

# The Collusion of Feminist and Postmodernist Impulses in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Many critics of Doctorow have classified him as a postmodernist writer, acknowledging that a wide number of thematic and stylistic features of his early fiction emanate from the postmodern context in which he took his first steps as a writer. Yet, these novels have an eminently social and ethical scope that may be best perceived in their intellectual engagement and support of feminist concerns. This is certainly the case of Doctorow's fourth and most successful novel, *Ragtime*. The purpose of this paper will be two-fold. I will explore *Ragtime*'s indebtedness to postmodern aesthetics and themes, but also its feminist elements. Thus, on the one hand, I will focus on issues of uncertainty, indeterminacy of meaning, plurality and decentering of subjectivity; on the other hand, I will examine the novel's attitude towards gender oppression, violence and objectification, its denunciation of hegemonic gender configurations and its voicing of certain feminist demands. This analysis will lead to an examination of the problematic collusion of the mostly white, male, patriarchal aesthetics of postmodernism and feminist politics in the novel. I will attempt to establish how these two traditionally conflicting modes coexist and interact in *Ragtime*.

**Keywords:** Feminist literary criticism, Postmodernism, E.L. Doctorow, *Ragtime*, gender change

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With a few notable exceptions, critics of Doctorow's early novels did not hesitate to classify him as a postmodernist writer. Williams (1996: 6) goes so far as to claim that any critical attempt to approach Doctorow's fiction must take into consideration its indebtedness to the impact of postmodernism and poststructuralism. Many of these critics acknowledge that a wide number of thematic and stylistic features of Doctorow's early fiction emanate from the postmodern context in which he took his first steps as a writer (see Jones 1979; Foley 1983; Harris 2001; and Farca 2013). Indeed, some of the most widely acclaimed scholars of postmodern literary theory

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have referred to E.L. Doctorow's early novels in their seminal contributions to the field (see Hutcheon 1988; Jameson 1991; and Waugh 1984). Yet, despite the formal and thematic affinities with postmodernist fiction that Doctorow's early novels show, these books have an eminently ethical and social scope that may be perceived in their intellectual engagement with human suffering and injustice. More specifically, a central social concern that permeates his entire literary oeuvre is gender politics.

In an interview with Bevilacqua, Doctorow casts significant light on his own outlook on postmodernism when he refers to his realist and oppositional allegiances: "I used certain postmodern devices. However, I did that, I think, for very traditional novelistic purposes. [...] My final intention, or faith, is in the traditional novel, or the traditional function of the novelist" (1999: 134). This traditional function of the writer seems to be the promotion of empathy and the improvement of society. In that sense, it is worth highlighting that, when asked in an interview about his attitude towards the Women's Movement, the North American author openly declared that he favors feminism, since he considers it "an indisputable important advance in human apprehension of what life is" (Schlinger 1999: 110).

The collusion of feminist and postmodern impulses that characterizes Doctorow's oeuvre is particularly noteworthy in *Ragtime*. Published in 1975, *Ragtime* represented E.L. Doctorow's admittance into the American contemporary literary canon and also meant his greatest commercial success so far. At its simplest, the novel is a historical fiction set in New York which deals with the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Ragtime Era. It tells the story of the traumatic encounter of three families—one WASP, one Jewish immigrant and one African-American—that interact with a number of historical figures and participate in some of the most transcendental events in North American history at the turn of the century.

The purpose of this paper will be two-fold. First, drawing on Cornier-Michael's (1996: 5) pertinent formulation of the notions of feminist and postmodern 'impulses', this paper will explore *Ragtime*'s indebtedness to postmodern aesthetics and themes as well as its feminist elements. Thus, the focus will be placed, on the one hand, on issues of uncertainty, indeterminacy of meaning, plurality, referentiality and decentering of subjectivity in *Ragtime*; on the other hand, this paper will examine the novel's attitude towards gender oppression, violence and objectification, its denunciation of hegemonic gender configurations and its direct reference to certain feminist demands. The analysis of *Ragtime*'s postmodern and feminist impulses will lead to an examination of the problematic collusion of the mostly white, male, patriarchal aesthetics of postmodernism and feminist politics in the novel. I will attempt to establish how these two traditionally conflicting modes coexist and interact in *Ragtime*, and to what extent do they undermine or complement each other.

