

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC 363**

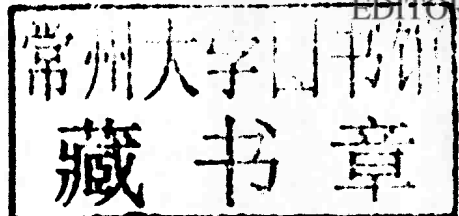
Volume 363

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short-Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers

Lawrence J. Trudeau

EDITOR



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# Contemporary Literary Criticism

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## Preface

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### Organization of the Book

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# Ragtime

E. L. Doctorow

(Full name Edgar Laurence Doctorow) American novelist, short-story writer, essayist, playwright, and screenwriter.

The following entry provides criticism of Doctorow's novel *Ragtime* (1975). For additional information about Doctorow, see *CLC*, Volumes 6, 11, 15, 18, 37, 113, 214, and 324; for additional information about the novel *World's Fair*, see *CLC*, Volume 44; for additional information about the novel *Billy Bathgate*, see *CLC*, Volume 65.

## INTRODUCTION

Published in 1975, *Ragtime* is widely regarded as the novel that established E. L. Doctorow (1931- ) as a critically significant author. In the words of the literary scholar Fredric Jameson (1984; see Further Reading), it offers "a panorama of the first two decades of the century," commenting on such diverse developments as the Mexican Revolution (1910-20), the popularization of the automobile, and the rise of socialism in the United States. As in Doctorow's earlier works, fact and fiction are interwoven in *Ragtime*. Doctorow tells the story using a small cast of fictional characters whose lives intersect with those of recognizable historical figures, who experience imagined encounters: Henry Ford and J. P. Morgan meet for lunch and form a secret Egyptology club; Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung visit the Tunnel of Love at Coney Island; and Harry Houdini performs aerial stunts for Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Countess Sophie of Hohenberg. Doctorow's treatment of these famous personages polarized early reviewers of *Ragtime*, some of whom dismissed the appearances of Ford, Freud, and others as tasteless or cartoonish. Critical discourse subsequently shifted from assessing the novel's merits to understanding it in the broader context of American and European historical fiction. Discussions of *Ragtime* frequently focus on its borrowings from Heinrich von Kleist's 1810 short story "Michael Kohlhaas," which furnished the basic plot of injustice and revenge that dominates the novel's second half. *Ragtime* has also been described by Doctorow, among others, as a Postmodern novel that aims to correct or subvert the "official" history presented in textbooks and scholarly works.

## PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

*Ragtime* follows the fortunes of three American families from 1902 to the outbreak of World War I in 1914. The first characters to appear are a wealthy fireworks manufacturer and his wife, known throughout as Father and Mother,

and their unnamed young son, all of whom reside in New Rochelle, just outside of New York City. Subsequent chapters introduce Tateh and his daughter, known as "the little girl," impoverished Latvian Jewish immigrants who live on New York City's Lower East Side, and Coalhouse Walker Jr., an African American concert pianist. Of the novel's various protagonists' accounts, Tateh's story bears the closest resemblance to the American dream as traditionally construed. Eager to provide a better life for his daughter, he manages to parlay his talent as a maker of flipbooks into a lucrative career. At the height of his success, he reinvents himself as "Baron Ashkenazy" and begins a love affair with Mother, who grows increasingly distant from Father following his return from a polar expedition. Coalhouse's path through turn-of-the-century American society is, in contrast, a tragic one. His Model T automobile is vandalized by a group of firemen, and his complaints to the police get him arrested and ridiculed instead of leading to justice.

In the second part of the novel, Coalhouse demands restitution through increasingly violent means and is eventually killed by police after he and his followers bomb a volunteer fire station. Throughout the book, several unlikely events bring the major characters of *Ragtime* into contact with one another, despite their different life circumstances. Mother's Younger Brother, an idealistic but unstable young man, joins Coalhouse's band of protesters; an abandoned baby found and adopted by Mother turns out to be Coalhouse's child; and, in a brief episode, Mother and Father's little boy meets Tateh's little girl during a trip to Atlantic City. Doctorow's fictionalized versions of real-life financiers, celebrities, and activists also serve as intermediaries or mutual acquaintances for his invented characters. The famous model Evelyn Nesbit, a benefactor to Tateh and his daughter, is also romantically involved with Mother's Younger Brother following the murder of her husband. The final chapters of the novel bring the three families even closer together, if only symbolically: in 1915, Father dies on the *Lusitania* when it is sunk by a German U-boat during World War I, leaving Mother free to marry Tateh, while Mother's Younger Brother drives Coalhouse's Model T to Mexico and is killed in the revolution there.

