

Ragtime Study Guide

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Contents

Ragtime Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1-3.....	5
Chapters 4-6.....	7
Chapters 7-9.....	9
Chapters 10-12.....	11
Chapters 13-15.....	13
Chapters 16-18.....	15
Chapters 19-21.....	17
Chapters 22-24.....	19
Chapters 25-27.....	21
Chapters 28-30.....	23
Chapters 31-33.....	25
Chapters 34-36.....	27
Chapters 37-40.....	29
Characters.....	31
Objects/Places.....	36
Themes.....	38
Style.....	40
Quotes.....	42
Topics for Discussion.....	45



Plot Summary

The novel begins in 1902 with the story of a wealthy upper-middle class family—Father, Mother, the little boy, and Mother’s Younger Brother—living in New Rochelle, a town just outside of New York City. Mother’s Brother is in love with Evelyn Nesbit, a former chorus girl and artist’s model, whose husband Harry K. Thaw is charged with the murder of her ex-lover, architect Stanford White. Famed escape artist Harry Houdini’s car breaks down in front of the house one day and he subsequently pays the family a visit. Father prepares for and leaves on a trip to the Arctic with explorer Robert E. Peary.

In contrast, the immigrant family of Tateh, Mameh, and the little girl live in abject poverty on the Lower East Side of New York City. Mameh prostitutes herself to her employer for a few extra dollars a week; when Tateh finds out, he takes the little girl and leaves. Evelyn Nesbit begins to visit the Lower East Side in secret, and becomes enamored of the little girl. She disguises herself as one of the poor so she may visit Tateh and the little girl in anonymity. The little girl becomes ill, and Evelyn Nesbit takes care of her. Mother’s Younger Brother begins to follow the object of his secret affection, Evelyn Nesbit; she is completely aware of his presence. One afternoon, Tateh, the little girl, and Evelyn Nesbit attend a political meeting of Socialists where the guest speaker is anarchist Emma Goldman. Emma Goldman recognizes Evelyn Nesbit and exposes her to the crowd; angry, Tateh takes the little girl and leaves. Meanwhile, Mother finds and rescues an African-American baby buried alive in her backyard. She learns the mother is a young woman and washerwoman named Sarah. Rather than let her go to prison, she takes her into her home.

Evelyn Nesbit and Mother’s Younger Brother begin a relationship. Mother’s Younger Brother helps Evelyn Nesbit search for Tateh and the little girl; however, their search is for naught. Tateh and his daughter leave New York and travel up the Eastern seaboard. In the meantime, Houdini learns to fly planes and performs a demonstration for Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the Countess Sophie. Father returns from his trip to the Arctic and experiences a profound sense of isolation. Mother’s Younger Brother, now split from Evelyn Nesbit and working at Father’s fireworks factory, becomes proficient in bomb construction.

Tateh and the little girl travel to Lawrence, Massachusetts, where Tateh finds work in a textile mill. However, a mill strike nearly separates the two permanently. They continue their travels and land in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Tateh, an artist, sells movie books (flip books) he has invented to a novelty store owner for a considerable sum. Tateh and his daughter return to Lawrence and settle into a comfortable life. Pioneers of industry J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford meet to discuss theology and technology.

Back at the house in New Rochelle, Coalhouse Walker, Jr.—an African-American jazz piano player—begins to court Sarah. Sarah refuses to see him yet he continues to visit until she agrees not only to see him, but to accept his marriage proposal. One day, as Coalhouse drives from New Rochelle back to New York City, the volunteers of the Emerald Isle Firehouse—led by Chief Willie Conklin—block his path and demand a toll.



While Coalhouse seeks police help, the firefighters destroy his car. When Coalhouse complains, he is arrested. Coalhouse uses the funds originally intended for his wedding to Sarah to secure a lawyer; however, no lawyer will take his case. One night, desperate to help, Sarah leaves the house to ask Mr. Taft's Vice-President for help petitioning the federal government on Coalhouse's behalf. However, she is mistaken for an attacker and is struck very hard in the chest by Secret Service men. She becomes ill and eventually dies. Lost in grief, Coalhouse fixates on the injustice done to him, and retaliates by blowing up the Emerald Isle Firehouse, killing four volunteers in the process. Father and Mother's Younger Brother fight over the incident, and Mother's Younger Brother leaves the house and family to join Coalhouse Walker, Jr. and his group of disgruntled youth. Under increasing scrutiny, Father, Mother, and the little boy flee with Sarah's baby to Atlantic City, New Jersey. Mother and Father meet Tateh, who has re-fashioned himself as a motion picture director, while in Atlantic City.

Willie Conklin faces pressure to leave town or give into Coalhouse Walker's demands as Coalhouse and his gang continue to blow up firehouses across the city. Coalhouse and his gang break into J.P. Morgan's library and hold it hostage as they continue to make demands. District Attorney Charles T. Whitman calls Coalhouse to negotiate; Coalhouse reiterates his demands: his car must be restored to full working order and Willie Conklin must die. Booker T. Washington attempts to persuade Coalhouse to give himself over to the authorities but Coalhouse refuses to do so until his demands are met. Finally, Father returns from Atlantic City and is able to convince authorities to concede to Coalhouse's demand. The District Attorney delivers the Model T and forces Conklin to restore it in the street where Coalhouse can see. When the restoration is complete, Coalhouse's gangs, including Mother's Younger Brother, make their escape in the car. Coalhouse surrenders, and is shot down in the street by a firing squad. Mother's Younger Brother drives around the country in Coalhouse's Model T and subsequently to Mexico, where he joins revolutionary forces and eventually dies.

J.P. Morgan travels to Egypt to see the pyramids in an attempt to restore his spirituality. However he fails, his health begins to decline, and he dies. Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Countess Sophie are assassinated. As tension in Europe increases and WWI approaches, Father becomes involved in war preparations. He dies when the Lusitania is struck and sinks with him on board. Tateh and Mother marry and raise the little boy, the little girl, and Sarah's son as their own. Emma Goldman is deported and Evelyn Nesbit fades into obscurity as she ages. Her former husband, Harry Kendall Shaw, is released from the insane asylum and marches in the Armistice parade.



Chapters 1-3

Summary

Chapter 1. The novel opens on a domestic scene in New Rochelle, New York. The upper-class family remains nameless, rather they are referred to throughout the novel as Mother, Father, the little boy, and Mother's Younger Brother. The family's fortune resides in the manufacturing of various patriotic paraphernalia such as fireworks and flags. Mother's Younger Brother is in love with Evelyn Nesbit. Evelyn Nesbit's husband, Harry K. Thaw, is facing trial for murdering her ex-lover, architect Stanford White, in a fit of passion. The little boy largely left to his own devices, dreams of escaping from his family and town. He is incredibly fond of escape artist and magician, Harry Houdini, whose car breaks down in front of the house one day. Father invites Houdini in for tea while the car is being fixed and tells Houdini of his plans to journey to the Arctic.

Chapter 2. Father prepares for his trip to the Arctic. His family and a number of his employees accompany him to the railway station. As Peary, Father, and the rest of the expedition set sail for the Arctic, father notices a boat full of bedraggled immigrants sailing into the wharf. Father experiences an acute feeling of despair at this sight.

Chapter 3. An omniscient narrator describes the immigrant population pouring into New York City and how they are processed at Ellis Island. The descriptions of the new immigrants are not favorable. Neither is the reception the immigrants receive from New Yorkers and, more specifically, from older, more established immigrants. The narrator narrows focus to Mameh, Tateh, and the little girl. Their experience is not unique—Tateh works as a peddler and Mameh takes in sewing to help supplement the family's meager earnings. They live in poverty in the apartment housing on the Lower East Side. When Mameh's boss offers her money for sex, she reluctantly agrees. Famed journalist Jacob Riis briefly enters the story to photograph and write about the plight of the poor living in the tenements. Riis asks architect Stanford White—renowned for his elaborate and expensive building designs—if he's ever considered designing better housing for the poor.

