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The Myth of the Melting Pot

A Postmodernist Reading of E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*

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Park, 1889

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Abstract

E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, published in 1975, depicts the multicultural societies of New York and America during the years between 1902 and 1914. During this period the term 'melting pot' began to be in use more extensively than ever before, due to both the play *The Melting Pot* by Israel Zangwill which premiered in 1908, and the vast amount of immigrants that entered America. The idea of America as a melting pot suggests that immigrants can 'melt' into one homogeneous group and become Americans by assimilating to the dominant culture. In this essay the notion of the melting pot within E. L. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime* will be examined. In contradistinction to most previous research on *Ragtime*, where the greatest focus is put on the American dream, this study will mainly emphasise the melting pot. The essay will question the validity of *Ragtime*'s melting pot and argue that the concept within this fictional work is a myth. The research is based on a postmodernist reading of the novel where postmodernist features in *Ragtime* like the paradox, marginalisation, parody and identity will serve as evidence of the claim. The main body of the essay is divided into three chapters, one for each of *Ragtime*'s three families: The White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, the Jewish Immigrant, and the African American. As the results of the research will show, not all characters within the three families will succeed in entering the melting pot, and this is where the idea that *anyone* can become American will reveal itself as a myth.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Chapter One: The White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Family	8
Chapter Two: The Jewish Immigrant Family	12
Chapter Three: The African American Family	17
Conclusion	21
Bibliography	22

Introduction

E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* is a postmodern so-called 'historiographic metafiction' in which actual historical figures and events from the years between 1902 and 1914 are blended with fictitious characters and scenes. By intertwining stories of very different types of Americans, especially in terms of race and ethnicity, Doctorow depicts the melting pot of New York, allegorised in the novel as "a crazy quilt of humanity" (16). Involved in this human crazy quilt are, among many others, three fictitious families: The WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), the Jewish Immigrant, and the African American. Living in a country under rapid change, the members of the three families face different fates, depending on who *is* and who is *not* able to adapt. As Michelle M. Tokarczyk writes in her essay *The American Dream, Insiders and Outsiders: Ragtime*, the ones who succeed are "those who can metamorphose themselves, both by transforming their talents into something the era appreciates and by transforming themselves into acceptable personages" (105). Of course, as Tokarczyk also emphasises, not everyone has the ability to transform, as there are "serious limitations, especially along race lines, as to who is allowed to progress" (105). The ambiguity of *Ragtime*'s melting pot then leads to question whether the idea that anyone can transform into American is true or simply a myth.

The term 'melting pot', most commonly associated with America, and New York in particular, refers to the idea that immigrants of a multicultural society can 'melt down' through assimilation to the dominant culture and become one homogenous group. The expression was first made popular in 1908 through Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot*, whose storyline involves a Jew who immigrates to New York and assimilates to the American culture. According to Glazer, however, the idea of America as a melting pot is as old as the Republic itself, and the term had been in use for more than a century before Zangwill's play (288). The idea originates from the fact that America throughout centuries has experienced an immense influx of people: European colonial settlers, African slaves, Jews, and immigrants from all corners of the world, people who have all merged into a group called Americans. The fusion of all these people of different ethnicities, races and religions, evokes the idea that no matter who you are, you can become American. This idea is closely related to the American dream, which suggests that anyone can prosper and succeed in America through hard work. These two notions, however, are sometimes questioned since not everyone has the same opportunity of success, and the literal interpretation of the term 'melting pot' brings forth a legitimate scepticism: can a human being really 'melt' into an American?

Also in *Ragtime*, the concept of the melting pot is questioned and appears in the shape of a paradox as some characters, but far from all, manage to transform into Americans. On the one hand, there is the character Tateh, a Jewish immigrant who in the course of the novel succeeds in assimilating to the American culture. On the other hand, there is the character Coalhouse, an African American who is prevented from transformation by the forces of racism and discrimination. Hence, the idea that *anyone* can ‘melt’ in the ‘pot’ will seem to be more of a myth than an empirical fact, even within this fictional work. Of course, there are characters who do become part of the melting pot and manage to adapt, but these are nothing but exceptions which inadvertently reinforce the myth. The unfortunate fates of those who cannot ‘melt’ in *Ragtime* are more numerous, but tend to be forgotten as the readers “remember and focus on the characters who have achieved an unlikely happiness rather than the more typical ones who do not” (Tokarczyk 92). Therefore, a close reading of *Ragtime*, giving all three fictitious families just as much emphasis, and, thus, highlighting those who otherwise are forgotten, will reveal that Doctorow’s melting pot is a paradox, a half-truth which does not involve all. In this essay I will argue precisely this; that *Ragtime*’s melting pot fails to work out for all the characters within the three families, in order to prove that the whole concept, suggesting that *anyone* can become American, is a myth.