## MAJOR THEMES

Encompassing a wide cross section of society—from washwomen to tycoons—and a period of some fifteen years, *Ragtime* is often read as a meditation on the cultural, political, and technological changes that swept the United

States in the early twentieth century. From the opening of the novel, it is clear that the relative isolation of America's different ethnic and social groups is coming to an end; the narrator introduces 1902 as a remote, genteel era of the past in which "[t]here were no Negroes. There were no immigrants." As this ironic remark foreshadows, racism, nativism, and nationalism prove to be prevalent among the characters of *Ragtime*, many of whom would prefer to continue believing in the homogeneity of their country and culture. Father, who represents the American patriot par excellence with his flags and fireworks, offers perhaps the most consistent example of these attitudes. While not as outwardly malicious as the firefighters who damage Coalhouse's car, Father is condescending toward the Inuit he encounters in the Arctic, despairs at the surge of immigrants arriving in the United States, and treats Coalhouse with disdain. The various aspects of change in American society are embodied in famous historical personages, who are employed as a kind of narrative shorthand. The political dimension of this change is illustrated by the many notable social reformers who populate the novel, including the photographer and journalist Jacob Riis, the anarchist Emma Goldman, and the African American leader Booker T. Washington. Similarly, transformations in industrial and labor practices are provided with a spokesperson in Ford, whose automobile company popularized the assembly line, and developments in psychology and philosophy are explored through the characters of Freud and Jung.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

*Ragtime* was an instant popular success, selling hundreds of thousands of copies in its first year of publication. Literary critics, however, have been sharply divided as to the merits of the work. In his summary of *Ragtime*'s early reception, John Williams (1996) recounted that the most conspicuous point of contention was the novel's liberal blending of fiction and historical fact. John Lukacs (1975-76), like many critics after him, saw Doctorow as one of the inaugural authors in an emerging literary genre he called "novelized history," in which the form of the novel is adapted to tell a larger societal story rather than the tales of individual characters.

As Williams noted, most early reviews of *Ragtime* were not concerned with Doctorow's style, focusing instead on his use of history, which many reviewers found "irresponsible, trivial, or political." Doctorow addressed this particular line of criticism in a 1978 interview with Paul Levine during which he claimed that his fictionalized version of events illustrates uncomfortable truths about politics and power in modern America: "I'm satisfied that everything I made up about Morgan and Ford is true, whether it happened or not. Perhaps truer because it didn't happen." He argued further that the "common wisdom" of readers was sufficient to derive a valuable message from the work

without being distracted by its departures from verifiable fact. Dianne Osland (1997) concluded that the most strident critics of *Ragtime* have missed the point by assuming that "there are no motives" behind Doctorow's outwardly haphazard use of history.

The resemblance between Coalhouse and the protagonist of "Michael Kohlhaas" has long been recognized. Lieselotte E. Kurth-Voigt (1977), one of the first critics to comment on these similarities, noted that both Coalhouse and Kohlhaas are driven to violent acts when they are denied justice under the law. Whereas Coalhouse is deprived of his Model T, Kurth-Voigt recounted, two of the horse trader Kohlhaas's horses are confiscated in a selfish abuse of authority resembling the actions of *Ragtime*'s Emerald Isle firemen; and, like Coalhouse, Kohlhaas initially seeks satisfaction through peaceful means but eventually declares "war" on his oppressors and is killed in the resulting conflict. Moreover, Kurth-Voigt argued, the role of Martin Luther, who intercedes for Kohlhaas, is substantially the same as that of Booker T. Washington in *Ragtime*.

Beginning in the 1980s, critics have adopted a largely favorable view of Doctorow's blending of fact and fiction. Jameson characterized *Ragtime* as a work that explores "our ideas and stereotypes" about history rather than attempting a faithful recreation of the past. There is now a general consensus that *Ragtime* speaks both to a particular period in American history and to the problematic nature of historiography in general. Various critics have extracted different and sometimes conflicting messages from Doctorow's treatment of *Ragtime*'s historical era. John G. Parks (1991; see Further Reading) considered the novel a "comedy of history" that, while narrating some of the low points in the modern quest for social justice, also presents the possibility of a "pluralistic American future"; in contrast, Michelle M. Tokarczyk (2000) maintained that *Ragtime* emphasizes above all the "darker side of the American Dream."