Analysis

This novel, set at the turn of the century, reflects many of the changes America faced at the time. Immediately establishing two of the three sets of main characters—the wealthy, well-to-do family, and the poor immigrant family—within the first chapters launches parallel storylines. The first focuses on Mother, Father, Mother's Younger Brother, and the little boy. The long descriptive first paragraph immediately sets the mood and tone of the book. It describes items and thoughts familiar to the world of wealth and privilege the little boy inhabits. It is important to note this passage specifically acknowledges the absences—at that point—of the two other groups of main characters: the immigrants and the Negroes. However, this first paragraph ends with the



line, “Apparently there were Negroes. Apparently there were immigrants.” This implies that soon the family and its way of life will encounter sudden and irrevocable change.

Chapter 2 segues between the introduction of the wealthy family and the poor immigrant family. Chapter 1 introduces us directly to the wealthy family and Chapter 2 introduces us to the tensions between the wealthy and the poor. Father’s reaction to the boat full of immigrants is one of despair, though it is not clear if it is despair for their condition, or despair because a non-native force is infiltrating his beloved country.

Ragtime addresses the complex hierarchy that existed between old and new immigrant populations. Older immigrant populations viewed new immigrants as a threat to their livelihood and as such, treated new immigrants poorly. Many fail to recognize they are trapped in a vicious cycle. Older immigrants do not recognize that their parents, or perhaps they themselves, once endured cruel conditions and poor treatment. Rather, they continue to treat the new immigrants as they themselves were once treated. The inclusion of Riis and Stanford at the end of Chapter 3 acts as a foil, reminding the reader of the growing conflict between the wealthy and the ever-increasing poor. Riis exhibits the concern that some reformers and humanitarians expressed regarding living conditions and Stanford responds with a typical ego-centric, high-society response. He is more concerned with the beauty and aesthetic quality of his buildings than he is with the troubles of his fellow man.

Vocabulary

accoutrement, sentiment, eccentric, scion, genteel, profusion, vaudeville, pneumatic, demeanor, indelicate, doff, consign, culvert, indigent



Chapters 4-6

Summary

Chapter 4. Mother's Younger Brother's obsession with Evelyn Nesbit grows stronger. Evelyn Nesbit contemplates her husband, Harry K. Thaw, and his fate. A violent man, he has little chance of persuading a jury that he was temporarily insane when he killed Stanford White. Because of his wealth and celebrity status, Harry K. Thaw receives much better treatment than the average prisoner at the Tombs. Evelyn Nesbit, despite knowing her husband to be guilty, plays the dutiful wife and continues to proclaim Thaw's innocence.

Chapter 5. Harry Houdini happens to be at the Tombs, the prison where Harry K. Thaw resides while awaiting trial. Houdini challenges the warden's statement that the cells are secure and performs an escape from one such cell. During the escape, Houdini encounters Harry K. Thaw and experiences an unsettling moment. However, it is not until later that Houdini actually learns the inmate he stumbled upon is Thaw, the killer of Stanford White. Houdini's real name Erich Weiss is revealed, as is his Jewish heritage. Sigmund Freud arrives in America for the first time, and receives a lukewarm reception as some believe his theories to be unsound and perverse.

Chapter 6. Freud travels around New York City. He sees many sights but can focus only on the obscene level of noise coming from the streets. He flees back to Vienna, Austria and concludes America is a gigantic mistake. The narrator turns to a discussion of the deplorable working conditions of the average worker at the time, focusing largely on child labor. African-Americans of the time continue to experience social, racial, and economic discrimination frequently coupled with violence. Many wealthier citizens of America seem to exhibit a growing awareness and concern for the growing issue of poverty, yet their methods decry this concern as superficial, meaningless, and often at the expense of the poor.

Analysis

The interconnectedness of characters, as motif, is incredibly important. The novel frequently shifts from plot to plot and between characters in order to demonstrate the interconnectedness between the social classes of the time. Chapter 5, for example, opens with Mother's Younger Brother at the fireworks display thinking about Evelyn Nesbit. This scene transitions into a description of Evelyn Nesbit's thoughts of her husband and his imminent trial, which in turn segues into the scene in which Houdini escapes from a cell within the Tombs. The chapter then focuses on Houdini's thoughts and feelings for his mother, which some may consider intense to the point of bordering on incest, which in turn leads to the introduction of Sigmund Freud whose work focused on love and sex. Freud's response to New York City and its poor further illuminates the status of the poor and immigrant populations and allows the author to more broadly



discuss labor conditions and social. The constant shifting between perspective and topic creates a richly layered and thought-provoking narrative.

At points, the narrative voice is almost journalistic in tone, as it shifts focus from the main characters to broader political and social problems of the time. At the end of Chapter 6, for example, the narrator lists statistics about wages and numbers of deaths. However, the narrative voice remains ironic in order to accentuate the inability, and unwillingness, of wealthy class to understand the lower classes. Juxtaposing the brutality suffered by the laboring poor with fashionable and elaborately staged mock-poor charity events draws attention to and critiques the self-satisfaction of pretend-humanitarians.

Sigmund Freud's character acts as a cipher through which the reader can observe changing social views and trends. Freud's studies—more specifically his later studies, changed perceptions of sexuality, sexual freedom, and free love. This relates, in part, to the burgeoning awareness Mother has of her own sexuality, which in turn mirrors the ways in which American society shed restrictive Victorian Era notions of sex and sexuality as the more liberated Roaring Twenties approached.

Vocabulary

benevolent, deranged, concoct, affidavit, convalescence, tacit, laceration, cavernous, valet, gesticulate, demurred, porcine, promenade, coiffed, silhouette, commingle, entrails



Chapters 7-9

Summary

Chapter 7. Leaving the Tombs one day, Evelyn Nesbit notices no reporters are following her. She takes the opportunity to explore the city, ordering her driver to take her to the Lower East Side. A beautiful little girl catches her eye and when Evelyn Nesbit approaches the girl, she notices a length of clothesline attached to her wrist connects her to an old man's waist. Tateh, now a silhouette artist, explains to Evelyn Nesbit many children are stolen from their parents and sold into slavery. Evelyn Nesbit demands to know where the girl's parents are and Tateh tells her his family's story. Touched by his story, Evelyn Nesbit continues to visit Tateh and the little girl. The press accuses her of having multiple affairs with other men, but Evelyn cares little for what they write in the papers. One day, failing to find Tateh and the little girl on their usual corner, Evelyn visits their home only to discover the little girl is deathly ill. She nurses her back to health while Tateh returns to his work. Fueled by his growing love, Mother's Younger Brother begins to follow Evelyn on a regular basis.

Chapter 8. Tateh convinces Evelyn Nesbit to join him at a socialist meeting featuring anarchist Emma Goldman. Goldman recognizes Evelyn Nesbit and in her speech on her skepticism of the institution of marriage, exposes Evelyn Nesbit, claiming Evelyn Nesbit used her sexuality for social and economic gain. Tateh flees with the little girl from Evelyn Nesbit. Emma Goldman takes Evelyn Nesbit to her apartment, all the while criticizing Nesbit's behavior. Emma Goldman recounts her youth and her fight for equality and labor rights as she undresses Evelyn Nesbit, encouraging her to free herself literally from the uncomfortable clothing and all it symbolizes. Mother's Younger Brother, having followed the two women, bursts forth from Goldman's closet at the exact moment of his sexual climax.

Chapter 9. In New Rochelle, Mother becomes increasingly worried and angry at her brother. While walking in the garden, she discovers a new born infant buried alive. She rescues the baby and immediately reports the incident. The police take a young African-American washerwoman into custody. Mother takes both the washerwoman and the baby into her home.

Analysis

While Evelyn Nesbit rose from lower-class obscurity to upper-class fortune and fame, she remains ignorant of the conditions under which the immigrant poor suffer. Her education and eventual involvement illustrate, in a sense, the growing social awareness of this issue. However, Evelyn Nesbit's mothering of the little girl illustrates a sort of irony as she "plays" poor in order to escape the stresses associated with her wealthy life (namely her husband's incarceration, his impending trial, and the constant hounding of the press). In some ways, Evelyn Nesbit's insertion into the immigrant family's life fulfills



a longing for the opportunities she's missed out on when she chose to pursue fortune and fame.

Emma Goldman's inclusion within the novel is essential as she often is portrayed challenging characters' preconceived notions of self. In these chapters, she criticizes Evelyn Nesbit's life choices and attempts to convince Evelyn Nesbit to examine the lies on which she's constructed her life. She equates Evelyn Nesbit's life to that of a prostitute: each employs love, lust, and sex to secure money. Emma Goldman's feminist beliefs to convince Evelyn Nesbit that even the clothing she wears is part of the lie, as it molds her body into a shape intended for men's pleasure. Goldman attempts to convince Evelyn Nesbit the two women, despite their physical polarity, in fact have more in common than they do not. Goldman's critique of Evelyn Nesbit's life forces Nesbit to consider the fact an individual constructs his or her life through a series of choices, rather than events.