In fact, the myth of the melting pot in *Ragtime* encompasses many typical features of postmodern literature. First of all, the way Doctorow questions, challenges, and even criticises a rather well established notion is to be connected to the postmodern stance of questioning commonly accepted values and ideas of our culture. As Linda Hutcheon puts it in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*:

What [postmodernism] does say is that there are all kinds of orders and systems in our world – *and* that we create them all. That is their justification and their limitation. They do not exist “out there”, fixed, given, universal, eternal; they are human constructs in history. This does not make them any the less necessary or desirable. It does, however, [...] condition their “truth” value. (43)

Thus, as Doctorow calls the melting pot in question, and as he also accepts it as a humanly constructed idea instead of a primordial and fixed one, the truth-value of the melting pot is conditioned and as a consequence the concept becomes a myth. As well as the questioning stance, the myth itself is a typical feature of postmodern literature. As John Williams writes in his book *Fiction as False Document: The Reception of E.L. Doctorow in the Postmodern Age*, myths and fairy tales are often present in postmodern historiographic metafiction, where the authors, mixing history and fiction, tend to “reach for truth at the level of myth” (9). The myth of the idea that anyone can transform into American also goes well in hand with

postmodernism's disliking of homogeneity and totality, and its preference for heterogeneity, plurality and difference. As Hutcheon states: "Historiographic metafiction espouses a postmodern ideology of plurality and recognition of difference [...] There is no sense of cultural universality" (114). Thus, while the idea of the melting pot suggests that people could 'melt' into a conforming mass, postmodernism would state the opposite; we are all different and we will remain different. Therefore, it is no wonder that a postmodern literary work would depict the concept of the melting pot as a myth.

However, as I mentioned earlier, some of the characters in *Ragtime* actually manage to become part of the melting pot, and this makes the matter somewhat complex. The melting pot is then a paradox, a fact which again connects to postmodernism, where discontinuity, ambiguity and contradiction constitute some of the most important characteristics. The fact that the melting pot is a paradox shows that the concept is not as universal as it is imagined to be and, as I stated earlier, the idea that *anyone* can become American then reveals itself as a myth. Another characteristic of postmodernism that can be found in *Ragtime* is marginalisation, as some characters are excluded from the melting pot. Also the typical postmodern feature of parody is present as the ending of *Ragtime* can be seen as a travesty of a fairy tale. Finally, the self's search for identity and a place in the world, often present in postmodern fiction, can be connected to some of the characters in *Ragtime* who struggle to fit in society. Relating to the concept of the melting pot, this essay will provide a postmodern reading of Doctorow's *Ragtime*, which will mainly focus on four characteristics of postmodern literature: the paradox, marginalisation, parody and identity.

Among the many literary sources that have been the basis of my work on *Ragtime*, especially worthy of mention are John Williams' *Fiction as False Document: The Reception of E.L. Doctorow in the Postmodern Age*, for its postmodern perspective of the myth, and, because of the focus on the melting pot, Michelle Tokarczyk's *The American Dream, Insiders and Outsiders: Ragtime*. Important to mention is also Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, which gives an excellent account of the characteristics of postmodern literature. Furthermore, not to forget are Arthur Saltzman's *The Stylistic Energy of E. L. Doctorow*, Peter Brooker's *Fellow Modernists in Postmodern Times*, and Susan Brienza's *Writing as Witnessing: The Many Voices of E. L. Doctorow* which all three manage to reveal the myth of the American dream in *Ragtime*. Lastly, Christopher Morris' *Models of Misrepresentation on the Fiction of E. L. Doctorow* has been contributive.

Perhaps not too surprisingly, considering the fact that Doctorow is widely held as a postmodern novelist, most previous criticism on his works has adopted the postmodern (or

poststructural) theoretical approach (Williams 143). A fairly large part of the research that has been done on *Ragtime* elucidates both the mythical aspect and the melting pot, but these two facets are neither dealt with exclusively nor pronounced as interlinking components of the novel. Besides, most previous research tends to focus more on the theme of the American dream than on the melting pot aspect. For these reasons given, my hope is that this essay will contribute to an alternative postmodern reading of *Ragtime*, similar to what Leslie Fiedler previously has called for, and that, according to Williams, has not been applied to Doctorow:

[A] new postmodern criticism that would move away from traditional formalism toward an appreciation of popular forms as they relate to social context, seeing in genres like the Western a search for myth in a machine age. (153)

Of course, many years have passed since Williams' statement, and many more since Fiedler called for this new postmodern approach to literature. However, what still remains is in fact the lack of this kind of study on Doctorow, and, on *Ragtime* in particular.

Therefore, the aim of this essay is to highlight the 'myth in a machine age' of *Ragtime*, relating to the false notion that any immigrant can metamorphose and become American. In other words, I will attempt to demonstrate how the melting pot fails to work out for all the characters within the three families in order to prove that the concept is not as universal as it is imagined to be. Furthermore, I will show that the characters who become part of the melting pot are exceptions, favoured by race conditions, and those who are disfavoured because of race never succeed completely in entering the melting pot, no matter how hard they try to. Thus, I will try to debunk *Ragtime's* myth of the melting pot by emphasising its irrelevance to specific cases in the novel.

This essay is divided into three chapters, one for each of *Ragtime's* three families. In the first chapter of this essay I will deal with the WASP family, consisting of Father, Mother and The Little Boy. Here I will primarily focus on the family members' ability versus disability to adapt to change, and show how not adapting leads to destruction and exclusion from the melting pot. In the second chapter I will look at the Jewish immigrant family, made up of Tateh, Mameh, and The Little Girl, analysing each character's success versus failure in 'melting' in the 'pot'. In the third and last chapter of this essay I will analyse the African American family of Coalhouse Walker Jr., Sarah, and their son, looking at to what extent each of the characters manage to assimilate and become part of the melting pot.

