

Ragtime : A Critical Analysis

'Ragtime' is an immensely popular historical fiction by E. L. Doctorow. Published in 1975, this work is primarily set in the New York City area from about 1900 until the entry of the United States into World War I in 1917. A unique adaptation of the historical narrative genre with a subversive slant, the novel blends fictional and actual historical events into a framework that revolves around events, characters and ideas important in American history.

The novel centers on a wealthy white family living in New Rochelle, New York. The family consists of persons simply called Father, Mother, Mother's Younger Brother, and a little boy who is not named at all. The family business is the manufacture of flags and fireworks, evidently an easy source of wealth because of the national enthusiasm during the time. Father joins the first expedition to the North Pole, and his return sees a change in the sexual politics of his relationship with his wife. Younger Brother is an insecure, unhappy character who chases after love and excitement.

Into this secure homely set-up comes first an abandoned black child, and then his deeply depressed mother Sarah. Coalhouse Walker, a black musician, visits the family regularly until he wins back Sarah's affections. Things go well until he is humiliated by a racist fire chief, and his inflexible pride brings him to seek violent revenge rather than pursue the course of love and happiness. Mother adopts the neglected child after Sarah dies as a result of police brutality. Younger Brother becomes drawn into the escalating conflict, as a protagonist, and so does Father as a mediator.

In the slums of New York, an unhappy Jewish father Tateh struggles to support himself and his daughter, Little Girl. The girl attracts the attention of the famous beauty Evelyn Nesbit. She provides them support, but ultimately they move away from the city. Tateh appears later in the novel, having progressed in his career as a wealthy pioneer of the moving picture industry.

By the end of the novel, surviving members of the three family groups have merged into one in an allegorical representation of the American cultural melting pot, leaving Father financially successful but abandoned and unhappy.

The novel provides a kaleidoscopic view of the American society of the time. It is unusual for the way it weaves historical figures and fictional characters into the narrative. E.L. Doctorow brings in several key changes taking place in the turn-of-the-century America. He conveys the effects of these changes through the reactions of the characters. Some characters welcome and accept these changes, while the other reject and struggle with them.