Michael J. Hartwell

### PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Welcome to Hard Times*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960. Pub. as *Bad Man from Bodie*. London: Deutsch, 1961. (Novel)

*Big as Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966. (Novel)

*The Book of Daniel*. New York: Random House, 1971. (Novel)

*Ragtime*. New York: Random House, 1975. (Novel)

*Drinks before Dinner*. Estelle R. Newman Theatre, New York. 22 Nov. 1978. New York: Random House, 1979. (Play)



*Loon Lake*. New York: Random House, 1980. (Novel)

*American Anthem*. New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 1982. (Nonfiction)

*Daniel*. Paramount, 1983. (Screenplay)

*Lives of the Poets: Six Stories and a Novella*. New York: Random House, 1984. (Novella and short stories)

*World's Fair*. New York: Random House, 1985. (Novel)

*Billy Bathgate*. New York: Random House, 1989. (Novel)

*The People's Text: A Citizen Reads the Constitution*. Jackson: Nouveau, 1992. (Nonfiction)

*Jack London, Hemingway, and the Constitution: Selected Essays, 1977-1992*. New York: Random House, 1993. Pub. as *Poets and Presidents*. London: Macmillan, 1994. (Essays)

*The Waterworks*. New York: Random House, 1994. (Novel)

*The Best American Short Stories 2000*. Ed. E. L. Doctorow and Katrina Kenison. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. (Short stories)

*City of God*. New York: Random House, 2000. (Novel)

*Lamentation 9/11*. New York: Ruder-Fin, 2002. (Nonfiction)

*Reporting the Universe*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003. (Essays)

\**Three Screenplays*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2003. (Screenplays)

*Sweet Land Stories*. New York: Random House, 2004. (Short stories)

*The March*. New York: Random House, 2005. (Novel)

*Creationists: Selected Essays, 1993-2006*. New York: Random House, 2006. (Essays)

*Homer and Langley*. New York: Random House, 2009. (Novel)

*All the Time in the World: New and Selected Stories*. New York: Random House, 2011. (Short stories)

*Andrew's Brain*. New York: Random House, 2014. (Novel)

\*This work includes the screenplays *Daniel*, *Ragtime*, and *Loon Lake*.

## CRITICISM

### John Lukacs (review date 1975-76)

SOURCE: Lukacs, John. "Doctorowurlitzer; or, History in *Ragtime*." Rev. of *Ragtime*, by E. L. Doctorow. *Salmagundi* 31-2 (1975-76): 285-95. Print.

[In the following review, Lukacs characterizes *Ragtime* as a significant example of an emerging literary genre that he terms the "novelized history." Lukacs explains that in this genre, the main characters are subservient to a larger historical narrative, whereas in the earlier and more familiar historical novel, history serves as a backdrop for character development.]

*Lanny Budd*, by Upton Sinclair

*Stalingrad*, by Theodor Plievier

*Nineteen-Nineteen*, by John Dos Passos

*Nineteen-Fourteen*, by Alexander Solzhenitsyn

*In Cold Blood*, by Truman Capote

*The Horrors of Love*, by Jean Dutourd

*The Armies of the Night*, by Norman Mailer

*Ragtime*, by E. L. Doctorow

What do these books—some very bad, one of them very good (Dutourd)—have in common?

Their authors are obsessed with history. They are also attempts to break through to a new genre. Of this some of their authors are more aware than others.

The new genre is the converse of the historical novel. In *War and Peace* or in *Gone With The Wind* history is the background. In the abovementioned books (there are many others) history is the foreground. In the classic historical novel the great events of history are painted on a large canvas in order to lend depth to the story, to give an added dimension to the main characters. In the abovementioned books the reverse: the main characters serve for the purpose of illuminating the history of certain events, of a certain time. In the historical novel the author's principal interest is *the novel*. In these books the author's principal interest is *history*—perhaps a new kind of history, but history nonetheless.

The historical novel (like scientific history) was essentially a nineteenth-century genre. The novelized history is essentially a twentieth-century genre. But—like so many matters in the twentieth century, which is a transitional century, at the end of the Modern Age—this genre has not yet crystallized. (Because the genre has not yet crystallized, "novelized history" is not a particularly good term, but for the time it will have to do.)

Still it represents a stage in the evolution of historical consciousness. Historical consciousness—a much more recent, and much more important development than we

have been accustomed to think—led, among other things, to the novel in the second half of the eighteenth century; and a few decades later, to the historical novel. For the last two hundred years in the Western world an appetite for history has grown that has no precedents. As the young Ortega y Gasset wrote in 1914, the novel and the epic are poles apart.

The theme of the epic is the past as such: it speaks to us about a world which was and which is no longer, of a mythical age whose antiquity is not a past in the same sense as any remote historical time ... the sphere inhabited by the Achilleses and the Agamemnons has no relationship with our existence, and we cannot reach it, step by step, by retracing the path opened up by the march of time. The epic past is not *our* past. Our past is thinkable as having been the present once, but the epic past eludes identification with any possible present ... No, it is not a remembered past but an ideal past.