Chapter One: The White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Family

The WASP family consists of Father, Mother, The Little Boy, Mother's Younger Brother and Grandfather, all living together in a house in New Rochelle. Father, the head of the family, is an explorer who also runs a rather successful business that manufactures fireworks and American flags. Quite stereotypically, Mother represents the heart of the family, since she is both the domestic housewife and the more sensitive and loving one. Thus, Father and Mother both live up to the standard societal roles for their gender and represent the 'perfect' and well-adapted couple of their time. Together with their son, The Little Boy, Mother's Younger Brother, and Grandfather they represent the ideal American family. As white, wealthy and Christian, they also represent the dominant culture in America, the role model, to which immigrants have to assimilate in order to become Americans. In other words, they are perceived as 'real' Americans.

However, although it is never explicitly stated in the novel, it is not unreasonable to conclude that they, generations back, have been immigrants themselves. Even so, they now represent the stereotypical Americans. Considering their transformation from ancestral immigrants to 'pure' American citizens, it is apparent that they have become successfully integrated in the melting pot. Of course, this is due to their race, and religion of origin, which have given them the advantage of not being too different from the ideal and not having to change every aspect of their natural identities. It is likely, though, that they have gone through some sort of assimilation process, such as accustoming themselves to, and learning how to benefit from, the capitalist system that is particularly distinctive of America. Since it has been possible for the WASP family to 'melt' in the 'pot', *Ragtime's* melting pot appears on the surface to be well functioning, at least for WASP immigrants.

Below the surface, however, the melting pot will, in line with postmodernism, prove to be quite complex and ambiguous, even for the most racially favoured citizens like Mother and Father. As the country changes, new adaptations need to be made on their part in order to remain 'real' Americans, suitable for the time being. As this chapter will attempt to demonstrate, it is harder for some of the members of the WASP family to accomplish the required continuing transformation into well-adjusted citizens. In the following sections we will see the different characters' journeys from 'pure' Americans to the different destinations that their fates lead them. We will see how adapting continuously helps the characters to remain inside of the melting pot, whereas not adapting at all leads to their exclusion from the melting pot.

Starting off as an orphan investing a small amount of money in a fireworks business, and ending up being the successful owner of it, Father of the WASP family represents the self-made man who fits in seemingly well in predominantly white and Christian America. His business, producing patriotic-related items such as flags and fireworks, also makes him well adapted to current times of capitalism, in which “patriotism was a reliable sentiment” (Doctorow 3). When first introduced to us, Father seems to have already attained the American dream for him and his family, being relatively affluent and living in a self-built three-story house in fashionable New Rochelle:

In 1902 Father built a house at the crest of the Broadview Avenue hill in New Rochelle, New York. It was a three-story brown shingle with dormers, bay windows and a screened porch. Striped awnings shaded the windows. The family took possession of this stout manse on a sunny day in June and it seemed for some years thereafter that all their days would be warm and fair. (Doctorow 3)

However, the American dream that Father has achieved, will eventually perish. As the country becomes more multicultural, his narrow-mindedness and racist views begin to cause him problems. This happens as he fails to adapt and realise “that attitudes and behavior recently appropriate are tenable no longer” (Dekker qtd. in Tokarczyk 93). The clash between Father’s old-fashioned values and the new society becomes evident when Father returns home after an expedition to the North Pole and finds both his family and country changed. While he has been gone, Mother has taken in an African American child and his poor mother Sarah, a thing that Father can hardly accept. He even upbraids Mother, saying: “What in God’s name possessed you on that day? [...] You took her in without sufficient thought. You victimized us all with your foolish female sentimentality” (Doctorow 175). Even though he feels as if the whole family is victimized, having an African American mother and her child staying with them, Father seems to be the only family member who actually is opposed to it. It shows, then, that while he has been away, the rest of the family has transformed and become more open-minded, whereas he still sticks to his old values.

The fact that Father’s narrow-mindedness now makes him deviate from the rest of the family is apparent on various occasions throughout the novel. When the African American Coalhouse Walker Jr., apparently the father of Sarah’s son, shows up at their house and wants to speak with Sarah, he finds Mother’s suggestion to serve him tea in the parlour indecent. He is also astonished by and hostile to how well-spoken and well-dressed Coalhouse is, which suggests that he expects African Americans to stick to their race-assigned roles and not to challenge racial stereotypes:

It occurred to Father one day that Coalhouse Walker Jr. didn't know he was a Negro. The more he thought about this the more true it seemed. Walker didn't act or talk like a colored man. He seemed to be able to transform the customary deferences practiced by his race so that they reflected to his own dignity rather than the recipient's. (Doctorow 134)

By this we understand that Father finds Coalhouse's behaviour both unconventional and inappropriate, since he neither acts nor dresses the way he should according to his race. Father is, thus, unlike the rest of his family, racist, prejudiced, and narrow-minded.