## 2. POSTMODERN IMPULSES

To begin with, *Ragtime* arguably incorporates key postmodern themes. First of all, the novel seems to give expression to the poststructuralist understanding of the indeterminacy of meaning and the impossibility of truthful representation (see Derrida 1967; Foucault 1970). And so, although in his essays Doctorow generally advocates the authority and superiority of fiction (see Doctorow 1993), he ultimately recognizes the indeterminacy of not only writing, but also human experience, which may be best seen in the structural indefiniteness of *Ragtime*. Further, the novel depicts an individual response to the overwhelming sense of uncertainty that characterizes contemporary existence. The narrator—who is ultimately unplaceable and stands in the novel for the figure of the writer—grapples with his/her untimely realization that whatever the efforts to capture reality, meaning seems to slip away from his/her hands, leaving him/her with serious doubts as to the possibility of ever representing truth. This is made evident by the narrator's playful switching from omniscient stream of consciousness to a mock pursuit of historical accuracy when he/she attempts to justify the source of specific information: “we have the account of this odd event from the magician's private, unpublished papers” (Doctorow 2006: 267).<sup>2</sup>

*Ragtime* also carries out a critical interrogation and revision of the universalizing metanarratives of myth, politics and history. The novel reflects the postmodernist decentering of culture characterized by mistrust of grand narratives and an all-encompassing sense of plurality (see Lyotard 1984: xxiv). As John G. Parks has noticed, “Doctorow's fiction shows a willingness to take risks, to counter the tendency of a culture to monopolize the compositions of truth” (1991: 462). The contestation of totalizing narrative traditions based on the communication of facts is one of the key issues dealt with by Doctorow in his seminal essay *False Documents* (1993). He coins the terms ‘regime language’ and ‘language of freedom’ to refer to precisely this division between the power of language residing in verifiability and the superior power of ideal imagined language that is unverifiable and derives its strength from “what we threaten to become” (1993: 152-3). Thus, the decentering of metanarratives becomes a central project in *Ragtime*, where the grand narratives of myth, politics and history are respectively undermined. And so, for instance, *Ragtime* becomes the narrator's attempt to rewrite history at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the rendering of several fictional and fictionalized historical characters' engagement with it who, interestingly enough, come from different social and racial contexts and have traditionally been denied a place in mainstream historiography.

Indeed, Doctorow's affinities with postmodernism also become clear in *Ragtime*'s attitude towards history, reality and fiction; in the novel, the confusion of the fact with its model seems to point to the postmodern notion that the real and the imaginary are no

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<sup>2</sup> Further references to the novel will be to the Penguin Modern Classics edition, published in 2006.

longer distinguishable (see Baudrillard 1988:175). The novel's main thematic concerns, as argued above, are historical events. This responds to Doctorow's predilection for historical plots, since they become an ideal subject matter to reflect on "the 'fictiveness' of all discourse about reality and history" (Bevilacqua 1990: 94). In fact, the constant intermingling of what is generally considered verifiable historical fact and the author's fictive imagination allows Doctorow to redefine the past and open it to new and multiple interpretations. This is particularly obvious in *Ragtime*, where the categories of history, reality and fiction become helplessly blurred in a postmodernist celebration of uncertainty and plurality of meanings. As Doctorow concludes in his essay "False Documents," "there is no fiction or non-fiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative" (1993: 163).

In *Ragtime*, Doctorow's postmodernist subversive drive is also revealed in stylistic terms. In his 1967 article, John Barth first draws attention to what he terms "the literature of exhaustion." This essay constitutes Barth's first attempt to document the exhaustion of the aesthetics of Modernism and the emergence of what would be later called postmodernist fiction, articulating the sentiment that "the novel's time as major art form is up" (1984: 71). However, far from showing himself pessimistic about the future of literature, Barth explains that "one way to handle such a feeling might be to write a novel about it" (1984: 72). Thus, his influential article heralds the rise of a highly self-reflexive mode of writing that is characterized by narrative experimentalism, the decentering of subjectivity, parodic revision of traditional forms and intertextual playfulness.

Echoing such understanding, *Ragtime*'s aesthetic affinities with postmodernism may be seen, first of all, in the paradoxical rejection of objectivity that it deploys. In an interview with Friedl and Schulz, Doctorow seems to advocate a dismissal of the central authority of the writer, who is instead replaced by a "multiplicity of witnesses": "since history can be composed, you see, then you want to have as many people active in the composition as possible. A kind of democracy of perception. Thousands of eyes, not just one" (1999: 113). According to the writer, then, the plurality of perspectives that literature generates can provide a better understanding of different models of reality. Such an aspiration manifests itself in *Ragtime* mainly in terms of experimentalism with the narrating subject. The voice of the narrator is ultimately unplaceable, since it remains impossible to establish whether the narratorial voice is merely that of the mock historian or the Little Boy in the WASP family, or even a first-person plural collective narrator that comprises the voices of the Little Boy and Tatch's Little Girl.

Furthermore, the postmodernist revision of metanarratives that *Ragtime* thematically represents also manifests itself formally in the blurring and reassessment of the traditional conventions of literary genres. In *Ragtime* this is mainly achieved through the use of parody. The genre of the historical chronicle is parodically appropriated by emphasizing the chronicler-narrator's unreliability and playfulness, in effect destabilizing and playing against traditional frameworks of generic interpretation.