And as Ortega's principal exegete, the brilliant Julian Marias put it more than a half-century later: We can no longer grasp the meaning of what a man says unless we know *when* he said it and *when* he lived.

Until quite recently, we could read a book or contemplate a painting without knowing the exact period during which it was brought into being. Many such works were held up as 'timeless' models beyond all chronological servitude. Today, however, all undated reality seems vague and invalid, having the insubstantial forms of a ghost ...<sup>1</sup>

By the twentieth century, as Huizinga wrote in 1934, "Historical thinking has entered our very blood." History has become a form of thought. Yet the vast majority of professional intellectuals, including historians, have remained unaware of this—because they could not free their minds from outdated categories of thought, and because of the bureaucratic character of their intellectual ambitions.

At the same time all kinds of writers—some of them not professional intellectuals—grappling with the elusive nature of truth, have become more and more absorbed with the historical dimension thereof. Most of them, too, have been incapable of freeing their minds from outdated ideas of politics, society, justice, reality. Few of them realized that at the end of the Modern, or Bourgeois, Age the novel, as a form of narrative, has been dissolving, tending in two directions: one toward poetry, the other toward history.

I am concerned with the latter, rather than with the former tendency, because of my conviction that here the future of prose literature may lie—unless all literature, as we have known it, is doomed to disappear: a possibility to which I must return at the end of this article.

\* \* \*

In teaching history in the twentieth century some of us require our students to read certain novels, in addition to

the histories and the biographies on our reading lists. We do not do this in order to acquaint them with the principal literary works of a certain period, or to give them a bit of extra culture (though God knows they are in need of that), hanging a literary tailpiece on the end of their historical readings. It is obvious that certain novels tell us certain things about a certain nation, a certain class of people, a certain time: how people behaved and, more important, what they thought and how they felt. Thus I, for one, do not assign to my history students the principal novels (and not even the principal historical novels) of a period but, rather, those that are particularly rich in this kind of sociography. Thus, for example, in a survey course dealing with nineteenth-century France it is Balzac rather than Stendhal, it is *Sentimental Education* rather than *Madame Bovary* that serves this purpose; dealing with mid-Victorian England it is Trollope rather than George Eliot; dealing with nineteenth-century Germany it is *Buddenbrooks*. In Russian history Gogol, some of Turgenev and some of Chekhov will fulfill this purpose better than *Crime and Punishment* or *War and Peace*. I should not put the latter on a reading list dealing with Napoleon's wars.

This function of certain novels is even clearer in American history, because of its peculiar and, until recently, unique texture: a history of a people rather than the history of a state. The most obvious example: In the 1920's much of the history of the North American state, including that of its politics, was cramped and dull; but that was a decade of substantial, perhaps even profound, mutations in the behavior, in the manners, in the sensitivities of Americans. Thus for the history of the Twenties a minor masterpiece such as *The Great Gatsby* serves a purpose. It suggests to American students more about those years than some of the standard histories. More things: more things worth knowing. This is obvious. What is less obvious, and more significant, is that *The Great Gatsby* serves such a purpose better than, say, Dos Passos' *1919*, in spite of the mass of journalistic, and contemporary, material in the latter. And, were I to give a course on the first decade of the American twentieth century, I would put *The House of Mirth* on the reading list but not Doctorow's *Ragtime*, in spite of the latter being not just a novel but novelized history, in spite of the large panopticon of historical stuff displayed in it.

\* \* \*

E. L. Doctorow is a writer of great talent. A Sunday afternoon on the western New York side of Long Island Sound, circa 1906:

... Gulls wheeled overhead, crying like oboes, and behind him at the land end of the marsh, out of sight behind the tall grasses, the distant bell of the North Avenue streetcar tolled its warning.

More streetcar scenery:

... The moon was out, the temperature had dropped, and the trolley clipped along the broad reaches of this wide boulevard with only occasional stops. They passed grassy lots interspersed with blocks of row houses still under construction. Finally the lights disappeared entirely and the little girl realized they were traveling along the edges of a great hillside cemetery. The stones and vaults standing against the cold night sky suggested to her the fate of her mother.

Sentences such as these evoke in one's mind the sensation of instant, and far from superficial, recognition. Yes: that was the way it was. Yes: that's the way it must have been. I wish I had written these—both in my capacity as a writer and as an historian. Still I find *Ragtime* disappointing.

