

# Essay on doctorow e l 1975 ragtime united states of america random house

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



One important theme in Ragtime is the difference between the rich and the poor. Discuss how Doctorow illustrates this problem throughout the novel.

The plot of Doctorow's Ragtime is utilised by the author to vigorously present his views about many turn of the century issues. Most prevalent of these issues is the divide between the rich and the poor and the social tension which this causes whilst also tying in the concepts of race and power into the mix. Through his combination of fiction and history, Doctorow is able to present a realistic sense and feel for how this time really was and present his opinions about actual events of the time.

Doctorow presents his characters in varying lights, depending on their social standing. Perhaps most interesting is Evelyn Newsbit's husband, Harry Thaw: a man whose power and wealth are almost limitless but is then incarcerated for the murder of his wife's former lover, Stanford White. The juxtaposition of a wealthy man with power and freedom, suddenly being thrown into the asylum, clearly demonstrates Doctorow's view of money. It is clear that Doctorow prefers the people of lower class as he presents these characters as being intrinsically 'good'. By presenting Thaw as a man with a lot of money but who is also capable of murder, he is affirming this view. This is also characterised by Tateh, Coalworker and Sarah who, whilst from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, have all faced social adversity in some form whilst remaining as 'good' people. However, the novel is engineered in such a way that the reader is resigned to agreeing with Doctorow's view as he presents only the positive aspects of these characters and fails to give a rounded view of their actions or the negative consequences as a result.

The social tension represented by the rich/poor divide is often satirized throughout the novel; “ Children suffered no discriminatory treatment. They were valued everywhere they were employed.” This example of how life was for the poor, with their children having to work, is a significant and dry take on American society at the time. This is also shown through the two paths of Tateh and Father: two patriarchal figures who are trying to look after the well-being of their family.

However, Tateh, as an immigrant, faced much more adversity than Father whose heritage goes in his favour. Immigrants were seen as being extremely low on the social ladder: “ They were despised by New Yorkers. They were filthy and illiterate.

They stank of fish and garlic. They had running sores. They had no honor and worked for next to nothing.” Understandably, if this view is held by the majority, Tateh and his family are unlikely to ever find wealth and power but because of he works hard to look after his family, the reader grows to like and admire him regardless. However, eventually, Tateh’s artistic talents prove to be more resourceful than Father’s as Tateh eventually marries Mother after Father is forced to travel.

It is this event, along with the incarceration of Harry Thaw which represents Doctorow’s views on social mobility. Tateh, a poor, immigrant worker eventually raises his social status through discovering artistic talent, gaining recognition [for his books] and through marrying Mother. However, Harry Thaw, a rich gentleman goes in reverse to Tateh by committing murder and

losing his social status. The juxtaposition of these two characters is yet further proof that Doctorow favoured the poor, hard-working members of the lower classes: the underdogs. Tateh's fairy tale ending makes him the poster boy for over-coming adversity: "Tateh, having ascertained that his wife had died, proposed marriage. He said I am not a Baron, of course, I am a Jewish socialist from Latvia. Mother accepted him without hesitation; she adored him..." In this situation, Tateh's background is no longer relevant because Mother loves him; thusly representing Doctorow's view that your background does not matter - it is what you do with your life that matters.

Doctorow has shown that in the early Twentieth Century, social diversity was vast and that social mobility was difficult, but not impossible. He presents the rich/poor divide as being a hugely relevant part of society at the time; compounded by the fact that the book is only partially fiction and is based on real stories of the time. He presents his opinions through the lives of his characters: Tateh being successful, Harry Thaw losing his power and Father not being satisfied by his life and wealth.

These characters demonstrate that Doctorow did not put much faith in the wealthy; preferred the poor and suggests that he perhaps felt like the rich were less deserving of good fortune as they already had a financial fortune. Doctorow chooses his 'good' (but poor) characters to be his main protagonists and this confirms his focus as being on the poorer side of society. In conclusion, it is clear that whilst a main theme of the book is the rich/poor divide which causes social tension, Doctorow is of the opinion that

society got it wrong and should have devoted more effort to improving the quality of life who he felt were most deserving.