



*MENG 6510, Eminent Writers —
Selected Writings of E. L. Doctorow*

Fall 2017, Michael Wutz

Below, please find some prompts for our class discussion of *Ragtime*. Some of those questions—esp. following our class discussion—might conceivably also lead you into more substantial (final) papers . . .

(a) Doctorow once observed that *Ragtime* could be understood as a critique of the patriarchy, as a commentary on male control, in all its forms, in the first decade(s) of the 20th century. Locate passages and developments in the text that would support such a reading of the novel? Can you identify characters and/or scenes that would qualify such a reading? Where does such a reading perhaps border on cliché (perhaps playfully and on purpose), and where does it provide nuance?

(b) It has been argued—though I would take that with more than a grain of salt (in other words, a pinch)—that postmodern fiction, more so than modern fiction, tends to be self-conscious and playful. Building on (I hope) our class discussion on Doctorow style and Fredric Jameson’s famous critique of the novel, one could claim that postmodern writers often meditate on the process of textual/artistic production in their texts. In *Ragtime*, for example, Tateh, the silhouette artist and eventual movie maker, reflects on the conditions of art in a consumer culture (chapter 17), and making and consuming art in a world that acknowledges mechanical repeatability and reproducibility is a great and grave concern to a number of characters in the novel . It was also a topic of serious concern to cultural critics at the time, such as, in our readings, Walter Benjamin. The question: *Ragtime* could easily be seen as a series of silhouettes—a sequence of ostensible surface sketches—strung together, a “movie book.” Right? If so, what evidence would you need to enlist to make such a case. At the same time, what other compositional models could you identify? Put differently, what scenes, moments, themes, or figures of speech in the narrative text(ure) do you see that might suggest additional compositional principles or formal equivalents to the novel’s structure? This is a question you might want to keep in mind for the other novels we will be studying as well.

(c) During an early conversation with Evelyn Nesbit, Emma Goldmann observes that their meeting is the result of “the mystical rule of all experience.” Shortly thereafter, she comments that, “Who can say who are the instrumentalities and who are the people. Which of us causes, and lives in others to cause, and which of us is meant thereby to live” (ch. 8). These statements have frequently been

taken to suggest the narrative logic of *Ragtime*, the way “things happen” or unfold in the book. Locate related statements in the text, then discuss the validity of this claim. Speculate on the larger implications of such a claim for the novel. How, for example, does that experiential mysticism stand in relation to the “history” presented in the novel?

(d) No doubt, Doctorow doctors *Ragtime* with the finesse of a parlor magician. The fluidity and ease with which he pulls off many of the transitions within and between chapters is elegant and seemingly effortless—“Houdinish,” one might say. This is nowhere more apparent than in the highly crafted ending, in which Father is made to go down with the Lusitania so as to clear the way for Tateh waiting in the wings. What do you make of the ending, an ending whose simplicity and neatness draws attention to itself? What might Doctorow have had in mind in concluding *Ragtime* in such a way? Should or can we read it “straight,” as a family romance with a happy ending? How would you characterize the spirit of the book (which, in turn, would perhaps determine the reader’s way of looking at the book’s conclusion)? Is it a “postmodern” ending that plays with the reader’s assumptions? How does the ending relate to other events and developments in the text? What ways of reading the conclusion can you identify?