Similarly, Doctorow's inclination towards postmodernist aesthetics can be observed in the parodic intertextual references that pervade his novel. Discussing Jorge Luis Borges's experiments with fiction as an example, Barth (1984:73) refers to the continuous importance of intertextuality for the emerging postmodern novel in his 1967 essay. As Hutcheon eloquently elaborates in her seminal book on postmodernist poetics, intertextual parody "offers a sense of the presence of the past, but a past that can be known only from its texts, its traces—be they literary or historical" (1988: 125). In this sense, it is worth highlighting that the title of the novel already points to its intertextual nature through its parodic connections to historical intertexts, namely the Ragtime Era, but also Ragtime music, whose syncopating structure the novel seems to imitate (see for example Foley 1983; Ostendorf 1991 and Roberts 2004). More specifically, intertextuality plays a paramount role not merely in its relation to historical events, but also in its ironic reworking of the textual literary past, which deeply affects issues of characterization: for instance, the name of one of its main protagonists — Coalhouse Walker — and the events in which he becomes involved have been recognized by many critics as an intertextual reference to Kleist's short story "Michael Kohlhaas" (see for example Kurth-Voigt 1977; Moraru 1997 and Orbán 2003).

*Ragtime*'s indebtedness to postmodernism may also be seen in its displacement of subjectivity. As Hutcheon has argued (1988: 27), postmodern novels problematize the notions of enunciation and subjectivity through allegory or even through textualized questioning of the notion of narrative focalization. This is precisely the case in *Ragtime*, since its fragmented, iterative structure challenges the narrative conventions of the inscription of the subject as coherent and continuous centre of consciousness. Indeed, the novel is constructed on the basis of constant abrupt through smooth shifts of focalization that make it impossible for the reader to be sure of which of the character's consciousness is being favored: "They were immediately sensitive to the enormous power of the immigration officials. [...] Such power was dazzling. The immigrants were reminded of home. They were despised by New Yorkers. They were filthy and illiterate. [...] They had no honor and worked for next to nothing. They stole. They drank. They raped their own daughters" (13). Further, as Hutcheon has suggested, "[t]he meeting of fictional characters and historical personages in the novel may also have a function in the problematizing of the nature of the subject in the sense that it foregrounds the inescapable contextualizing of the self in both history and society" (1988: 27).

Finally, Doctorow's indebtedness to postmodernist aesthetics may be substantiated by *Ragtime*'s metafictional self-reflexivity. According to Patricia Waugh's (1984: 2) definition, a metafictional text is one that self-consciously draws attention to its own status as an artifact. This is something that *Ragtime* actively seeks: the narrator constantly reflects on the process of his/her own textual composition, which is presented to the reader as the text that we are reading: "Our knowledge of this clandestine history comes to us [...]" (205). Further, the novel carries out a metafictional rethinking of the epistemological and ontological

relationship between history and fiction without trivializing either the historical or the factual.

All things considered, it seems apt to agree with Hutcheon's analysis of *Ragtime* as a paradigmatic example of the postmodernist mode of writing, and more specifically, of what she has termed "historiographic metafiction" (1988: ix). This label encompasses "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" that incorporate "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs" (1988: 5). Summing up, when considered in the light of Doctorow's declarations of sentiments in his essays and interviews, *Ragtime* thematically and stylistically epitomizes the strong spirit of subversion and, at the same time, the sense of skepticism that typically characterize postmodernism.

While E.L. Doctorow's thematic and aesthetic affinities with postmodernism and his indebtedness to the postmodern cultural context are unquestionable, there is a strong sense of contradiction inherent both to his fiction and non-fiction. His writings manifest a strong commitment to skepticism (see Tokarczyk: 2000) and place a strong emphasis on the fictiveness of literature. Yet, they simultaneously demonstrate that Doctorow is fully convinced of a privileged role of fiction with respect to truth and knowledge. Indeed, *Ragtime* engages with social, political and historical realities in an extremely meaningful way, which suggests a movement beyond postmodernism and towards the recuperation of faith in meaning and the possibility of truthful textual representation. Certainly, some critics would seem to agree with the tenet that despite sharing some of the most common features traditionally associated with a postmodern poetics, Doctorow's *Ragtime* also implicitly rejects the postmodern contempt for the outside world (see Saltzman 1983; Levine 1985; Harter & Thompson 1990; Parks 1991). More specifically, some critics have approached *Ragtime*'s social scope, establishing that the novel denounces the deplorable consequences of the socio-economic living conditions that African-Americans and immigrants faced in the United States at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see for example Bevilacqua 1990: 102). Thus, *Ragtime* seems to stage a return to the idea that art can provide a sense of reality, which reinforces the novelist's own claim (in Trenner 1983: 48) that his early novels endorse a "poetics of engagement" with the ills of contemporary North American society. It is this paper's contention that such an engagement may be best perceived in the novel's preoccupation with issues of gender and oppression.