Doctorow performed the reverse trick, without sustaining it. Yes: history is in the foreground, it is the main theme. Yet Doctorow's figures are paper figures, almost wholly one-dimensional ones. He performs tricks with them, paper-silhouette tricks (as does his protagonist "Tateh"). Sometimes the figures are not much more than art nouveau caricatures resuscitated for contemporary interests: like fake-Tiffany objects, like the Beatles' Sergeant Pepper. One set of his main figures are "Father," "Mother," "Younger Brother." There is also a "Coalhouse Walker, Jr." They are not real. But this does not seem to bother Doctorow; we shall soon see why.

I see something here that is not a deficiency in literary skill but a deficiency in the author's thinking. Doctorow understands that Fact and Fiction are not entirely separate and watertight categories: but he cannot free his mind from thinking in terms of these categories—like a twentieth-century physicist or philosopher<sup>2</sup> who knows that objectivity has been shown to be impossible but who nonetheless keeps on talking and thinking in Cartesian categories. In *Ragtime* some of the figures are "fiction," the others are people who "really" lived: Houdini, Emma Goldman, J. P. Morgan, Henry Ford, etc. etc. Like Houdini (who, Doctorow does not fail to remind us, was Jewish), he performs neat tricks, making Goldman, Morgan, Ford, Freud do things and say things they had not said "in fact" but which will make them more "real." But it doesn't. Now, if he had only written a parody ... But no—Doctorow wants to make them real, as in the movies. Yes: a novelist may invent a millionaire banker who is more interesting than J. P. Morgan, an automobile manufacturer who is more interesting than Henry Ford, a Jewish socialist mother-figure who is more interesting than Emma Goldman. But he cannot make *Emma Goldman* more interesting by making her do things and say things she never said because this will be not Emma Goldman, it will be someone else. What Henry Ford or J. P. Morgan really said is more interesting, it will always be more interesting (though perhaps less entertaining) than something we might invent and attribute to them, just as an authentic recording or newsreel of Churchill or Hitler speaking will always be more interesting (though perhaps

less entertaining) than Churchill played by Charles Laughton or Hitler played by Alec Guinness. Fifty years before *Ragtime* Thomas Beer, pleasantly intoxicated with literary ambitions, and slightly contemptuous of the bloodlessness of American academic historianship, attempted—with limitations, of course—a new kind of voluble history. Has Doctorow read *The Mauve Decade*?<sup>3</sup> With all of its foppishness and its verbal artifice, *The Mauve Decade* remains both interesting and entertaining, because of Beer's emphasis on the characters who are real: Beer was more interested in the persons than in the trivia of the historical procession, even as he put the latter to good use, because he knew a great deal of it.

The second limitation is ideological. In all probability it derives from the background of this author. E. L. Doctorow is a New York Jewish intellectual, grounded in a certain Leftist world-view. "Grounded" is the *mot juste*. *Ragtime* is a much better book than Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, the main theme of which is that the Rosenbergs were innocent. But in *Ragtime*, too, Doctorow's view of the United States in the early twentieth century is hardly distinguishable from a New York Marxist (or neo-Marxist; or neo-neo-Marxist) world-view current in the Twenties (or in the Thirties, or Forties, or Fifties, or Sixties, it hardly matters when). He knows a world which is very limited. This, of course, leads to his weaknesses in characterization. In *The Book of Daniel* nearly all the characters were Jewish. In *Ragtime* Tateh and Mameh are at times near-real; "Father" and "Mother" and "Younger Brother" practically never. Unlike her counterpart Evelyn Nesbit, Emma Goldman is described with affection, she is sentimentalized; sometimes the reader can sense her real presence.

And there is more to this. Doctorow knows a certain Jewish environment intimately and deeply. He also knows many, many things about America. But what he does not know is that his knowledge of Jews in America is a different kind of knowledge from his knowledge of America. Doctorow may know *more* about America than, say, Philip Roth, another Jewish writer: but Doctorow does not know it *better*; all of Roth's coarseness and enormous lapses of taste notwithstanding. For in a book such as *Portnoy's Complaint* Roth's underlying theme is not Portnoy's problem with sex but Portnoy's problem with his Jewishness, the recurrent problem of his identity,<sup>4</sup> mostly among non-Jewish Americans. When Roth fails (he, too, knows Jews better than he knows Gentile Americans), he, unlike Doctorow, at least knows what he is trying to do. For Doctorow's interest in America, in the American past, is in *things* American—altogether on a different level from his knowledge of Jewish-American *thoughts*. And this brings us to the deeper limitation, to Doctorow's limited sense of history. Doctorow has a very large bin of knowledge. He has a real feel and talent for the accumulated contents of that bin—like a knowledgeable antiquarian, he knows the value of most bits of trivia. No,