Father's deviating and old-fashioned views on African Americans lead to several conflicts with Mother, eventually resulting in his exclusion from the family. This happens as Mother and Father have different attitudes to the planned wedding between Coalhouse and Sarah, and as Father dislikes that Mother takes care of Sarah's child after she has died: "He found distasteful her promotion of the black girl's marriage. And now that Sarah was dead he felt altogether invisible, Mother's grief having directed her attention solely on Sarah's boy" (Doctorow 182). Father starts to feel invisible and lonely within his own family and this is a sign that he is gradually excluded from the community. The exclusion is due to his inability to adapt to what is appropriate at the time. Thus, Father goes from being the well-adapted, 'pure' American citizen and ends up as an isolated and unhappy misfit. What can be concluded from this is that he is marginalised and no longer is inside of the melting pot.

On the other hand, Mother represents the character who manages to accomplish a continuing transformation into a well-adapted citizen and thus remain inside of the melting pot. Mother proves to be much more open-minded than Father, which suits the time well and she remains consequently the fitting citizen that she always has been. As Tokarczyk writes, "she is receptive to social changes that give her access to a more rewarding life" (95). Her open-mindedness and receptiveness to change are affirmed throughout the story, for example when she, despite Father's disliking, follows the American home decorating trends of the time and brings home exotic fabrics with Egyptian patterns. Also, the boarding of Sarah and her little son, and eventually, the adopting of the child, show that Mother is adapting well to the increasingly multicultural character of her country. She is not afraid of embracing new trends or interacting with people from different races, which prove that she both adapts herself and helps other people to become integrated in society. Thus, unlike Father, Mother has a highly active role within the melting pot.

Furthermore, Mother shows that she is an active part of the melting pot when she meets the Jewish immigrant Tateh in Atlantic City. Instantly, unlike Father, she is sympathetic to Tateh and attracted by the beauty of his little girl. She even hopes for his son to marry the little girl in the future, which is yet another sign that she has no prejudices about people of

different ethnicities. Also, when she learns that Tateh is a Jew, she is far from hostile to him. In fact, she even accepts to marry him in the end, after Father has died. As Tateh and Mother form a new family, consisting of Tateh's daughter, Mother's white son, and the African American boy of Sarah and Coalhouse, Mother can be seen as the force of the melting pot that unites people of different races, religions and ethnicities. The differences between Mother and Father are apparent. Whereas Father is marginalised, Mother manages to remain inside of the melting pot and this is one of the many signs that *Ragtime's* melting pot is a paradox.

Just like Mother, The Little Boy becomes part of the new, multi-ethnic family. As he becomes friends with his stepsiblings, he learns to interact with children of different races and ethnicities, and thus remains inside of the melting pot. This is illustrated in the final scene of *Ragtime*, when Tateh, looking out from a window, sees The Little Boy together with his own daughter and the adopted African American child, sitting together in the shining sun:

One morning Tateh looked out the window of his study and saw the three children sitting on the lawn. Behind them on the sidewalk was a tricycle. They 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 neighborhood, a society of ragamuffins, like all of us, a gang, getting into trouble and getting out again. (Doctorow 270)

It can be seen then, that The Little Boy, together with Tateh's daughter and the adopted African American child, represents the successful outcome of the melting pot.

Looking at it this way, using only Mother and The Little Boy as examples, the melting pot may seem well functioning. However, the ending may as well be perceived as a parody of the fairy-tale plot, suggesting quite unreasonably that the family lives happily ever after (Brienza 182, see next chapter). Besides, when contemplating Father as well, the melting pot will appear more ambiguous and illusory, as he does not manage to develop into the kind of citizen that is appropriate at the time. Starting from being in the very centre of the melting pot, he ends up being left outside. Thus, although the whole WASP family at first is successfully integrated in society, the melting pot does not continue to embrace all of them. The only two who remain there are Mother and The Little Boy, as they are the only ones who manage to adapt continuously to what is appropriate. The ending scene of *Ragtime*, in which The Little Boy and his stepsiblings sit together in the garden, creates the illusion of a well-functioning melting pot. This illusion is, however, quite easy to puncture as Father is not included in this picture. It is evident then, that the idea of the melting pot as a warm society, welcoming everybody and able to transform anyone into an American citizen, is a myth.

Chapter Two: The Jewish Immigrant Family

In contradistinction to the WASP family, the Jewish immigrant family represents the ones who are initially excluded from the melting pot, owing to factors such as their ethnicity, religion, and poverty. The following passage reveals that the Jewish family finds itself in a strikingly worse situation than the WASP family:

The family lived in one room and everyone worked: Mameh, Tateh and The Little Girl in the pinafore. Mameh and the little girl sewed knee pants and got seventy cents a dozen. They sewed from the time they got up to the time they went to bed. Tateh made his living in the street. (Doctorow 14)

Since they live in extreme poverty, struggling every day to make ends meet, they appear to be entrapped in a terrible situation from which they cannot escape. Also, as their Yiddish accents, Jewish clothes and appearances mark them as different from the white and Christian norm, the family's possibility of integration seems at first sight minimal. Their difference shuts them out from society as the white population of New York refuses to interact with them. For all these reasons, it is clear that the Jewish immigrant family is marginalised in society and thus far from integrated in the melting pot.