### 3. FEMINIST IMPULSES

To begin with, the novel places a strong emphasis on the fact that women face conditions of overt victimization that derive not merely from their socio-economic context but also from their own feminine condition in a deeply patriarchal society. Thus, characterization in *Ragtime* functions as a tool to expose the oppression, and, at

times, violence that women faced at the turn of the century and which intersects with racial and class discrimination. The best example is probably the character of Sarah, an African-American washgirl who enters the narrative right after a newborn "brown" baby is found semi-buried and half-dead in Mother's garden (58). It becomes obvious that she has attempted to kill her child in cold blood. Yet, one soon learns that the baby's cord has been bitten off and he is still bloody, which suggests that Sarah has not been attended by anyone during labor. At this point one begins to understand that Sarah must have acted out of intense despair. And this is precisely the case, since it is explained later on that Sarah has been abandoned by the father of her baby, a rather well-off ragtime player named Coalhouse Walker. Sarah's victimization in the novel cannot be dissociated from the adverse socio-economic forces and the racism of US society at the time. Yet, it seems apt to claim that her gender worsens her living-conditions, rendering her vulnerable to further oppression and violence.

A similar case represented in the novel would be that of Mameh, a Jewish immigrant from Latvia who struggles to survive in the poorest area of the State of New York. The hardships of her life as a working-class immigrant are notably accentuated by her condition as a woman in a deeply patriarchal culture. Indeed, the novel shows how the terrible circumstances that her family must endure force her to helplessly submit to sexual abuse at the hands of her employer:

The owner invited her into his office [...]. He counted out the money, adding a dollar more than she deserved. This he explained was because she was such a good-looking woman. He smiled. He touched Mameh's breast. Mameh fled, taking the dollar. The next time the same thing happened [...]. She became accustomed to the hands of her employer. One day with two weeks' rent due she let the man have his way on a cutting table. He kissed her face and tasted the salt of her tears. (15)

It is possible to deduce from the narrative that Mameh is the one who actually supports her whole family with her sewing wages. Thus, what other (white, male) characters judge as "moral degeneracy" (15) is in fact an act of self-sacrifice on Mameh's part. In other words, she helplessly tolerates her own sexual victimization to ensure her family's survival in utterly adverse economic circumstances, merging economic and sexual oppression. It is worth adding that when Tateh finds out that his wife has been complying with the employer's abuse, he casts her away without giving it a second thought, condemning her to an even worse fate of vagrancy and prostitution (38).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The undecidability with respect to the character of Tateh points to E.L. Doctorow's concern with the exploration of the limits between the categories of victim and perpetrator in the face of injustice, dispossession and discrimination. Victim-perpetrator characters are particularly recurrent throughout Doctorow's oeuvre. Their condition is constantly problematized, though never justified, in novels such as *The Book of Daniel* (1971) and *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960).

Another character whose representation in *Ragtime* addresses the victimization of women in patriarchal society is the fictionalized Evelyn Nesbit. At first sight, it may appear that the sort of oppression that she experiences is diametrically opposed to the victimization which Sarah and Mameh suffer, due to Evelyn's status as member of the privileged class. Indeed, Evelyn is described as a celebrated beauty and artist's model that is married to the millionaire Harry K. Thaw, and was once mistress of the renowned architect Stanford White (4-5). Furthermore, she is described as a sexual goddess who "had caused the death of one man and wrecked the life of another [...]" (5), which leads one to perceive her as a sort of *femme fatale* who exerts her power in order to manipulate men. However, the reader soon discovers that the similarities among these three female characters are surprisingly remarkable in spite of class differences. Evelyn is nothing but a broken toy at the hands of two abusive men, who take advantage of their superior economic position to victimize her. Thus, we learn that she was drugged and raped by White when she was only a fifteen year-old chorus girl (20). Later it is revealed that Evelyn was taken on a trip to Europe by the violent and deranged Thaw, who paid her mother off and then took her to a castle in Germany to rape and torture her:

Their first night in the Schloss he pulled off her robe, threw her across the bed and applied a dog whip to her buttocks and the backs of her thighs. Her shrieks echoed down the corridors and stone stairwells. [...] Shocking red welts disfigured Evelyn's flesh. She cried and whimpered all night. In the morning Harry returned to her room, this time with a razor strop. She was bedridden for weeks (21).

Later on, during Thaw's trial for murder, she agrees to testify on his behalf despite knowing "better than anyone how innocent Harry was" (23). We also learn that he further humiliates her by forcing her to give him fellatio while he is in jail, as "proof of her devotion" (22).

The examples provided by these three female characters highlight *Ragtime's* articulation of gender oppression and (sexual) violence as affecting women regardless of their race, ethnicity or social class. In other words, differences aside, the victimization and oppression that the female characters in *Ragtime* suffer are shown to cut across race, class and ethnicity, which is made visible by the characters' parallel helplessness in patriarchal society. This idea was certainly shared by the second wave of feminists who were writing at the time of Doctorow's coming of age as novelist, although it has been, ever since, rejected by black and postcolonial feminist critics.

