



**FACULTAD  
DE  
FILOLOGÍA**



# MATERNITY AND ESCAPISM IN E. L. DOCTOROW'S RAGTIME

EROULLA DEMETRIOU

## RESUMEN

Analizamos el marcado contraste que para E. L. Doctorow existe entre los personajes masculinos y los femeninos en *Ragtime* (1975). Tanto unos como otros tienen en común su deseo de escapar tanto de la brutalidad de la sociedad norteamericana de principios de siglo como de la banalidad de sus vidas. Sin embargo todos los intentos de los personajes masculinos acaban en muerte, con la excepción de Tateh y Houdini, representantes del incipiente estamento judío recién emigrado a la América de principios de siglo. Los personajes femeninos se caracterizan por aferrarse al sentimiento de maternidad, no siempre bien asimilado, en diversos grados y manifestaciones. Mother es la única que logra formar una familia ideal basada en la filosofía del "melting pot" (judío + negro + blanco), según Doctorow el ideal a la que debe aspirar la sociedad norteamericana. A través del análisis de los personajes es posible ver hasta qué punto temas como el escapismo y la maternidad van de la mano en la obra de Doctorow.

## ABSTRACT

This article attempts to analyse the sharp contrast that exists for E. L. Doctorow between the masculine and feminine characters in his novel *Ragtime* (1975). They both share the desire to escape from the brutality of American society at the beginning of the century as well as from the banality of their lives. However, all attempts to do this by the male characters end in death, with the exception of Tateh and Houdini, representatives of the new class of Jewish immigrants that began to arrive in America at the start of the century. The female characters are characterised as holding on to maternal feelings. They do this in different degrees and in different ways, although some of them do not fully accept this role. Mother is the only one of these female characters that manages to form an ideal family based on the philosophy of the "melting pot" society (Jew + black + white), which according to Doctorow is the ideal that American society should aspire to. Through a study of the characters one can see up to what extent themes such as escapism and maternity go hand in hand in Doctorow's novel.

## PRÉCIS

On analyse le prononcé contraste que pour E.L. Doctorow existe entre les personnages masculins et féminins en *Ragtime* (1975). Autant les uns comme les autres ont en commun leur désir d'échapper de la brutalité de la société aux Etats Unis du début du siècle, ainsi que la banalité de leur existence. Mais tous les efforts des personnages masculins finissent en mort, exceptés Taleh et Houdini, représentants de la naissante classe juive, récemment émigrée en Amérique du Nord aux débuts du siècle. Les personnages féminins se caractérisent par s'accrocher au sentiment de la maternité, pas toutes les fois bien assimilé, en divers degrés et manifestations. Mother c'est la seule qui réussit à constituer une famille idéale sur la base de la philosophie du "melting pot" (juif+noir+blanc), d'après Doctorow, l'idéal auquel doit aspirer la société d'Amérique du Nord. Parmi l'analyse des personnages, il est possible de voir jusqu'à quel point des thèmes comme la fuite illusoire (escapism) et la maternité vont ensemble dans l'oeuvre de Doctorow.

When analysing E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), most critics have concentrated on studying different aspects of the novel such as its alleged mock historical outlook, its political, social and ethnical issues (namely the plight of immigrants and racism), and above all, its original «ragtime» approach, including the Little Boy's narrative

voice (Levine 1985; Tokarczyk 1988; Schurz 1988; King 1988; Harter and Thompson 1990). Indeed the novel's prose resembles that of the repetitive and syncopatic and polyrhythmic technique of ragtime music, hence its name (Campbell 1979; Brienza 1981). What is more, this constitutes a remarkable metaphor for the tension between stability and progress present in the novel (Busby 1985). To critics like Emblidge (1977) the repetitive nature of the historical process of the novel is what gives *Ragtime* its title. Matheson (1984) and Schulz (1988) relate the title to the two ideas that «rags» inevitably depict: ragtime music and the economic inequity existing in the kaleidoscopic United States of the period spanning 1902-1918.

Paradoxically enough, in spite of being a novel in which the narrative weight between female and male characters favours the former, most of the above-mentioned critics have placed their interest on the male persona. There have been studies on Coalhouse Walker's radicalization of his Negro awareness, on Tateh's political transformation, and to a lesser extent on Houdini's search of a purpose in life and on Father's patriotism and mediocrity. Major female characters like Mother, Evelyn Nesbit, Sarah and Houdini's mother Cecilia have been left on a decisively lower profile. However, having said that, Jones (1979) has dedicated some attention to Emma Goldman's key role in the novel.

According to King (1988:53), all the characters in the novel have a common wish to escape their banal life in a physical and/or psychological way. On the whole I agree with him, but I also believe that critics have failed to highlight the strong presence of female characters and the instinct of maternity as one of the main «leit motifs» in the novel. In my opinion, the wish to escape their routine lives and weaknesses is a trait that belongs both to the male and female characters of *Ragtime*, but only Mother and Tateh, archetypal characters of motherhood and fatherhood respectively, manage to achieve a clear betterment in their respective lives. Not only do they survive a premature death (which cannot be said of the other main characters of the novel), but they also end up forming a successful and ideal type of family.