Vocabulary

tenement, livery, jodhpurs, defile, geriatric, liaison, filigree, treadle, overwrought, consternation, socialism, anarchism, capitalism, opulent



Chapters 10-12

Summary

Chapter 10. Father writes home from the Arctic every day. Peary's expedition to the North Pole proceeds; his assistant, the African-American Mathew Henson supervises the training. Father thinks the Eskimo men and women working with the expedition are primitive and child-like people and curiously notes the Eskimos exhibit no sexual timidity. Traveling through and across the ice becomes difficult as the expedition nears the pole. Father presents Peary with a flag from his factory to place at the North Pole and then returns to New Rochelle. Peary reaches the North Pole yet remains unsatisfied.

Chapter 11. Evelyn Nesbit and Mother's Younger Brother strike up a relationship; they engage in frequent sexual intercourse, but find they have little to speak about otherwise. Mother's Younger Brother helps Evelyn Nesbit search for Tateh and his little girl, but with little success. Goldman criticizes Evelyn Nesbit's acceptance of her role sex symbol. To ease her consciousness, Evelyn Nesbit donates money to various causes, but remains unhappy nonetheless as she misses Stanford White. For her role as devoted wife during Harry K. Thaw's trial, his lawyers finalize Evelyn's divorce; she receives \$25,000 as part of the settlement.

Chapter 12. Growing increasingly concerned about the conditions in which his daughter is growing up in New York City, Tateh takes all of their money and buys a ticket out. As the father and daughter travel out of the city and through New Rochelle, the little girl sees the little boy playing in front of his house. They continue up the Eastern Seaboard, and Tateh is elated to see his little girl becoming more and more cheerful the further away they get from the city.

Analysis

Peary and Father's views of the Eskimos further exemplify the racist views of minorities many held at the time. At one point, Peary equates the Eskimos to dog—both are loyal and obedient—and tells father the Eskimos must be treated like children. This parallels some of the discourse used to justify slavery prior to the Civil War. Father's blind agreement with Peary illustrates the group-think mindset of the majority of Americans at the turn of the century.

Evelyn Nesbit and Emma Goldman's interactions continue to be a source of discourse concerning female sexual awareness and its effect. In particular, this section focuses on the ways in which women use their sexuality to obtain what they desire and how, ultimately, that fails to satisfy. Money ultimately loses meaning and importance for Evelyn Nesbit as she first mourns and then becomes emotionally callous over the loss of Tateh and the little girl. Feeling no love and no joy, Evelyn Nesbit rejects Mother's



Younger Brother for men who will use her and be used by her, in spite of all the love he showers on her..

Chapter 12 reminds the reader of the interconnectedness of the characters when the little girl and the little boy lock eyes. It also foreshadows the ways in which the two families will come together by the end of the novel.

Vocabulary

berth, sortie, sledge, theoretical, fastidiousness, embarkation, precipitous, sinuously, contrition, vellum, utopian



Chapters 13-15

Summary

Chapter 13. Experiencing an ever-growing dissatisfaction with his escape and magic routines, Houdini learns to fly. He conducts an informal exhibition of his new-found talent for a number of German officers. The Commandant of the Imperial German Forces asks him to perform another exhibition, and Houdini complies. Unbeknownst to Houdini, Archduke Ferdinand and his wife, the Countess Sophie, are in the crowd, Houdini meets the Archduke after his display, and the Archduke congratulates him on inventing the airplane.

Chapter 14. Father returns home from his journey to the Arctic to find Mother caring for the washerwoman's child. The washerwoman, Sarah, meanwhile, remains sequestered in her room upstairs. Father feels isolated from his family and former life as his wife now exhibits a greater competency and business acumen, and his son has matured. Mother's Younger Brother, increasingly depressed by Evelyn Nesbit's rejection, constructs a bomb.

Chapter 15. The little boy develops a fondness for discarded and neglected items. Grandfather tells him Ovid's stories, specifically recounting the ones about transformation and illusions. The little boy begins to become aware of his impending manhood and his vanities.

Analysis

Characters in *Ragtime* illustrate what happens when one is faced with change. Some, like father, fail to embrace change and as such experience alienation, rejection, and bitterness. Others, such as Mother, undergo change without really being cognizant of the experience. The little boy, on the other hand, is aware of the changes happening within in his life as well as within himself. Father's reactions to the changes occurring in his household symbolize the sentiments of a portion of society that yearned for by-gone eras. He no longer understands his wife, as she has become increasingly independent, and he cannot relate to the new generation—symbolized by his son. He represents old traditions and old ways embodied by traditional men at the turn of the century. He is incapable of change and resentful of the newly altered world around him. Mother's transformations, on the other hand, manifest in her growing awareness, and enjoyment of, her sexuality. No longer repressed by Victorian mores and morals, Mother comes to symbolize the New Woman (a late 19th, early 20th century feminist concept) of the new era. Likewise, the little boy's growing self-awareness speaks to the new generation's ability to embrace change.



Vocabulary

hydraulic, buttresses, traction, lithe, dissatisfaction, disembodied, devious, spherical, combustion, peculiarly, volatile, solicitude



Chapters 16-18

Summary

Chapter 16. Tateh and the little girl travel to Lawrence, Massachusetts, where Tateh finds employment in a textile mill. Tateh notes his daughter is beginning to grow up, and worries about how she will change as she matures and what effect her new environment will have on her. Pay and working conditions are grim, and the textile mill workers strike. The strike organizers set up a network of families where workers can send their children for safety. Tateh struggles with the decision, but ultimately decides to send the little girl away. The City Marshall, fearing bad press, bars all children from leaving and, as a result, chaos breaks out at the train station. Tateh is injured and separated from the little girl, who is placed on the train. The train leaves the station and Tateh runs to, catches up with, and jumps aboard the train.

Chapter 17. Tateh and the little girl disembark from the train in Philadelphia. A despondent Tateh doesn't know how he's going to provide for the little girl in this new city. He reads of the strike's success, and decides they will move back to Lawrence, MA. Walking around Philadelphia, they happen upon a novelty store. Tateh quickly produces a series of sketches he shows to the store owner. When flipped through quickly, the drawings become animated like a cartoon. Tateh signs an agreement to produce more books of this nature.

Chapter 18. Henry Ford pioneers the assembly line, contributing to the increase in manufacturing and mass production of goods. This results in a devaluing of individual human labor as a result.

Analysis

Tateh's character perhaps undergoes the greatest amount of change within the novel. In these chapters, the reader sees Tateh begin to question his old life and actively seek a better one. He assesses his life to this point, and finds that hardship outweighs joy. He makes a conscious decision to separate himself from the working class and their associated troubles. The realizations he makes at this point fully sever all attachments Tateh had to the American Dream. He no longer possesses the idealism of and hope for social equality associated with his days as a socialist. Rather, as he is able to conceive of a product and produce a demand for it, he places his faith in the capitalistic system of early-20th century America.

Chapter 18 touches on the effect of technology on individual lives. The technological innovations of the time enabled greater efficiency in manufacturing. However, as a result, the need for and value of the individual laborer decreased. This, inevitably, effects the ever-growing immigrant population as competition for and to keep jobs increases.

Vocabulary

dismal, militia, threadbare, pirouette, resolute, foreboding, wretched, emporium, amiable, proprietor, entrepreneur, ecstasy, vouchsafe, replicate, multitudes



Chapters 19-21

Summary

Chapter 19. The narrator introduces J.P. Morgan, one of the pioneers of banking and financing. J.P. Morgan is an incredibly wealthy man with an interest in art, and specifically Egyptian art. He despises other men of his social status, as he finds them dull. However, J.P. Morgan sets up a meeting with Henry Ford as he believes they are two of a kind.