However, as the country changes by becoming more tolerant and as the possibility for upward mobility increases, two of the three family members eventually manage to find a way into the melting pot. This happens as Tateh and his daughter succeed in climbing the social ladder, assimilating to and also becoming integrated in the white dominant culture. Together they thus constitute the illusion that any immigrant can transform and become American. Paradoxically, however, Mameh is left alone to fend for herself and then dies, probably as a result of poverty. This is a fact that inevitably confirms the ambiguity of *Ragtime's* melting pot. Looking at the Jewish immigrant family, *Ragtime's* melting pot then becomes a paradox and this is what this chapter will attempt to uphold. By analysing the three characters Tateh, The Little Girl, and Mameh, I will try to make clear that the melting pot embraces some of them, but not all of them. More precisely, I will attempt to demonstrate that Tateh helps create the myth of the melting pot, whereas Mameh's fate debunks it. Followingly, I will analyse Tateh's journey from outsider to insider of the melting pot, and show how he ultimately helps reinforce the myth of the melting pot.

As immigrant, Jewish and socialist, Tateh's identity initially clashes with the American ideal of being white, Christian and capitalist and he is thus excluded from the melting pot. As evidenced from the beginning of novel, Tateh refuses to give up his religious and political values in order to become American and his segregation from the melting pot then seems to

be partly self-chosen. This is shown also as he is apparently unwilling to interact with the white population. For example, when a white woman comes to his corner and asks for a portrait of herself together with Tateh's daughter, his reaction reveals his hostility towards her: "At this the old man looked directly at her and a terrible Hebraic judgment seemed to flash from his eyes" (Doctorow 39). Furthermore, Tateh is described as "a proud man" (Doctorow 38) and by leading the Socialist Artists' Alliance of the Lower East Side he strongly criticises the American consensus. Also when it comes to his Judaism there is evidence that he is unwilling to give it up. For example, when talking to the relief committee about letting a family voluntarily board his daughter for a few weeks, he says he prefers a Jewish family. This suggests that Tateh is opposed to Christian views and that he would not like for his daughter to assimilate to Americans. Tateh's initial negative attitude to the American capitalism and Christianity precludes an immediate assimilation and he remains segregated from society for a long time in the story. The fact that Tateh seems to have chosen his own exclusion from the melting pot then helps debunking the myth that any immigrant would want to assimilate.

What is more, in terms of reasons for his exclusion from the melting pot, there is the Americans' negative attitude towards him as an immigrant. The hostility is apparent as the citizens are xenophobic and prejudiced towards immigrants in general:

[The immigrants] 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. They stole. They drank. They raped their own daughters. They killed each other casually. (Doctorow 13)

The white's hostility towards Tateh and his family is shown when they meet with the police during a walk on Madison Avenue and Fifth Avenue: "The police in their tall helmets looked at them. On these wide empty sidewalks in this part of the city the police did not like to see immigrants" (Doctorow 14). It shows then, that the Jewish family is not welcome in the 'white' and rich parts of the city. When it comes to Tateh alone, the New Yorkers' unwillingness to interact with him is shown when he is creating his art in the street: "while people sometimes stopped to watch the old man work, very few people asked to have their portraits done" (Doctorow 39). This suggests that although many people have their attention drawn to Tateh's art, they still have an aversion to approach him. Clearly, the hostility towards foreigners is a fact in *Ragtime*, which will be seen also in the next chapter, and this helps debunking another important myth about the melting pot, namely the one asserting that being let in is easy.

Additionally, what shuts Tateh out from the melting pot is his poverty. Even after having left New York for a job in Lawrence, in hope for a better future, he is still impoverished and lives under bad conditions: “Tateh stood in front of a loom for fifty-six hours a week. His pay was just under six dollars” (Doctorow 100). He later understands that his economic situation gives him no possibility to change: “A salary of six dollars and change. Would that transform their lives? They would still live in that wretched room, in that terrible dark street” (Doctorow 108). Tateh’s situation of not being able to move upward in society, although he tries hard to, then refutes both the melting pot and the idea of America as the land of promise and golden opportunity.

Tateh is poor, a Jew, a socialist and an immigrant, marked as different by everything from his clothes to his Yiddish accent, and even by the way he smokes a cigarette: “he held [the cigarette] between his thumb and forefinger, palm up, in the European style” (41). These things considered, he seems to have everything going against him in America and assimilation seems almost impossible. Quite miraculously, however, Tateh later manages to become the embodiment and reinforcement of the whole concept of the melting pot, and this is where one of the novel’s greatest paradoxes comes in. Almost unreasonably fast Tateh climbs the social ladder as he gets his so-called movie books published by Franklin Novelty Company, enters the film industry and makes a fortune. The proud man thus gives up his socialism and gives into capitalism, the very phenomenon he was criticising. He also assimilates to the American culture in all other ways possible, and leaves his old identity behind. His quite unexpected transformation is described in the following way:

[H]e invented a baronry for himself. It got him around in a Christian world. Instead of having to erase his thick Yiddish accent he need only roll it off his tongue with a flourish. He dyed his hair and beard to their original black. He was a new man. (Doctorow 218)

Thanks to his transformation, Tateh gets the possibility to become friends with the white couple Mother and Father as they meet in Atlantic City. After Father and Mameh both have died, Tateh and Mother marry, move to a fashionable house in California, and by all appearances they live happily ever after.