As I mentioned before, escapism seems to be the common attitude in the characters' uninteresting lives. Indeed, Houdini, one of the many historical characters that Doctorow inserts in his narrative, is himself a professional escapist, «an escapologist» (*Ragtime*, 78), as he calls himself. His search to find himself takes him on a European tour and away from the care of his tiny and serene Jewish mother, Mrs Cecilia Weiss, whom he suspects he will never see again. His feelings of remorse lead him to border suicide when attempting more and more daring tricks in a somewhat childish attitude to get nearer to her, talk to her and touch her in the afterlife. Houdini goes on a journey as do the other male characters in the novel. Their journey is their means of escape although unfortunately for all except Houdini and Tateh, this journey ends in death, an unwanted form of escape.

Father is an amateur WASP adventurer who accompanies Peary in his conquest of the Arctic without realising that his duty is to remain with his family at home, as

his marriage may be in jeopardy. His wife, Mother, hates his absences whenever she feels he is most needed: «She felt keenly her husband's absence and condemned herself for so readily endorsing his travels» (59). When Father returns, he finds that Mother has partially liberated herself both sexually and socially. He ends up sailing for Europe after the failure of his marriage, only to be killed when the ship he travels in, the «Lusitania», is torpedoed by a German U- boat.

Coalhouse Walker, a proud and successful Negro ragtime musician, goes on an admirable journey to his own death when he feels he has been unjustly abused by a gang of white Irish immigrant firemen led by Willie Conklin whilst driving to visit Sarah, his future wife and mother of his child. Coalhouse Walker's social and political Negro awareness is triggered off when Sarah is brutally killed by the all-powerful powers-that-be represented here by the Vice-President of the USA.

Mother's Younger Brother is a psychological outcast who spends his moody life looking for a reason which he can fight and die for: he becomes the short-lived and inept lover of Evelyn Nesbit; but having been finally rejected, he takes a suicidal and anti-social attitude when he decides to become a Negro himself and to join Coalhouse Walker's lost cause:

*[Mother's Younger Brother] shaved his blond moustache and he shaved his head. He blackened his face and hands with burnt cork, outlined exaggerated lips, put on a derby and rolled his eyes. Having in this way suggested his good faith to Coalhouse's other young followers by appealing to their sense of irony, he went out with them and threw the bombs into Municipal Firehouse No. 2, thereby proving himself to everyone including himself. (181)* Mother's Younger Brother finally dies in a silly accident in Mexico, where he had fled to join Zapata's «campesino» revolution.

Jewish born Tateh stubbornly abandons his wife Mameh after she sells her body for her family's welfare, and finally escapes New York to save his Little Girl from the brutality of the slums they live in. When Evelyn Nesbit finds her tied with a rope to her father she is told that young girls are stolen everyday from their parents and sold into slavery. But Tateh also escapes from the city to take Little Girl away from Evelyn Nesbit's obsessive newly-acquired maternal feelings towards his beautiful daughter. When the narrowminded trade union leaders fail to understand how art can be employed to fight social injustice Tateh decides to escape from them as well as from poverty. This gives way to his political evolution. His individualism leads him to social and economic success as a cinema pioneer and genius and becomes a disguised aristocrat from Latvia called Baron Ashkenazy.

Very seldom are women characters given the chance to escape or journey from their absurd reality, but their attitude to life is usually more positive and practical. Indeed, the female characters in *Ragtime* have their pronounced sense of maternity in common as well as their willingness to end racism and their efforts to aspire to a real melting pot of races, social classes and religions in America. Whereas the male white

characters -with the exception of Mother's Younger Brother-maintain their racial and social differences, women try to rid themselves of them whenever they can. Despite knowing that society will never approve, Mother takes a black girl, Sarah, and her son into her home after the girl has attempted to murder her own baby by burying him alive in Mother's garden:

*I will take the responsibility, [Mother] said. Please bring her [the black girl] inside. And despite the best advice of the doctor and the remonstrations of the police, she would not change her mind. (59)*

Her husband reacts similarly when he comes back from his journey and learns the truth about the black girl and her son:

*We are suffering a tragedy that should not have been ours, he said to his wife. What in God's name possessed you on that day? The country has facilities for indigents. You took her in without sufficient thought. You victimized us all with your foolish female sentimentality. Mother regarded him. (...) She knew he would apologize; nevertheless tears filled her eyes and eventually ran down her face. (157)*