Chapter 20. Henry Ford accepts J.P. Morgan's invitation to lunch at his home on Madison Avenue. The two tour the library, and Ford makes an anti-Semitic remark. J.P. Morgan asks Ford about his religious beliefs; Ford hesitates to answer. They continue the tour with J.P. Morgan's ancient Greek and Egyptian artifacts. Morgan expresses the belief that the purpose of science is to destroy apprehension of reality. He invites Ford to join him on a trip to Egypt to explore ideas of reincarnation. Ford declines; his interest in reincarnation lies only in the fact he believes it explains his intellect as he assumes he has accumulated knowledge from multiple past lives. The two create an exclusive club, The Pyramid, of which they are the only members.

Chapter 21. Father finds the increased interest in Egyptian culture repulsive; however, the little boy is fascinated by Egyptian culture. Coalhouse Walker, Jr. arrives in a fancy Model-T to call on Sarah. Sarah refuses to see him. Mother notices Coalhouse doesn't act like other "Negroes." He doesn't act submissively to the white family, but rather acts as though they are his equals. Coalhouse continues to visit Sarah every Sunday, and is turned away every Sunday until Mother, despite Father's objections, invites him in for tea. They learn Coalhouse is a jazz pianist in New York City. He demonstrates his skills with a ragtime tune of which none but Mother's Younger Brother have heard. They are duly impressed by his talent. Sarah continues to refuse to see Coalhouse, but begins to act motherly towards her baby. Father, confused by Coalhouse's proud behavior, concludes Coalhouse is not aware he is a "Negro." Finally, late in winter, Sarah accepts Coalhouse's marriage proposal.

Analysis

J.P. Morgan's character represents another way in which individuals seek meaning and purpose. Morgan approaches this struggle from an intellectual point of view. Finding the other Captains of Industry dull and vapid—as they seem to be concerned with incredibly mundane things—J.P. Morgan turns to books and art to aid him in his search. His fascination with Egyptian culture is inevitable, as the Egyptian belief in reincarnation offers him a reassuring sense of continuity and meaning.

Coalhouse Walker's inclusion in the novel introduces the third facet of society: the African-American. The ways in which Father and Mother respond to Coalhouse's



presence represent the ways in which the majority viewed African-Americans. Father's confusion over Coalhouse's atypical behavior depicts the ways in which white society struggled to understand the free black man (The Emancipation Proclamation had ended slavery a mere 39 years earlier, and the Civil War came to an end only 37 years prior). Mother, however, begins to see Coalhouse Walker not as a "black man" but just as a man.

Vocabulary

financier, disentangle, obeisance, transnational, ruthless, exquisite, palpable, provincial, necropolis, homespun, insolent, firmament, promulgate, florid, resolute, penitence, intransigence, propriety



Chapters 22-24

Summary

Chapter 22. Mother's Younger Brother travels to New York City on a regular basis to attend Broadway shows. He attracts the attention of a number of women, but soon realizes he lacks the money to live a lavish lifestyle. He turns to prostitutes for company but not sex. One day, he stumbles upon the office of Mother Earth, Emma Goldman's anarchist magazine. For several nights, he observes the comings and goings of these offices from afar. One night, however, he is invited in and learns they have mistaken him for a police spy. Emma Goldman takes him to a rally about the Mexican Revolution, an on-going event of which Mother's Younger Brother is ignorant. At a post-rally party, Mother's Younger Brother waits for hours for a chance to speak to Emma Goldman; she finally approaches him and informs him she does not know the whereabouts of Evelyn Nesbit. She criticizes his self-pity as indulgent and tells him if he and Evelyn Nesbit were to reunite, their love would dissolve just as it did before. Mother's Younger Brother concedes Goldman is probably telling the truth. Goldman tells him romance matters less than friendship and the sharing of ideals. Mother's Younger Brother contemplates suicide on the way back to New Rochelle.

Chapter 23. After a visit to Sarah, Coalhouse Walker drives back to New York City and encounters some difficulty. As he drives by the Emerald Isle firehouse, as he does every Sunday, the volunteers, lead by Willy Conklin, block his passage and demand a toll in order to pass. Coalhouse, refusing to pay the toll, first attempts to reason with the volunteers then attempts to drive his Model-T around the barrier. The firemen successfully prevent his passage, and he leaves his car and seeks help from a police officer. The officer dismisses the situation as a harmless practical joke. Returning to his car, Coalhouse finds his car pushed to the side of the road, vandalized, and pile of excrement on the seat. Coalhouse confronts Willie Conklin just as a police van appears and, despite the state of his car, the police believe Conklin's recounting of events and Coalhouse is arrested. Father posts bail for Coalhouse's release. Mother's Younger Brother feels sympathy for Coalhouse's troubles. Coalhouse re-designates the wedding funds toward securing a lawyer. Mother's Younger Brother visits the site of the incident and takes note of the vandalism.

Chapter 24. Mother's Younger Brother plunges deeper into depression. In efforts to pull himself out of depression, he engages in rigorous exercise. Mother's Younger Brother sympathizes with and begins to understand the magnitude of the anger Coalhouse Walker felt over the destruction of his Model T. Coalhouse faces difficulties securing legal representation; he meets with and is rejected by three different lawyers. Even Father's influence cannot improve the situation. Coalhouse considers representing himself. The family frequently discusses Coalhouse's predicament; Sarah informs Mother's Younger Brother Coalhouse told her they cannot marry until he gets justice and his car is restored to its original condition.



Analysis

Emma Goldman represents the ways in which traditional thought and values are rapidly changing in the early 20th century. The ways in which she challenges Mother's Younger Brother to examine his infatuation with Evelyn Nesbit translate into the changing perception of love and marriage within society. Rather than base marriage on economic and social status, Goldman encourages unions based on shared interests and values; she suggest removing sex from the equation altogether.

Coalhouse Walker's increasing troubles symbolize the hardships of many oppressed groups and provides commentary on race relations. Coalhouse Walker conducts himself in a manner atypical of African Americans at this point in history; he is prideful and treats the white majority as an equal. The conflict between Coalhouse's expectations regarding how he should be treated—which are not unreasonable—and the way others actually treat him as an African American exhibit the racism of the times. Mother and Father's bafflement at Coalhouse's refusal to conform and the fact they blame Coalhouse for the incident with the firehouse are symptoms of a fundamentally racist society.

Vocabulary

vigil, irony, complicity, network, bourgeois, syncopate, auxiliary, ostentatious, circumnavigate, bohemian, phenomenon, nuisance, redress



Chapters 25-27

Summary

Chapter 25. Frustrated by Coalhouse's postponement of the wedding, Father visits Willie Conklin. However, before he can, Sarah learns President Taft's Vice President, James Sherman, will attend an event in New York City. She leaves the house with the intention of asking for the Vice-President's help in petitioning the United States' government on Coalhouse's behalf. As Sarah calls out to Sherman, mistaking him for the President, she is struck in the chest by a security guard and a Secret Service man jumps atop of her in order to restrain her. She is hauled off to jail, and later to the hospital where she becomes very ill. Mother, Father, and Coalhouse visit her but within a week she dies of pneumonia.

Chapter 26. Coalhouse Walker spends all of the money he has—the former wedding money that became his legal fund—on an elaborate funeral for Sarah. The orchestra for which Coalhouse plays piano marches behind Sarah's coffin all the way from Harlem to Brooklyn, where her body is laid to rest.

Chapter 27. Grandfather falls and cracks his pelvis. Harry K. Thaw escapes from prison and is recaptured after he creates a scene on a train near Buffalo, NY. Houdini continues to grieve his dead mother, who took ill and died while he was touring Europe. She called out his name immediately before she died, and Houdini is plagued by the fear she wished to tell him something. He becomes interested in debunking methods used to speak with the dead, and educates himself on the tricks of the trade. He incorporates these tricks into his magic show. He nearly reveals the secrets to his new tricks while performing in New Rochelle, but an explosion and the ensuing chaos prevents him from doing so.

Analysis

The relationship between poverty and morality comes to the forefront in these chapters. The interactions between Mother, Father, and Sarah demonstrate the false belief that many upper class citizens held; specifically, the belief that wealthy individuals possess a heightened set of morals. Sarah's conviction in her morals, however, surprises and challenges this belief.

The focus on Harry Houdini in Chapter 27 acts as a reminder of the interconnectedness of characters and events. As Harry K. Shaw escapes from prison, for example, he says, "Just call me Houdini," which provides segue into Houdini's story. While in the midst of Houdini's story, the narrator reminds the reader of J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford's secret society (established in Chapter 20), and the explosion that occurs at the end, the reader later learns, is Coalhouse Walker blowing up the Emerald Isle firehouse. This structure



provides not only proof of interconnectedness, but also a natural transition between storylines.