It is certainly true that Nesbit's plight differs from that of Sarah and Mameh, and empathizing with her suffering seems particularly difficult in the light of her economic ambitions: "she had grown up playing in the streets of a Pennsylvania coal town. She was the Gaudens statue Stanny White had put on the top of the tower of Madison Square Garden, a glorious bronze nude Diana" (23). As the fictionalized Emma Goldman later on accuses her, "you're nothing more than a clever prostitute. You accepted the conditions in which you found yourself and you triumphed. But



what kind of victory has it been? The victory of a prostitute. [...] you are a creature of capitalism” (48-9). In that sense, *Ragtime* may be said to manifest underlying criticism of traditional female compliance with their own victimization in an attempt to fulfill economic aspirations which are in turn imposed by the capitalist values of the patriarchal society that oppresses them. Yet, the novel seems to leave open another possibility for the interpretation of Evelyn's behavior, which may be alternatively understood as revolutionary: in the only slightly feminist-oriented reading of the novel, Phyllis Jones (1979: 25) has claimed that her analysis of the novel's self-made men has been intended to remind us of a cultural fact, that the rise from rags to riches was a possibility only for men. While fully agreeing with Jones's interpretation and taking up the argument where she leaves it, it is possible to claim that Evelyn's determination to take her future into her own hands and do whatever it takes to fulfill her ambitions is a sort of triumph after all, even if it constitutes “the victory of a prostitute,” in Goldman's words (48). That is to say, in spite of the apparent condemnation of Evelyn's immoral ways to fulfill her ambition at the level of textual implications, it is undeniable that she has achieved her aim: rising from rags to riches and gaining certain economic independence, a remarkable attainment for a woman at the turn of the twentieth century.

Leaving this issue aside, the character of Evelyn displays an acute masochistic drive that deserves further examination. And so, for instance, the reader learns that she decides to break her affair with a tender and loving man, Mother's Younger Brother, because “she loved him but she wanted someone who would treat her badly and whom she could treat badly” (74). Her self-destructiveness may be better understood in the context of the abuse that she has endured since she was a young girl, which seems to have left indelible scars on her psyche. Indeed, it is not difficult to perceive that Evelyn is psychologically unwell, which, it is hinted, may be traced back to her history of sexual and physical victimization, as described above. Thus, when she meets Tateh's Little Girl in the street she becomes infatuated with her to a point that verges upon insanity: “[s]he was so desperately in love that she could no longer see properly. [...] She saw everything through a film of salt tears, and her voice became husky because her throat was bathed in the irrepressible and continuous crying which her happiness caused her” (43). Evelyn's behavior towards the Little Girl can be easily understood as a process of acting out her own traumatic past: she was abandoned by her mother at the hands of two abusive men, so she takes care of the Little Girl as a protective mother would; at the same time she sees herself reflected in the Little Girl's outstanding beauty and understands the tragedy of her prospective future as some man's sexual toy. Therefore, the representation of Nesbit's psychological condition arguably allows the novel to warn about the disastrous psychological consequences of patriarchal oppression and violence.

The articulation of Nesbit further allows *Ragtime* to address a related source of oppression: the objectification of the female body. It is explained, for instance, that Harry K. Thaw takes Evelyn to Europe because he wants to use her body “without

worrying if White was to have his turn when he was through" (19). That is, he demands exclusive property rights. Further, she is defined as "the first sex goddess in American history" (70) and, as the woman who provided the inspiration for the movie star system (71), because some *men* in the business community realize that "Evelyn's face on the front page of a newspaper sold out the edition" (71). Thus, Nesbit is presented in the novel as a mere instrument by means of which more products can be sold, in effect denouncing the birth of the business of sexualized publicity that presents the female body as passive object of the male gaze and as a commodified product that can be sold and bought. Most interestingly, Evelyn herself willingly complies with the objectification of her own body in the name of an ideal of beauty. Thus, when at one point in the novel she takes off her underclothes, we learn that "marks of the stays ran vertically like welts around Nesbit's waist. The evidence of garters could be seen in the red lines running around the tops of her thighs" (53). It is worth pointing out that the marks left on her body by her corset are described in the exact same terms as the wounds that Thaw inflicts on her at the German castle mentioned above. This cannot be a coincidence: it may be claimed that there is a connection at the level of textual implications between male physical abuse of women and female physical subjugation to the aesthetic rules set by patriarchal society. Thus, *Ragtime* may be also read as an attempt to highlight the negative effects of internalized sexism as manifested in the compliance with artificial beauty standards and self-objectification. Phrasing once again the novel's ideology, Goldman befittingly claims: "women kill themselves" (54).