Owing to this, the story all of a sudden reshapes and takes the form of a happy tale, creating yet another paradox. Brienza describes this in the following way:

Finally, this tale of ragtime America resolves itself in a parody of the fairy-tale plot, as Doctorow continues his innovative toying with standard genres, forms, and formulas. It becomes a rags-to-riches story when the poor Tateh, like a cinema Cinderella, overnight becomes the wealthy Baron. (182)

The character Tateh is full of contradictions and inconsistencies. Firstly, the fact that Tateh starts as a man too proud to interact with the white population and ends up marrying a white Christian woman is a great paradox. Secondly, as Tateh succumbs to capitalism, the very phenomenon he is criticising, there is yet another contradiction. Thirdly, the fact that he first lives in deep poverty and ends up as a wealthy baron helps create a Hollywood ending that seems both unreasonable and unexpected. Finally, a paradox lies in that he at first defends his religious values, whereas he in the end seems to have abandoned them completely. All these paradoxes of Tateh help create the myth of the melting pot, at the same time as they, given the apparent exorbitance, reveal the falsity of it.

Just like Tateh, his daughter starts as a character who is shut out from the melting pot and thus marginalised. It is seen on various occasions in the novel that The Little Girl has almost no possibility of interacting with the white population. For example, when Tateh works in the street he keeps her tied to him with a rope and is suspicious when the white Evelyn Nesbit offers him her help and wants to babysit the little girl when she is ill. Also, as I mentioned earlier, when Tateh is thinking about letting the girl stay with a family he prefers a Jewish family and would thus not let her stay with a Christian white family. Tateh's overprotectiveness of his daughter prevents her from interacting with the white population and thus also from having the possibility to assimilate. This is seen especially when they have just moved to Lawrence: "He refused to enroll her in school – it was easier here than in New York to avoid the authorities – and made her stay home when he was not there to go out with her" (Doctorow 100). From the point when Mameh is excluded from the family, up to the point when Tateh marries Mother, the only human contact The Little Girl has seems to be with her own father, and because of this she has at first no possibility to enter the melting pot.

However, when Tateh and The Little Girl go to Atlantic City, they meet the WASP family and get the possibility to interact with them. As The Little Girl becomes friends with The Little Boy she now enters the melting pot. It is also evident that she by this point has climbed the social ladder and stands in front of a bright future:

[Tateh's] child was dressed as beautifully as a princess. He wanted to drive from her memory every tenement stench and filthy immigrant street. He would buy her light and sun and clean wind of the ocean for the rest of her life. She played on the beach with a well-bred comely boy. She lay between soft white sheets in a room that looked into an endless sky. (Doctorow 218)

Later on, when Tateh and Mother marry, the two families unite and The Little Girl becomes stepsister to The Little Boy from the original WASP family and the African American boy of

Coalhouse Walker and Sarah. She thus becomes even more integrated in the melting pot. This bringing together of three children of different races and/or religions then proves the existence of a melting pot in *Ragtime*. The ending scene of the novel where the three children sit together on the lawn, quoted in the previous chapter, illustrates and accentuates this fact. The reader thus remains with the impression of a happy ending and the false idea that the melting pot works out for everyone.

However, what helps debunking this myth is remembering the characters that have been lost along the way, like Mameh. Mameh appears only in the beginning of the story as the miserably poor Jewish mother she is and never has the possibility to get out of her situation. Her extreme poverty and helplessness is shown when she, in a desperate attempt to raise money for the rent, and thus for the sake of her family, offers herself to her boss: “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” (Doctorow 15). As a result of this action, Mameh is driven from her home by Tateh, and one might only imagine that this has deteriorating consequences for her. In the end of *Ragtime*, it is confirmed that she has died, probably without having had any possibility whatsoever to enter the melting pot. The only contact with the white population she has had appears to be that one with her boss, and it takes little to understand that it was not a step into the melting pot. The white boss of Mameh considers her an object and probably he thinks it justifiable to do so due to her poverty and ethnicity. In this way, Mameh becomes even more segregated and ends up as the evidence that a part within the melting pot is not assigned to everyone.

The melting pot of *Ragtime* then appears in the shape of a paradox. On the one hand, Tateh and The Little Girl endure and end up in the picture of a happy multicultural family. On the other hand, Mameh is oppressed and dies. The myth of the melting pot is inevitably reinforced by the family of Tateh, Mother and the three children, but at the same time it is revealed by Mameh. Because, if the concept of the melting pot had been universal it would have embraced her and many others as well. This leads to question why some of the characters are integrated while others are not. According to Tokarczyk, a character’s success in entering *Ragtime*’s melting pot is “at least partially attributable to privilege associated with a character’s gender, race, and ethnicity” (97-8). This suggests that Tateh, being male, has an advantage over Mameh. It also indicates that Tateh, not being too different from the white norm owing to his skin colour, has an advantage over the African American Coalhouse Walker, whom I will analyse in the following chapter.

