postmodernism. Yet in this novel Doctorow consistently suggests the problems associated with progress namely that the progress of a few often coexists with the misery of many, that technological progress (Ford's assembly line), and the rewards of progress, are not available to all. The distinction between fact and fiction, between work like and documentary texts is thoroughly jumbled. Even so, we are able to make important distinctions between the fates of those allowed to progress and those who are disappeared or annihilated.

In this way, the progressive era that is presented in the book is largely complex, ironical and paradoxical. This era is known as progressive, peaceful, and prosperous but people are suffering from suppression, fear, hatred, domination and poverty. There is confusion among the people about their rights and freedom. They are surrounded by chaos. They seek freedom, equality and prosperous life but ironically, they are trapped due to the effect of American society.

## Chapter IV

### Conclusion

The novel *Ragtime* parodizes the American Progressive era in order to project the racial discrimination, economic injustice and poverty. Almost all of the characters depicted in this novel are trapped in a way or other, be it Coal House Walker, a ragtime pianist, Tateh, a Jewish immigrant or Emma Goldman. Doctorow's focus of the text is on the people who can not find justice in a society that pretends to be just. As a post modern novel, *Ragtime* foregrounds the tensions between what is known about history and what is narrated in the text. So, *Ragtime* problematizes the history and historical truth through parody. *Ragtime* by Doctorow both "installs" and then "contests" our traditional guarantees of knowledge by revealing their gaps or circularities (Hutcheon). *Ragtime* is a highly parodic book because Doctorow first inscribe the American progressive era by the setting of the novel. Then he exposes the bleakness of the social condition, and parodizes the notion of equality, justice and Progress that are inherently associated with it.

*Ragtime* contains a satiric commentary upon the development of America in the early years of 20<sup>th</sup> century. He playfully parodizes the era of peace and progress by portraying destruction and exploitation,. He uses the interconnectedness of characters and events in order to convey the political and social atmosphere in turn of the century America .He transitions from plot to plot and from characters to character in order to demonstrate the relationship between those of varying class positions and differing social views. His revolt against racial humiliation appears to be designed to demystify, to expose contradictions in the heart of the political and economic systems. The narrator interweaves actual historical persons with fictional characters and events.

The technique becomes even more interesting as Doctorow adds more famous people, bringing to mind numerous questions about history and fiction.

The condition of immigrants is so pathetic, where they are treated so poorly by immigration officials and New Yorkers that they are ironically and sadly reminded of home. Freud leaves America in a huff. "America is a mistake, a gigantic mistake," he says. The author then explains that millions of Americans are out of work at the time, hundreds of children are mutilated each year while working with factory equipment, one hundred blacks are lynched each year, and one hundred miners are burned alive each year. This is contrasted with the lifestyles of the rich, for whom it has become "fashionable to honor the poor." Huge amounts of money are spent on gala balls where attendees dress up as the poor and the decor is a representation of a coal mine, a stockyard, or a dirt farm. Poverty has become a mechanism for entertainment.

There was not safety and security for immigrants and blacks. The condition of Tatch and her daughter (Jewish immigrant family) show the clear picture of the progressive era. Around the girl's waist is a rope that is tied to her father to prevent her from being stolen, a common problem in the Jewish slums at the time. We also learn that Nesbit thinks the peddler, revealed as Tatch, is old because of his gray hair, but he is only thirty-two and has disowned his wife for selling her body. Tatch has decided he must leave New York; the city that he believes has ruined him. He distributes the only money he has--thirty dollars--among his pockets and shoes and boards the streetcar with his daughter, with no idea of where they will go. Coalhouse Walker, a black pianist, is stopped in front of the Emerald Isle volunteer fire house, where some of the firemen block his way and tell him he must pay a toll. Fire Chief Conklin makes a derogatory remark to Walker, who then asks two black boys to watch his car while he gets the police. The policeman offers no help, and when



Walker goes back to the fire station his car is in the field next to the road, mud spattered, with a tipped roof and human excrement on the back seat. Walker tells the firemen he wants the car cleaned and repaired, and they laugh at him. Two police arrive, and Walker is arrested. He calls the family to bail him out, goes to work, and the next morning tells them all the details of the incident, calmly and objectively. Later finds that actually, he is suppressed by white American police. It mocks the democratic America.

The novel's panoramic scope particularly implies that it is impossible to remain outside the web; everyone is complicit in the fates of all the characters. We will thus very subtly realize their own position in American society and thus come to reflect on the nature of their complicity. *Ragtime* is then a highly effective piece of parodic text. While it may appear to be all surface, it actually critiques the very surface it represents, beginning, for example, with the mock-factual statement, "There were no Negroes," and then focusing on an African-American family. The novel gives a powerful, yet distanced representation of injustice in America.

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