In its effort to denounce gender discrimination, *Ragtime* also engages with perhaps less harmful but much more widespread ideological forms of oppression through the representation of a well-off WASP family. Indeed, the characterization of Mother and Father<sup>4</sup> constitutes the central tool that the book employs to explore and contest the polarization of masculine and feminine models of conduct in US society at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At a first glimpse the character of Mother seems to represent the highest degree of domestic self-fulfillment: she is conveniently married to a wealthy entrepreneur and enjoys a quiet and comfortable upper-middle class life. Like the average woman in her social stratum, she has never endured any hardships or suffered physical or sexual abuse. However, her characterization highlights the fact that she is bound by certain cultural and social conventions that must be dutifully observed. Indeed, Mother's subjection to social oppression can be best perceived in the book's emphasis on her modesty and reluctance to engage in sexual intercourse, an attitude which Father very much admires and appreciates. Through her focalization, sex is presented as something distasteful and grotesque but which is, nevertheless, considered to be part of her wifely duties:

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<sup>4</sup> As Jones has noted, the WASP family's role as representative of a whole class in the novel is suggested by the omniscience of the narration, the general absence of first-person references and the capitalization of these generic names; the same happens with Mameh, Tateh and the Little Girl (1979: 20).

Father was a burly man with strong appetites, but he appreciated his wife's reluctance to assume the indelicate attitudes that answered to his needs. [...] He was solemn and attentive as befitted the occasion. Mother shut her eyes and held her hands over her ears. Sweat from Father's chin fell on her breasts. She started. (10-11)

As this quote illustrates, the WASP household's sexual politics are a source of humor and irony for the narrator, who at every chance satirizes the family's submission to patriarchal rules of female behavior. Mother and Father's attitude towards sexual intercourse appears even more limiting when compared to the unconstrained sexual conduct of the Eskimo women: during his expedition to the Pole, Father must confront a society that is not bound by rules of female modesty and submission but which he, nevertheless, considers to be undeveloped. He is at once fascinated and repulsed by what he calls the "primitive woman's claim to the gender," by her "grunts and shouts of fierce joy" (63). He is shocked to see an Eskimo woman "thrusting her hips upwards to the thrusts of her husband" and "pushing back" (63). And he disparagingly contrasts this attitude to Mother's "fastidiousness, her grooming and her intelligence" (63).

Father's extremely narrow view of the way women ought to behave earns him an even bigger shock when he returns from the Pole: he finds his wife holding a black baby and deeply changed by his absence. She seems to have undergone an evolution that started when she was forced to make her first independent decision: keeping Sarah's baby and taking responsibility for the two of them against the advice of the doctor and the policeman, who are, after all, traditionally key representatives of white male authority in western patriarchal society (59). Overcoming her despair at "deserted by the race of males" (57), she manages to remain faithful to her own principles and acts independently of male control, which provides her with a new sense of empowerment. Thus, at Father's return Mother has become a much more autonomous woman, going so far as to have assumed executive responsibilities in the family business: "Mother could now speak crisply of such matters as unit cost, inventory and advertising. [...] She had made changes in certain billing procedures and contracted with four new sales agents in California and Oregon. [...] Father was astounded" (93). On top of that, we learn that Mother is also starting to "claim her gender" (93) in bed. Indeed, Father is shocked to find that "she was in some way not as vigorously modest as she'd been" (93) and, humorously enough, considers her readiness in bed to be God's punishment for his absence. Furthermore, he finds on his wife's bedside table a volume entitled *The Ladies' Battle* and a pamphlet dealing with family limitation written by Emma Goldman. Finally, Mother's evolution can also be perceived in her attitude towards Sarah and her baby. Overcoming the widespread racism of her society, she treats them with extreme empathy and develops genuine affection for them, to the extent that she does not hesitate to legally adopt the child after Sarah's death.

Mother's newly acquired measure of independence and Father's failure to come to terms with it dramatically deteriorate the relationship between them, causing Mother to awake to the reality of her husband's parochial shortcomings:

[...] she was coming to the realization that whereas once, in his courtship, Father might have embodied the infinite possibilities of loving, he had aged and gone dull, made stupid, perhaps, by his travels and his work, so that more and more he only demonstrated his limits, that he had reached them, and that he would never move beyond them. (210)

Mother's estrangement from Father—which is aggravated by her sorrow at the loss of Sarah and makes Father feel “altogether invisible” (182)—culminates in a new and unprecedented tension between them that may be best qualified as a power struggle. And so, Father reproaches his wife for having taken Sarah in, accusing her of victimizing the family with her “foolish female sentimentality” (175). Father's outbursts are particularly noteworthy, because ever since his return, it is obvious that he has felt enormous displeasure at his wife's newly developed autonomy. It is his masculinity and authority that he feels to be demeaned and threatened by his wife's empowerment. Therefore, by deprecating her sentimentality and identifying it as a feminine trait, he might be seeking to recover his sense of control and reinforce his wounded sense of manliness. Father also attempts to exert his power through sexual subjection of his wife, who feels compelled to comply with her husband's sexual demands by a long-learned sense of wifely duty. And so, when they travel to Atlantic City, we learn that “after-the-swim was soon established by Father as the time for amour. [...] She silently resented the intrusion” (210). The emphasis on Mother's silent submissiveness actually works to undermine Father's success in submitting his wife to his own desires. In addition, Father's recovered sense of power is but illusory: not only has Mother moved from disregard to open animosity, but the bitterness and repulsion that she feels towards her husband drives her into another man's arms, leading to the dissolution of their marriage. In short, in spite of his efforts to return to the old sexual politics of the upper-middle-class household, Father has been clearly defeated and cannot even count on the reader's sympathy.