Sex-symbol and frustrated mother Evelyn Nesbit is eager to take in Jewish immigrant Tateh's child as a daughter, although she is unsuccessful in her attempt to do so due to Tateh's radical attitude towards class differences. His opinion of Mameh, his own wife, whom he left after learning of her selling herself, must have been similar to his opinion of Nesbit, who, as anarchist leader Emma Goldman, put it, was «a creature of capitalism» (50), «a daughter and a sister of poor men [who was] used for the pleasure of the wealthy» (69); in other words, a disguised prostitute. Goldman also fights for the rights of the less favoured classes (including women), despite social incomprehension. She ends up being exiled by the American authorities. Mameh is abandoned by her husband (Tateh) and mourned as if she were dead only because she tried to take her family away from poverty by sleeping with her boss... for the sake of a pronounced sense of maternity. It is plain that men's narrowmindedness clashes against the openmindedness that women characters constantly show in the novel. Whereas Emma Goldman is the character that Doctorow uses to serve as an example of how social and sexual equality should be achieved, Mother is in fact the character employed to set an example of the feminine and creative force that tries to fight racial differences. By marrying Tateh-Baron Ashkenazy, she gives way to a real melting pot family (Harter and Thompson 1990:53): her Little Boy and herself are WASPs, her husband Tateh and his Little Girl are Jewish, and Sarah's child, their legally adopted black son. Newly-married Tateh-Baron Ashkenazy's imaginative and artistic mind provides him with an idealistic and optimistic picture of a successful though unconventional family pattern:

*[The three children] were talking and sunning themselves. His daughter, with dark hair, his tow-headed stepson and his legal responsibility, the schwartze child. He suddenly had an idea for a film. A bunch of children who were pals, white, black, fat thin, rich poor, all*

*kinds, mischievous little urchins who would have funny adventures in their own neighbourhood, a society of ragamuffins, like all of us, a gang, getting into trouble and getting out again. (236)*

After all, according to Tokarczyk (1988: xix), *Ragtime* is essentially the story of three families -one white upper middle class family, one Jewish immigrant family and one Black American family- and the stress they each undergo due to social forces that act upon them within a precise historical setting, to finally reduce them to one.

Despite the different social classes and races of the women characters in *Ragtime*, their wish for motherhood is their common characteristic. Mother (with a capital M) is the key maternal element in the novel for reasons already explained. Evelyn Nesbit realises the futility of her life as the sex goddess of the age and the wife of a brutal husband, Harry K. Thaw, who has been capable of killing Evelyn's lover, the famous architect Stanford White. She is even hypocritically forced to defend her husband, whom she hates, in the trial for the murder of White. Their marriage is childless. Evelyn Nesbit meets Little Girl in one of her secret escapes to the city slums and falls in love with the idea of mothering her, but meets Tateh's refusal. She is a frustrated mother and thus she dies, a barren old ugly lady.

Houdini's saintly mother exercises her quiet and serene motherly love towards her son until she dies. Houdini's love for her is the result of an evident Oedipus complex. However, despite his insistence that he really cares for her, he keeps his conscience at rest by giving her money («Into the apron he poured fifty shiny gold dollars. He was a good boy») (80), or he keeps her far from him: «He was madly in love with his ancient mother whom he had installed in his brown stone home on West 113th Street» (34). Mrs Weiss' eyesight was poor and she could hardly see him; yet, she went to see her son off at the harbour when he was to sail for Europe. His behaviour towards her is more that of a child than of an adult:

*He kissed her and hugged her and kissed her hands and went up the gangplank. He ran back down the gangplank and kissed her again, holding her face in his hands and kissing he eyes. She nodded and patted him. He ran up the gangplank and waved. (80)*

Sarah is the only woman character that reluctantly learns to accept motherhood. Social pressures (namely her being an unmarried, uneducated black mother) had led her to the desperate solution of trying to rid herself of her unwanted baby by burying him alive. Mother accidentally discovers him when he is about to die and decides to take up both mother and son in her house on the grounds that, if it is true that Sarah had attempted to kill her newborn child, it is also true that,

*life was not something either of these people took carelessly. They lived in brutal subjection to their hopes and feelings. They suffered themselves. (123)*

Although her pronounced sense of guilt makes Sarah approach her own son with difficulty at first, with Mother's help she not only learns to go near him and grows to love him little by little, but also comes to terms with the idea of forming a family with the father of her child, Coalhouse Walker. Her past guilt is however redeemed when she dies an absurd death while trying to save her proud fiancé's reputation and future marriage by asking for help from the Vice-President of the country.

Finally therefore we ascertain that all male characters in the novel have the common characteristic of wanting to escape from the brutality of American society in the early XXth century and also from their banal lives. Apart from Tateh and Houdini, these attempts to escape unfortunately end in death. Women characters on the other hand hold the common trait of maternity, which is most blatantly manifest in Mother. Indeed, she is successful in forming an ideal American melting pot family. Nesbit and Sarah form a link between the characteristics of the male characters and those of the female characters. Nesbit chooses to flee the society that made her into a sex symbol and tries to escape in her maternal feelings towards Little Girl. Unfortunately for her, her attempts are thwarted by Tateh and she is not allowed to continue in her pursuit of maternity. Sarah on the other hand tries to escape her maternal responsibilities by trying to kill her son, but is fortunately unsuccessful due to the efforts of Mother's matriarchal attitude. Sarah even learns to like the role thanks to Mother's help. Through this analysis of the characters it is subsequently possible to see that in *Ragtime* the themes of escapism and maternity go hand in hand.

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