Many characters search for meaning within the novel. J.P Morgan finds it in Egyptian belief in reincarnation and in a similar manner, Houdini questions and seeks meaning in the nature of the afterlife. What he finds, however, provides no esoteric meaning (as the Egyptians do for Morgan) but rather poof that technology, science, and religion have failed in providing adequate understanding of life, death, and afterlife.

Vocabulary

pathology, mellifluous, lithe, petition, commission, militiaman, sepulchral, precipitous, omnibus, cortege, inconsequential, clairvoyant, proscenium



Chapters 28-30

Summary

Chapter 28. The explosion during Houdini's show is revealed as coming from the Emerald Isle Firehouse. Two volunteers are hospitalized and four others die; some of the firemen appear to have died from buckshot rather than fire or the explosion. When the New York City Police Department reconstructs the events, they discover six firemen had been playing poker when the alarm rang. They reacted quickly, as they are trained to do, setting off into the road where they were met by shotgun fire. Three died immediately. The fourth died when the engine fell on him. Father hears the explosion and initially assumes his fireworks plant is the cause. The newspapers identify the bomber as a black man demanding to know the location of Willie Conklin. Father blames the Mother for bringing Coalhouse Walker into their lives; Mother's Younger Brother reminds Father Coalhouse is the one who has been wronged. Coalhouse sends letters to the newspapers claiming involvement in the bombing attack and informing them he will continue to bomb firehouses until his demands are met and his car restored to its original condition.

Chapter 29. The reader learns of Father's upbringing. The only child of a wealthy family, his mother dies when he is a teenager and his father squanders the family fortune on failed speculations. He dies, leaving Father nearly penniless. Father attends good schools and uses what little inheritance he has to invest in and eventually purchase a fireworks business. Father starts to lose his physical attraction to Mother. Mother has channeled her grief over Sarah's death into care for Sarah's son. Responding to Coalhouse's letters in the newspapers, pairs of policemen stand guard outside every firehouse. One day, several black men appear outside a firehouse, kill a policeman and throw several bombs disguised as packages through the windows. They give the remaining policeman a letter to give the newspapers. Frightened, the town tightens security and people shut themselves into their homes. Learning of the family's involvement with Sarah and Coalhouse, the press sets up camp outside the house in New Rochelle. Tension grows between Father and Mother. Father invites the little boy to a baseball game.

Chapter 30. While at the baseball game, Father experiences extreme nostalgia. He recalls his days playing the game at Harvard, before teams became populated by largely immigrant players. He is perplexed by the nostalgia he experiences.

Analysis

By juxtaposing the social statuses of Father and Coalhouse, the author addresses mental and emotional effects of their differences. Coalhouse's anger and violent actions result from the impotence he experiences when faced with prejudice. The rejections of his intellectual and legal attempts to secure justice have left Coalhouse with no other



option for recourse but violence. Father, as an upper class white man, fails to understand and sympathize with Coalhouse's plight, largely because of his social status as a black man.

Father's upbringing provides the perspective necessary to understand Father's mentality. Father, it turns out, despite his fortunate birth and upbringing, is a self-made man. Yet, he still experiences a strong affinity for and ties to his privileged upbringing. As such, he experiences difficulties embracing change. This failure contributes to his increasing feeling of isolation and nostalgia for the past, as exemplified by his experiences at the ballgame.

Vocabulary

carafe, sentimentality, maniac, insurrection, speculations, flamboyance, billet, grievance, delegation, militia, physiognomy, siege, emulate, festoon, nostalgia



Chapters 31-33

Summary

Chapter 31. Father's day at the ballpark leaves him feeling rejuvenated. Father and Mother discuss and make plans to leave New Rochelle for Atlantic City for awhile in order to escape the constant scrutiny of the press and their neighbors. The tension in town grows and residents of African American neighborhoods experience harassment. The press photographs and publishes the extent of damage done to Coalhouse's car, much to the embarrassment of authorities. Citizens express a growing desire for Willie Conklin to leave New Rochelle; interpreting these desires as support for a "negro" rather than one of their own, Conklin begins to drink excessively. He eventually realizes the upper class citizens view him as lower class and thus of near-equal social status to African Americans. The family successfully slips from the house and travels to Atlantic City.

Chapter 32. Mother's Younger Brother, missing since his altercation with Father, locates Coalhouse. Coalhouse questions Mother's Younger Brother and, despite having an eloquent idealized speech prepared, he simply tells Coalhouse he can make bombs. He is accepted into the gang. Mother's Younger Brother paints his face black and dresses like the other followers. Coalhouse's followers live communally and simply; they follow Coalhouse's directions with military efficiency. Collectively, they call themselves "Coalhouse."

Chapter 33. The family leads a leisurely life in Atlantic City. Mother's continuing sexual awareness manifests in decreased modesty while wading. She questions her feelings for father; she loves him but feels unsatisfied with and by him. She experiences guilt over her neglect of brother. Other men express interest in Mother, but she ignores them. The family meets Baron Ashkenazy, a purported filmmaker, and his beautiful daughter.

Analysis

Willie Conklin's treatment and subsequent realizations illustrate the complexity of race and class dynamics of the time. Adherence to class structure, Willie learns, is just as strong as racist sentiments; in each case, the minority is excluded and prevented from social mobility. Conklin's white skin does not amount to an advantage sufficient enough to allow his continued presence in town.

Mother's Younger Brother's involvement and inclusion in Coalhouse's gang depicts how idealism without direction latches on to nearly any cause in hopes of finding a sense of purpose. However, the trajectory of Mother's Younger Brother's story—which ends in his death in a foreign country—warns of the perils of aimless idealism.

Mother's continued emotional and intellectual development in comparison to Father's continued adherence to traditional values and way of life highlights the ideological



schism occurring within mainstream society. Mother feels under-stimulated; she realizes despite the impression her husband has given her for years, his work is actually incredibly simplistic. She loves her husband, but is not “in love” with him. Mother finds herself becoming increasingly an idealistic dreamer, whereas her husband remains resistant to change. Father’s inability to satisfy his wife intellectually and sexually foreshadows Mother’s union with Baron Ashkenazy/Tateh.

Vocabulary

vengeful, disseminated, condemnations, irate, piteous, torpor, guerilla, concession, syncopated, pilfer, mercenary, munificent, ablutions, potency, indomitable, lascivious



Chapters 34-36

Summary

Chapter 34. The two families develop a close friendship; the little girl and the little boy play together on the beach daily. The narrator reveals Baron Ashkenazy is really Tateh, who created a fake title of nobility for himself in order to assimilate into mainstream society. One day the children are caught in a sudden storm. Mother and Tateh search frantically for their children and experience a giddy elation when reunited. Restless, bored, and concerned about his business Father yearns to leave Atlantic City. He reads that Coalhouse and his followers have broken into J.P. Morgan's library. When the District Attorney contacts him in the hopes Father could help alleviate the situation, Father decides to return to New York City.

Chapter 35. Originally, Coalhouse's gang planned to take J.P. Morgan hostage in his home; however, a mix-up in details and locations lead them to attack the library rather than his residence. J.P. Morgan is, in fact, aboard a ship en route to Rome and eventually Egypt. The police take immediate action and block off the block and establish constant surveillance. When other city authorities decline to take control of the situation, the duty falls to District Attorney Charles S. Whitman. Whitman sends a patrolman to investigate; thinking the roof offers a stealthy vantage point, the patrolman attempts to enter the library via a skylight. However, one of Coalhouse's followers quickly dispatches the policeman with a gunshot.

Chapter 36. Whitman attempts to talk to Coalhouse from outside the building; Coalhouse throws a collectible tankard with a phone number inside out the window. Whitman calls Coalhouse, who once again reiterates his demands including requesting that Conklin die in retribution for Sarah's death. Emma Goldman is arrested on false charges she is involved with Coalhouse. Whitman contacts African American academic Booker T. Washington for help; Washington, believing he can persuade Coalhouse to surrender, agrees.