Chapter Three: The African American Family

The African American family consists of the ragtime pianist Coalhouse Walker Jr., Sarah and their little son. Unlike the Jewish immigrant family, The African American family starts by being seemingly integrated in the melting pot, owing to its interaction with the WASP family and Coalhouse's quite successful assimilation. However, as their skin colour deviates significantly from the white norm, and as racism is widespread in the country, they also represent the characters who have the most difficulty entering the melting pot completely and claiming their rights as American citizens. Paradoxically, however, the little boy seems to be included in the melting pot. This chapter will attempt to show how the characters of the African American family either refute the concept of the melting pot, or act as evidence of its existence. The aim is thus to show how the melting pot becomes a paradox and that the idea that *anyone* can be included is a myth.

Sarah and her little son enter the melting pot as Mother from the WASP family chooses to take them in and as they consequently get the opportunity to interact with white Americans. However, as Sarah is depressed she keeps to herself all day, hiding in the attic. Thus, even though she has the possibility to, she does not interact with the WASP family and this fact makes her role within the melting pot quite uncertain. However, it may be suggested that her shirking has nothing to do with an unwillingness to interact with them because of their race, since she at first refuses to see Coalhouse too and even to hold her own baby: "Melancholy had taken the will out of her muscles. She did not have the strength to hold her baby" (Doctorow 91). It is apparent then, that although Sarah in a sense is inside of the melting pot, her depression keeps her from playing an active part. Being together with Coalhouse, and evading the WASP family she has no close interracial contact, apart from that with Mother, and this makes her rather segregated from the melting pot. Furthermore, there is no sign that she has assimilated to the white American culture.

On the other hand, Coalhouse Walker starts as a character who seems to have assimilated well to the American norm. Although he is not, of course, able to change his skin colour, he is a rather wealthy man with good manners. By possessing attributes mostly associated with the white upper class, such as his Ford Model T, and his fine clothing, Coalhouse is not considered a 'conventional' African American. This is confirmed by the piece quoted in the first chapter, where Father thinks that Coalhouse "didn't know he was a Negro" (Doctorow 134). This is seen also when he in the novel is described in the following way: "He was dressed in the affectation of wealth to which colored people lent themselves"

(Doctorow 129). Furthermore, Coalhouse seems to be accustomed to and comfortable with interracial interaction. When Coalhouse is served tea in the WASP family's parlour, he is relaxed and well-mannered, which suggests that he has been in similar situations before:

Father noted that [Coalhouse] suffered no embarrassment by being in the parlor with a cup and saucer in his hand. On the contrary, he acted as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The surroundings did not awe him nor was his manner deferential. He was courteous and correct. (Doctorow 131-2)

For all these reasons given, it might be suggested that Coalhouse has assimilated well to the white American culture and that he, at least initially, is a part of the melting pot. It is seen also, that he, just like Tateh, is a character who searches for an identity and who struggles to be recognized as an American citizen. However, as might be perceived by the previously quoted passage, some Americans, like for example Father, have strict ideas about how African Americans should act, and will not tolerate that Coalhouse does not follow these 'rules'. It shows then, that Coalhouse's speech, clothes, and self-awareness provoke since they are not what most white people would expect of an African American. The fact that Coalhouse is a provocation to many white people around him is a sign that he is not fully accepted as a part of the melting pot.

Owing to this, bad things start to happen to Coalhouse. When he travels by car from the WASP family's house heading for New York, he is stopped by a group of white firemen telling him to pay a toll. As Coalhouse starts to question whether there could possibly be a toll on a public thoroughfare, the chief insults him saying "We need the money for a firetruck [...] So we can drive to fires just like you drive to whorehouses" (Doctorow 146-7). Later, his car is vandalised: "It was spattered with mud. There was a six-inch tear in the custom pantasote top. And deposited in the back seat was a mound of fresh human excrement" (Doctorow 148). When Coalhouse demands from the firehouse chief that his car be restored he is answered with nothing but a laugh and the policeman tells him to "[s]crape off the shit and forget the whole thing" (Doctorow 148). The policeman even threatens Coalhouse with wrongfully charging him for driving under the influence of drink if he does not go away. The whole incident with the firemen shows that Coalhouse, given his race, is not fully recognized as an American citizen, and he finds it difficult to be treated righteously, even by the police.

Consequently, Coalhouse is placed under arrest, even though he has not committed any crime. On the contrary, the guilty white firemen go free. This fact proves how racism influences the legal system and that Coalhouse falls victim of this. It also proves that his assimilation and sense for righteousness are not approved of, as his fashionable car and

proudness apparently provoke the firemen and many other white people around him. Probably, most white people would have preferred to see him as a poor and self-denying man, and thus more like what they perceive as a 'typical' African American. As Tokarczyk puts it, "many whites will not tolerate deviation from race-assigned roles" (100). It becomes evident, then, that Coalhouse's 'melting' is hampered by the forces of racism. No matter how hard Coalhouse tries to assimilate to the white culture, his skin colour will still mark him as different and he will in any event be considered less worthy. When the WASP family sits at the dinner table to discuss the matter, it is apparent that none of the family members finds the incident particularly surprising: "It seemed to be his fault, somehow, because he was a Negro and it was the kind of problem that would only adhere to a Negro" (Doctorow 155). Thus, Coalhouse cannot, as an African American, expect to be treated equally to the white Americans and this proves that he is marginalised and excluded from the melting pot.