As a result, it may be claimed that Mother's evolution and the power struggle that has resulted from it underscores the novel's preoccupation with hegemonic models of masculinity and femininity as well as gender relations. The reader is led to empathize with a female character who, to a certain extent, has managed to awake to the reality of her own submission and has striven to stand up to the patriarchal ideological stagnation that Father represents in the novel. The latter, on the contrary, stands for a model of masculinity that *Ragtime* openly ridicules and undermines. His abusive behavior is constantly satirized, which effectively shatters the possibility of reader identification with his dissatisfaction and confusion.

A further indication of *Ragtime*'s feminist leanings is its emphasis on female cooperation as a source of strength. In that sense, it is worth highlighting Mother's selfless act of kindness towards Sarah and Evelyn's tender devotion to the Little Girl, as discussed above. Mother's evolution seems to be precisely brought about by her determination to help the African-American woman. Similarly, Evelyn's experience of living in the slums with the Little Girl plays a key role in her new awareness of the needs of others, causing her to use the money that she has received from her husband—her “hard-earned fortune” (74)—to help the underprivileged. Thus, it may be claimed that the novel subtly weaves a co-operative net of support among the female characters, who are interconnected through ties of empathy and mutual help: Mother saves Sarah's life, she reads Emma Goldman's pamphlets and becomes the Little Girl's step mother after marrying Tateh, replacing Evelyn in that role, who in turn becomes tightly attached to Emma. The latter is from the very beginning an outspoken defender of the rights of women regardless of their race or class, and specifically becomes Nesbit's tutor.

The fictionalized representation of the historical Emma Goldman deserves further consideration. If the analysis carried out so far has hinted at the book's support and visibilization of certain feminist concerns, the character of Emma Goldman may be claimed to constitute proof of it. Indeed, Goldman may be seen as the novel's embodiment of feminist ideology, which the narrator renders at every turn. For instance, during a socialist meeting that she organizes in the slums, Goldman claims that marriage as an imposition must be repudiated, because it is a shallow, empty mockery—we arguably find certain support of such statement in the story itself, in the WASP marriage between Mother and Father. She continues: “can you socialists ignore the double bondage of one half of the human race? Do you think the society that plunders your labor has no interest in the way you are asked to live with women? Not through freedom but through bondage?” (46). The (male) socialists in the meeting, however, are not interested. Rather, most of them show outrage, which points to the hypocrisy and sexism for which the Socialist Labor Movement has traditionally been well-known.<sup>5</sup>

The reproduction of these ideas has earned Doctorow accusations of anachronism (see Luckacs 1976: 289). It is certainly true that some of the ideas ascribed to Goldman in the novel would seem more in keeping with second-wave feminist ideology: “[i]s our genius only in our wombs? Can we not write books and create learned scholarship and perform music and provide philosophical models for the betterment of mankind? Must our fate always be physical?” (46). However, in spite of Doctorow's well-deserved reputation as a fabulator and his taste for the deliberate blurring of differences between the historical record and fictional accounts, as argued

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<sup>5</sup> E.L. Doctorow has questioned the traditional sexism of the Left in other novels, most notably *The Book of Daniel* (1971).

above, it appears that the fictionalized representation of Emma Goldman has not been purposefully distorted. As Shulman explains (1998: 6), the American anarchist/revolutionary belonged to an ideological trend that based its analysis of gender divisions on a radical critique of the family, and often embraced the sexual radicalism of the birth control and Free Motherhood movements. Doctorow's purpose in introducing in his narrative a character so outspoken in her condemnation of patriarchal oppression of women might seem self-explanatory; Goldman's ideology smoothly complements and reinforces the novel's underlying support of feminist concerns. Furthermore, as Jones has aptly noticed, the novel encourages reader identification with Emma since she comes out as the only female character that succeeds in balancing "individual needs with political demands, personal success with societal compassion" (1979: 27).

#### **4. CONCLUSION: THE COLLUSION OF POSTMODERNISM AND FEMINISM**

In the light of the analysis conducted so far, it seems apt to claim that *Ragtime* manifests definite postmodern and feminist impulses. The collusion of postmodernism and feminism is complex and wide-ranging. Indeed, critics like Felski (1989: 70), Waugh (2012: 6, 10) and Hite (1989: 1-2) have famously claimed that the two trends are incompatible. For one thing, postmodernism is traditionally premised on the undermining of individual subjectivity, reason and truth, as argued above, whereas feminism, in its many variants, has adamantly retained the belief in the primacy of individual agency and the actuality and historicity of women's oppression and subordination. Many feminist critics have assumed a fairly standardized version of postmodernism as ahistorical, apolitical and relativistic that shatters the subject and cancels the possibility of individual agency. Yet, this may have been the result of the rather limited notions of postmodernist fiction that (mostly white male) critics have developed due to their almost exclusive focus on the experimental avantgardist canonical texts written by white male writers. Further, it is undeniable that postmodern theory supports itself on an overwhelmingly list of male proper names who have been credited with establishing the foundations of contemporary cultural theory, most of whom have been quoted above. As Cornier-Michael has put it, "[p]ostmodern fiction's tendency to reduce individual agency to corporate agency and sociopolitical forces to chance and patterns of coincidences has understandably drawn sharp criticism from feminist literary critics and, unfortunately, has also led many to a wholesale rejection of postmodernism" (1996: 3-4).