Analysis

Chapter 34 alludes to the growing feelings between Tateh and Mother. It is clear these two have much in common. Furthermore, they reflect the ideas expressed earlier in the novel by Emma Goldman that friendship and mutual interests, versus love, should serve as the basis of a union. The vision of Mother, Tateh, and their children on the beach foreshadows their marriage at the end of the novel and establishes Father's growing isolation from his family.

Coalman's escalation in violence and his choice of target—J.P. Morgan—highlights the racial nature of the conflict. The two men, despite Willie Conklin's inferior social status, become interchangeable in Coalhouse's mind. This indicates Coalhouse's anger is no



longer directed at an individual, but rather at white men in general. Perhaps rightfully so; at every level of the ordeal, the white man has failed Coalhouse's search for justice.

Emma Goldman's arrest is an indicator of the ways in which authorities abuse power. She has no role in Coalhouse Walker's crusade, yet is perceived as a threat. This highlights early-20th century politics and the ways in which leaders of powerful social and political movements were controlled.

Vocabulary

apparatus, celluloid, monopolize, impoverished, encrustation, irrepressible, presentiment, consternation, reverberate, reconnoiter, edifice



Chapters 37-40

Summary

Chapter 37. The narrator describes the great African American academic Booker T. Washington's beliefs regarding the advancement of the "Negro" people. Washington believes advancement will be achieved through friendship with white people. A great orator with an impressive education, Washington is used to people heeding his advice and is surprised when Coalhouse does not. Coalhouse steadfastly believes he must not sacrifice his self-respect and bow to the white man's will. Coalhouse, however, for the first time decides he will leave J.P. Morgan's library if, in an act of good faith, Willie Conklin is forced to rebuild his car, returning it to its original condition. Washington fails to see this as a modification of Coalhouse's original demands and leaves angry and disappointed.

Chapter 38. Post-meeting, Washington makes a public statement declaring Coalhouse a brainsick man and encourages his friends and colleagues to come to Harlem to demonstrate their—and subsequently all African American's—opposition to such a man. Father arrives and notices a two-block radius has been cleared. Father overhears a conversation of Coalhouse's new demands and notes no one seems to have noticed the demands have changed. When he runs into the District Attorney, he informs him of such. Morgan sends a message from abroad indicating Coalhouse's demands should be honored and then Coalhouse should be dealt with accordingly. Father asks for the opportunity to negotiate further. When he is ushered into the library, he is shocked to find Mother's Younger Brother. Whitman complies and delivers the Model-T and Willie Conklin. Coalhouse assures Father that if his new wishes are fully met, he will turn himself over to the police with one stipulation: his followers go free. Whitman agrees to Coalhouse's condition.

Chapter 39. Conklin, forced to repair Coalhouse's Model-T in the street, is completely humiliated. Coalhouse holds Father hostage in the library; Father takes the opportunity to seek out and confront Mother's Younger Brother. Mother's Younger Brother responds with criticism of Father's treatment of his factory workers. Conklin completes reconstruction on the car, and Coalhouse's followers exit the library and drive away in the Model-T. Left behind, Coalhouse asks Father to tell him about his son.

Chapter 40. Holding up his end of the bargain, Morgan exits the library; Father, still inside, hears the gunfire of the execution squad. The newspapers report what the police tell them: Coalhouse made an attempt to escape. Mother's Younger Brother continues across the United States in Coalhouse's Model-T and eventually makes it to Mexico. He joins revolutionary Francisco Villa and Emiliano Zapata aiding them in the same way he did Coalhouse: by building bombs. Mother's Younger Brother dies in a fight with government troops. J.P. Morgan travels to Egypt, where he hopes the pyramids will restore his spirituality. His efforts fail; discouraged by his failure, his health rapidly declines and he dies. Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Countess Sophie are



assassinated, ushering in WWI. Houdini begins to overcome his grief over his mother's death. Grandfather dies and, as a result of Mother's Younger Brother involvement in the Coalhouse Walker incident, Mother and Father stop speaking. Father discovers the advance work Mother's Younger Brother did in the realm of explosives and weaponry; he begins selling weapons to the government. Aboard the Lusitania with a shipment of weapons en route to the war in Europe, Father dies when the ship is struck by torpedoes and sunk. One year after Father's death, Mother and Tateh marry. Observing his children—his dark haired daughter, his blond step-son, and his adopted African American son—Tateh comes up with a brilliant movie idea involving a mixed-race group of children.

Analysis

Booker T. Washington's inclusion in the Coalhouse Walker affair indicates an alternative view and approach to race relations. Many African Americans did not believe this "friends first" approach would work as it maintained a co-dependence that allowed the white man to continue to treat the black man as an inferior. Others believed that a show of good-faith solidarity would influence whites to join with blacks in solidarity. This debate informs the two sides of the Civil Rights movement.

J.P. Morgan's trip to Egypt further illustrated the on-going theme of characters search for meaning. His inability to successfully find meaning parallels the inability in other characters such as Peary, whose is unable to pinpoint the exact location of the North Pole, and Houdini who is unable to contact his dead mother. It also illuminates the distinction between true and false meaning. Characters frequently experience a moment in which they believe they've found meaning, only to discover they have not. Others, such as Houdini, accept their new found knowledge and are happier for it.

The last scene of the novel not only alludes to the Our Gang movies and T.V. shows, it also symbolizes a realization of the American dream. Tateh's vision is incredibly idealistic in scope: three distinctly different groups of people—upper class, immigrant, and African American—existing in harmony in absolute social inclusion. It also represents the changes that will occur throughout the 20th century.

Vocabulary

homburg, statuary, minstrel, impecunious, portico, monstrous, dismantle, insensitive, sibilant, serape, proliferate, skirmish, abhorrence, permeate, phlegmatic, embattled, shrapnel, volatile



Characters

Mother

A pretty woman, Mother is part of the upper-class family living in New Rochelle, New York. At the beginning of the novel, she is content in her role as wife and mother. Mother's life, and character, changes when her husband leaves for the Arctic. Finding the tasks associated with her husband's business mundane and simplistic, Mother begins to lose respect for Father's role as breadwinner. Caring for Sarah and her child further change mother emotional and psychologically. The love she once had for her husband diminishes to that of one friend toward another as Mother's sexual awareness frees her from societal repression. After Father's death, Mother marries Tateh/Baron Ashkenazy, as their passions—physical, emotional, and intellectual—directly align. Mother symbolizes idealism and change within the novel.

Father

Father owns a company that manufactures fireworks, flags, banners, and other such patriotic paraphernalia. He is portrayed as a self-made but cautious man as his own father lost the family fortune and left Father with no inheritance. When Father returns from the Arctic, he experiences a profound sense of isolation and alienation from his family, environment, and society that never quite disappears. Father character allegorically represents the traditional values held by many during the late 19th century. He—as did many—finds it difficult to come to terms with the changes of the Progressive Era and are reflected in his feelings of isolation and bewilderment. Father constantly compares current events in the novel to events from his past in an effort to understand his changing environment. However, his nostalgia often leads to resentment, and his resentment leads to an inability to change.

The Little Boy

The son of Mother and Father, the little boy is intelligent, observant, and is constantly learning about the world around him. He forms a close friendship with Tateh's little girl. He represents the next generation of Americans.

Mother's Youngest Brother

Mother's Younger Brother falls in love with Evelyn Nesbit. He first admires and lusts after her from afar; she eventually falls in love with him and then leaves him. Bitter and depressed, he joins the forces of Coalhouse to fight injustice. When Coalhouse's gang disbands, Mother's Younger Brother travels all around the United States and eventually to Mexico, where he becomes involved in several revolutionary campaigns and is subsequently killed in battle. Mother's Younger Brother represents not only the idealism



of youth/a new generation, but also the longing to belong. Mother's Younger Brother jumps from cause to cause, often idealizing and romanticizing people and social movements in the process.

Tateh/Baron Ashkenazy

A Jewish immigrant from Latvia, Tateh lives with his daughter and wife on the Lower East Side of New York City. He works as a peddler and silhouette artist. After disowning his wife and discovering Evelyn Nesbit's true identity, Tateh flees the city with his daughter and travels to Lawrence, Massachusetts. He works in a textile mill but leaves when a strike breaks out. He and his daughter travel to Philadelphia where Tateh develops an interest in filmmaking. He reinvents himself as Baron Ashkenazy. He meets Mother at Atlantic City and, after Father dies, the two marry. Tateh is perhaps the most dynamic of all the characters in the novel. He embodies changing entrepreneurial spirit. Whereas Father is unable to embrace change—and thus feels isolated and confused—Tateh wholly embraces change. As an immigrant, once he experiences a separation from his former socio-economic status and survives his disillusionment with the American Dream, he is able to overcome social and economic difficulties. He embraces the capitalistic system of early 20th century America through entrepreneurialism and self reinvention.