However, Coalhouse does not put up with the discrimination and seeks justice by trying to get his case tried in the court. He thus fights in order to be recognised as an American citizen with all the legal rights that it should imply. Nonetheless, considering the widespread racism, this proves to be a difficult matter, as no lawyer wants to represent him: "He went to see three different attorneys recommended by Father. In all cases they refused to represent him. He was advised to recover his automobile before it was totally wrecked and to forget the matter" (Doctorow 153). In practice, it is clear that Coalhouse, like any other African American, does not have the same legal rights as the white Americans. Saltzman describes this fact in the following way:

The Negro, no matter how qualified or well-mannered he may become, can only hope to be tolerated as a second-class citizen in White America. In fact, because the system of justice is designed to protect the ruling class, thereby ceasing to function when a Negro seeks to share in its benefits, not even second-class status can be guaranteed him. (95)

Coalhouse's failure in being recognised as an American citizen proves that he, despite his personal attempts to assimilate, does not really belong to the melting pot. The idea that anyone who wants to can become American then turns out to be false, and Coalhouse becomes yet another evidence that the concept of the melting pot is a myth.

As Coalhouse realises there is no hope in achieving justice in a usual manner, he turns into a criminal activist and blasts the fire station where the car incident had occurred. In a letter to the newspaper he declares his message:

I want the infamous Fire Chief of the Volunteers turned over to my justice [...] I want my automobile returned to me in its original condition. If these conditions are not met I will continue to kill firemen and burn firehouses until they are. I will destroy the entire city if it need be. (Doctorow 177)

When this proves to be a futile attempt, he ultimately agrees to be executed on the condition that his car is restored. He thus accepts the consequences of his own illegal actions, but still wants that the damage that caused him in the first place be put right. This is explained in the novel in the following way: “To get justice, Coalhouse Walker was ready to have it done to him” (Doctorow 246). In the end, Coalhouse is shot dead, which makes him one of the characters that disappear from the novel. He is thus, just like Sarah, excluded from the ending scene of *Ragtime*, where the multicultural family of Mother and Tateh by all appearances live happily ever after.

In contrast to Coalhouse and Sarah, their little son represents one of the characters who actually is included in the melting pot. As he is taken in by Mother already as a new-born baby, he grows up in a ‘white’ environment, and spends most of his time with Mother, since Sarah does not have the physical strength to take care of him. He also gets the opportunity to play with The Little Boy, which makes him accustomed to interracial interaction. When Sarah dies, Mother adopts the little boy and as she later marries Tateh, the family becomes even more multicultural in character. The African American boy now becomes a stepbrother also to the Jewish girl and becomes an active part of the melting pot. The ending scene of *Ragtime*, which is referred to continuously throughout this essay, is the evidence that the little boy of Sarah and Coalhouse is a part of the melting pot, and thus that there is in fact a melting pot. However, as there are characters who are excluded from this happy picture, like for example Father, Mameh, Coalhouse and Sarah, the melting pot proves to be not as universal as it is imagined to be. The scene of the three children then idealises and mythologises the concept. Morris explains this in the following way:

Of course, the “vision” of these new films is a gross misrepresentation of the bulk of the action of *Ragtime*, which tells of violent, incurable racial and ethnic conflict, but the [children] identify themselves with the gang of ragamuffins, thereby accepting Tateh’s Pollyannaish vision and revealing a blindness to the events of their own completed narration. (102)

The melting pot of *Ragtime* then appears to be a non-universal phenomenon, embracing only a few, and the idea that *anyone* can enter turns out to be a myth.

Conclusion

As evidenced from the previous chapters, *Ragtime*'s melting pot is ambiguous and paradoxical. Within each and every one of the three families, inconsistencies relating to the melting pot are to be found. Whereas Mother and the Little Boy from the WASP family remain inside of the melting pot throughout the whole story, Father is the evidence that even the most racially favoured American citizen can be excluded. Moreover, the Jewish Mameh never even gets the chance to enter the melting pot before she dies while Tateh together with The Little Girl on the contrary 'melts' into American thanks to his upward mobility and ability to transform. However, Coalhouse Walker shows that not anyone who wants to can move upward in society and transform into an American citizen, worth as much as any other. The forces of racism are what keep both Coalhouse and Sarah from entering the melting pot completely. Conversely, their little son seems to be embraced by the melting pot, which creates yet another paradox.

To conclude, the melting pot of *Ragtime* turns out to be a myth, inadvertently reinforced by some of the characters and exposed by others. Clearly, the multicultural family of Mother, Tateh and the three children can be seen as evidence that there is a melting pot. However, as the characters Father, Mameh, Coalhouse and Sarah are excluded from that reality, it becomes evident that the melting pot does not let in *anyone*. As has been stated earlier, the ending scene of *Ragtime*, suggesting that the multicultural family lives happily ever after, is then a misrepresentation of the melting pot as it seems to encourage the reader to forget all the characters that have been lost along the way. However, when emphasising the characters that have disappeared from the story, the melting pot then becomes a paradox and the idea that it should be a universal phenomenon is evidently revealed as a myth.

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