Against this perspective, critics such as Cornier-Michael (1996) and Hekman (1992) have argued that, when seen as plural and dynamic rather than as homogeneous and static, and as encompassing a wide range of subversive tendencies, feminism and postmodernism not only are *not* mutually exclusive but also have

similar aims.<sup>6</sup> In keeping with that argument, Singer claims that feminism and postmodernism have in common “an explicit discursive strategy of challenging the terms, conventions, and symbols of hegemonic authority in ways that foreground the explicitly transgressive character of this enterprise” (1992: 469). Similarly, the sociologist Janet Wolff argues that “the radical task of postmodernism is to deconstruct apparent truths, dismantle dominant ideas and cultural forms, and to engage in the guerrilla tactics of undermining closed and hegemonic systems of thought,” which she characterizes as “the promise of postmodernism for feminist politics” (1996: 87).

Indeed, formal strategies that radically subvert Western metaphysics and are commonly associated with postmodern aesthetics are also prevalent in fiction with feminist impulses since the 1960s. Among these, some of the most frequent ones have to do with the disruption of traditional, essentialist notions of subjectivity, character development, representation, language, narrative, history and binary logic in general, the pastiche of various types of texts or discourses, the dislocation of traditional spatial-temporal contexts, the self-conscious refusal to provide narrative authority or closure, and the appropriation and reworking of popular forms (see Cornier-Michael 1996: 5). Cornier-Michael goes so far as to (rightly) argue that “as an active oppositional politics, feminism transforms or translates the strategies it co-opts so as to satisfy its political aims” (1996: 6). Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that postmodernism, as a cultural movement, shares with feminism its subversive drive precisely in that it has led to the decentering of dichotomies and the inscription into history of previously silenced groups that traditionally occupied the margins of society due to their “marginal” gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion or class. This is certainly also a key aim of intersectional feminism. As Hutcheon (1988: 61) has noted, the 1970s and 1980s saw an increasingly fast inscription of these “ex-centrics,” as she calls them, into theoretical discourse and artistic practice, in effect challenging the traditional “centrisms” of our culture.

Such postmodern spirit of subversion inspires and arguably benefits *Ragtime*'s support of feminist concerns. First of all, the novel's decentering of dichotomies can be seen in the representation of three parallel families with salient women — one white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, one working-class European immigrant, and one African-American — as well as other traditionally excluded female characters. The result is a narrative with multiple centers and no margins that inscribes into fiction and history those that have traditionally been marginalized from them. Secondly, the novel's understanding of the indeterminacy of meaning and its uncertainty as to the

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<sup>6</sup> The theories of Judith Butler and of the French feminists from the 1970s onwards have shows how bridging the gap between postmodern and poststructuralist theory and feminism is not only possible but also productive. Yet, that strand of feminism — by focusing on the constructed nature of the category of gender in language and on issues of difference — has proved too theoretical to contribute to the actual oppositional project of contesting patriarchal oppression and hegemonic power structures.

possibility of representing truth allows for the surmounting of the essentialism that has traditionally characterized certain feminist fictions, moving away from its generalizing emphasis on women's experience. Indeed, the novel's rejection of objectivity and decentering of subjectivity contributes to a plurality of female characters that represent a repetition with a difference of experiences of oppression, in effect intersecting patriarchal subordination and violence with issues of class, race and ethnicity. Finally, *Ragtime*'s postmodern emphasis on the fictiveness of all discourse points to Doctorow's belief in the power of literature as an ethical tool to promote a revolution in the gender order. As R.W. Connell (2005: 86) has argued, "no one is an innocent bystander in this arena of change. We are all engaged in constructing a world of gender relations," novelists included, regardless of their gender.

To conclude, *Ragtime* prefigures itself as a highly political novel precisely because of the combination of postmodern and feminist impulses, which work together to carry out a subversive critique of Western metaphysics and the Enlightenment tradition in order to create a space for reconstruction. This paper has attempted to show how Doctorow delineates a space in which postmodernism and feminism not only can coexist, but also benefit each other. *Ragtime* participates in a radical critique of the patriarchal status quo of the 1970s, appropriating subversive aesthetic strategies associated with postmodernism and, in so doing, contributing to anchoring postmodernism to its rightful oppositional role.

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