The Little Girl/Sha

The little girl is beautiful and shy—these qualities first capture Evelyn Nesbit's attention. The little girl is unhappy and listless while in New York City, a state that directly parallels her family's struggle to survive as immigrants. However, once Tateh and the little girl leave the city, her health blossoms and she becomes animated. She becomes good friends with the little boy, and when Mother and Tateh marry, the two families blend, representing the eventual acceptance and incorporation of immigrants into mainstream society.

Mameh

Mameh appears only briefly in the novel. She attempts to help support her family as a seamstress. However, as the family failure to make ends meet becomes increasingly desperate, Mameh accepts her boss's proposal of sex for money. When Tateh discovers Mameh's acts of prostitution, he kicks her out of the house and disowns her. She eventually dies, freeing Tateh to marry Mother.

Coalhouse Walker, Jr.

A successful, wealthy, and educated ragtime pianist, Coalhouse is the father of Sarah's illegitimate child. When his polite requests of compensation for his damaged car go unheeded, Coalhouse turns to militant violence. Coalhouse represents race relations in



turn-of-the-century America. Coalhouse conducts himself with a pride uncommon in African Americans at this point in history; furthermore his expectations for how he should be treated socially directly conflict with other, predominantly white beliefs regarding African American integration into society. When politeness and social decorum fail him in his quest for equality and justice, Coalhouse reverts to “angry black man” and uses violence to resolve his issues with and feelings for white society.

Sarah

Coalhouse Walker, Jr.’s fiancé; she first buries Coalhouse’s illegitimate son alive and refuses to accept Coalhouse’s marriage proposal. She eventually relents, but is tragically killed.

Willie Conklin

The Emerald Isle Firehouse chief and of Irish decent, Willie Conklin reacts to Coalhouse Walker’s affluence and race with hostility. His actions in turn ignite Coalhouse’s violence. Eventually, Conklin is forced to leave New Rochelle. At the end of the novel, Conklin is shamed when he is forced to rebuild Coalhouse’s car in front of J.P. Morgan’s library. Conklin represents established immigrant population’s negative perception and reception of other minority groups.

Evelyn Nesbit

A historically famous turn-of-the-century beauty and sex symbol, Evelyn Nesbit is married to Harry K. Thaw. She endures his trail in order to receive a large divorce settlement. Evelyn Nesbit meets and becomes enamored of the little girl. She begins to dress as a poor immigrant and sneak into their community in order to spend time with the little girl. She engages in a brief fling with Mother’s Younger Brother, and allows herself to be used as a symbol of oppression by Emma Goldman. Evelyn Nesbit’s youth and beauty eventually diminish and she fades into obscurity.

Harry K. Thaw

Evelyn Nesbit’s husband. At the beginning of the novel, he stands accused of murdering her ex-lover, Stanford White. At the close of the novel, Thaw is released from the insane asylum and marches in the Armistice parade.

Stanford White

Evelyn Nesbit’s former lover and a famous architect killed by Evelyn’s husband.



Harry Houdini

A famous escape artist and magician. He was, and is depicted in the novel as, overly dependent on his mother. When she passes, he becomes obsessed with the afterlife and debunking séances and spirit talkers, which were wildly popular during the early part of the 20th century. He represents the burgeoning fields of science and medicine as much Houdini's internal thoughts in the novel revolve around using science and medicine in his magic and escape acts. Additionally, his interest in such items as aviation further exhibits the rise of an interest in scientific endeavors and understanding during this historical period.

Henry Ford

Pioneered use of the assembly line in manufacturing and changed the course of industry and history. Ford made his fortune in manufacturing Model-T cars.

J.P. Morgan

An incredibly rich and successful financier who historically influenced the way large-scale banking was conducted. He possesses an interest in Egypt, art, and religion. Coalhouse and his followers hold his expansive library hostage.

Emma Goldman

Emma Goldman was an anarchist and social activist. She is eventually deported from the United States to Russia for her seditious activities. She appears periodically throughout the novel to challenge various characters' conceptions of society and self.

Jacob Riis

A journalist whose work focused on the plight of the poor; he published extensively on life in the tenements, exposing the squalid conditions in which many of the poor lived.

Sigmund Freud

This famous man is considered the father of modern psychiatry. His studies focused on sex and society in America.

Charles S. Whitman

District Attorney of New York City; he helps negotiate Coalhouse Walker's evacuation of J.P. Morgan's library.

Booker T. Washington

Booker T. Washington was a well-educated civil-rights leader of the early 20th century. His character in the novel portrays the belief that Washington himself held that friendship and cooperation between whites and African-Americans would benefit African-American integration into mainstream society. The injustice that Coalhouse suffers and the manner in which it escalates to violence mock Washington's notions of peaceful integration.



Objects/Places

New Rochelle

New Rochelle, New York, is the affluent town just outside of New York City where Mother, Father, Mother's Younger Brother, and the little boy live. The house at New Rochelle becomes the locus of the change: characters within the house either embrace change (Mother, Mother's Younger Brother), or suffer the consequences of failing to do so (Father).

New York City

A complex setting within the novel, New York City is home to both the wealthiest character (J.P. Morgan) and the poorest (the immigrants). A vital and ever-changing city, New York City is the hub through which much of the major social and economic change of the time is portrayed.

Atlantic City

Hounded by the press, Mother, and Father flee with the little boy and Sarah's baby to the sea shore at Atlantic City for a bit of peace. They meet the Baron Ashkenazy (Tateh in disguise) and his daughter here. Atlantic City symbolizes rebirth as this is where Tateh and Mother—two idealistic dreamers—meet and begin to fall in love.

Coalhouse Walker's Model-T

When Coalhouse's car is first introduced, it is described as incredibly posh and fancy. When it is vandalized by the Emerald Isle Firehouse volunteers, it becomes a symbol of oppression around which Coalhouse's supporters rally.

J.P. Morgan's Library

J.P. Morgan's library represents the ways in which the upper class acquired and hoarded knowledge, keeping it from the lower classes. It is a private library and collection maintained by wealthy financier, J.P. Morgan, for his own purposes. Coalhouse Walker and his gang identify it as the symbol of their oppression; their occupation of and threat to blow up the library symbolically represents minority populations challenging the wealthy majority's authority.

Pictures & Movies

Images, specifically images captured using cameras (both still and motion picture), are present in the novel. Peary uses film to capture his discovery of the North Pole, J.P. Morgan uses photos to capture the otherwise uninspiring dinner party comprised of his peers, and Tateh—as Baron Ashkenazy—is involved in the burgeoning motion picture industry. Photos and movies serve both a means by which to capture a moment in time as well as a way to, ultimately, bring diverse groups of people together (as in Tateh’s idea for a movie about a group of children).



Themes

Change/Growth

Every character within the novel grapples with change, be it personal growth of the world-at-large. Social, economic, ideological, and personal change are all present and the manner in which characters react to change speaks to both their position within society as well as their personality. Some characters embrace change, while others fail to do so. Mother and Father, for example, act as foils in the sense that Mother accepts change and as a result thrives, whereas Father's inability to accept change emotionally cripples him. Throughout the novel, father becomes increasingly depressed and experiences feelings of alienation and helplessness brought on by Mother and the little boy's increased self-sufficiency. Father is unable to adapt to change, and suffer for it. Mother, on the other hand, embraces both societal and emotional change. She all-but-adopts a black child and marries a Jewish man—both events that were not acceptable at the time—and revels in her growing awareness of her sexuality. Other characters, while seeming to accept change, are ultimately overwhelmed by it. Mother's Younger Brother, for example, intellectually understands the social movements and actively, though perhaps misguidedly, involves himself in them. However, his inability to understand his own emotional growth (or lack thereof) indicates his involvement fulfills a selfish need—the need to fill the emotional void left by Evelyn Nesbit—rather than a need to be part of meaningful change. Tateh, on the other hand, represents a class of character that understands change and rather than wait for it to happen, makes it happen: Tateh reinvents himself, trading his Jewish name and roots for a fake European title.

Search for Meaning

In response to their changing world, characters are forced to seek meaning in the experiences they face. Frequently, this understanding manifests in reconciliation between a character's desires and an unstable and rapidly changing world. These desires are varied; some characters desire love in various forms, others desire truth. Ultimately, all characters grapple with a desire to find meaning. Houdini, for example, learns all the tricks for communicating with the dead after his mother dies. He desires to reconnect with her; however, in the end his desire is not for communication with his dead mother but rather to find meaning in the finality of death.

Similarly, J.P. Morgan's obsession with Egyptian culture and concept of reincarnation reflects a desire for physical proof of immortality. Inevitably, his search is unsuccessful as his night in the pyramids results in no great (and expected) revelation. Morgan fails to comprehend the true meaning of his search—a fear of being forgotten. Mother's Younger Brother and Father also fail to find meaning, and suffer as a result. Father grows increasingly alienated from his own life, and Mother's Younger Brother never finds the satisfaction he's looking for. Other characters, such as Tateh and Mother,



successfully reconcile their desires with their search for meaning. As Mother becomes more sexually aware, she drifts away from Father. Yet, understanding her sexuality leads to an emotional stability she's never really experienced before and as such, she is able to find purpose and meaning in caring for Sarah's child and marrying Tateh. Likewise, Tateh's one desire is to create a successful new life for his family. Once he rejects the idealized notions associated with the American Dream—namely the false promises of social equality—he is able to find meaning in embracing a capitalistic society and reinvent himself accordingly.

Technology & Society

The increased efficiency of manufacturing increased dramatically during the early 20th century, largely in part because of the technological advancements made in methods of production. Increasing industrialization—the beginnings of which are present in this novel (i.e. Ford's assembly line)—contribute directly and greatly to the rise in socialism, labor unions, labor laws, tension between immigrant and native populations, tension new and old immigrant populations, tension between immigrant and African-American populations, and increased classism.

The novel closely examines the potential for technology to undermine the value of the individual laborer's skills. Readers are first introduced to this issue in Chapter 3 when the narrator discusses immigrant populations. The narrator describes the treatment of new immigrants by old immigrants and cites the fear of job encroachment as factor. Ford's treatment of his workers as well as his philosophy that workers should be as interchangeable as the parts on a machine also alludes to the negative impact technology. Additionally, Coalhouse Walker's possession of a car—specifically a fancy car that indicates status and wealth beyond what society deems socially acceptable for a black man—incites envy in the white firehouse volunteers and ultimately leads to the undoing of Coalhouse. Technology, however, can also positively impact society; the reader sees this in Tateh's involvement in the motion picture industry as he creates a movie depicting many races of children living in harmony.

Style

Point of View

The narrative voice of *Ragtime* is difficult to pinpoint. Written entirely in third person, with the exception of the second to last paragraph of the novel (“Poor Father, I see his final expedition”), it is at omniscient and at times journalistic as the narrator includes historical observations and details. The argument can be made that the narrative voice may in fact be that of the un-named little boy. The inclusion of the single “I” sentence at the end of novel indicates as much as does the extra attention given to describing the boy’s thoughts and appearance in greater detail than any of the other characters. However, the narrator also describes events and emotions that the little boy could not possibly have known or experienced. Additionally, the novel frequently switches between multiple character perspectives and often uses the first person plural “we,” indicating a voice that represents America verses an individual. The tone is often ironic and sly.

Setting

Set in early-20th century America (roughly 1902-1917), the novel switches between a number of settings. Each setting is relevant to the type of character that resides their and reflects economic and social status. The New Rochelle family lives in an affluent suburb of New York City and the poor immigrant family reside in New York City slums. Occasionally, characters travel outside of the main settings in order to show that the issues of classism, racism, worker’s rights, etc. are not unique to New York City but rather experienced unilaterally throughout the United States. Tateh’s journey up the Easter Sea Board with stops in Lawrence, MA and Philadelphia, PA may serve as examples of this shift in setting. The setting of the novel is often symbolic and directly relates to what characters are feeling and experiencing.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is complex, but not overly difficult to understand. The prose is descriptive and often poetic, but not flowery; it is often used ironically. Even though the story is set in a much earlier historical period, the language is neither dated nor inaccessible. It does, however, reflect and educated voice and, as such, includes some challenging word choices. Language enhances the understanding of events—both imagined and historical—rather than detract from it. The language contributes to the creation of the narrative voice, which lends an air of authority to the narrator. Readers sense that the narrator, via his language, has lived through these times and thus trusts the descriptions. The language, especially when used ironically, encourages the reader to think critically about the implications of the events of the narrative.

Structure

Ragtime consists of a total of forty chapters split into three distinction parts. Most chapters average about five to ten pages, with occasion short chapters of two to four pages and a small number of long chapters of ten to fifteen pages. The author uses unconventional capitalization and punctuation to add emphasis to themes and concepts. For example, dialogue lacks quotation marks and he capitalizes certain characters titles verses giving them actual names (i.e. Mother, Father, Mother's Younger Brother). The effect is that the New Rochelle family could be any family, and thus their experiences are universal instead of specific. Thus, stylistically and structurally, characters are employed allegorically—they symbolize concepts rather than actual people.

Repetition also serves as plot and story structure. Coalhouse's repeated Sunday visits, Tateh's endless silhouettes, Coalhouse's repeated demands, repeated appearances of characters such as Houdini and Emma Goldman etc. Repetition becomes routine. Routine lulls characters into a false sense of security and produce monotony. Monotony character's experience results in purposelessness. It is this sense of purposelessness that drives nearly all characters to seek meaning and drives the action of the story.

Quotes

Everyone wore white in summer. Tennis racquets were hefty and the racquet faces elliptical. There was a lot of sexual fainting. There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants... [Evelyn Nesbit] happened once to meet Emma Goldman, the revolutionary. Goldman lashed her with her tongue. Apparently there were Negroes. There were immigrants. (Chapter 1)

Riis made color maps of Manhattan's ethnic populations. Dull gray was for Jews—their favorite color he said. Blue for the thrifty German. Black for the African. Green for the Irishman. And yellow for the cat-clean Chinamen... Add dashes of color for the Finns, Arabs, Greeks and so on, and you have a crazy quilt, Riis cried, a crazy quilt of humanity! (Chapter 2)

One hundred Negroes a year were lynched. One hundred miners were burned alive. One hundred children were mutilated. There seemed to be quotas for these things. (Chapter 6)

I bet it would shock you to know how free I've been, in what freedom I've lived my life. Because like all whores you value propriety. You are a creature of capitalism, the ethics of which are so totally corrupt and hypocritical that your beauty is no more than the beauty of gold, which is to say false and cold and useless. (Chapter 8)

Father tended to agree with this view, as it suggested a consensus... There was no question that the Esquimos were primitives. They were affectionate, gentle, emotional, trustworthy and full of pranks. They loved to laugh and sing (Chapter 10)

All he could do was commit his life to hers and work to satisfy her smallest whim. She loved him but she wanted someone who would treat her badly and whom she could treat badly. She longed for a challenge to her wit, he longed to have her ambitions aroused once again. (Chapter 11)

He wandered though the house finding everywhere signs of his own exclusion. His son now had a desk, as befitted all young students...What was strangest of all was the mirror in his bath: it gave back the gaunt, bearded face of a derelict, a man who lacked a home. His shaving mirror on the Roosevelt had not revealed this. (Chapter 14)

By controlling the speed of the moving belts, he could control the worker's rate of production. He did not want a worker to stop over or take more than one step from his work site. The worker must have every second necessary for his job but not a single unnecessary second. From these principles Ford established the final proposition of the theory of industrial manufacture—not only that the parts of the finished product must be interchangeable, but that the men who build the products be themselves interchangeable. (Chapter 18)



Why do you suppose an idea which had currency in every age and civilization of mankind disappears in modern times? Because only in the age of science have these men and their wisdom dropped from view. I'll tell you why: The rise of mechanistic science, of Newton and Descartes, was a great conspiracy, a great devilish conspiracy to destroy our apprehension of reality and our awareness of the transcendently gifted among us. But they are with us today nevertheless. They are with us in every age. They come back, you see? They come back! (Chapter 20)

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...Father recognized certain dangers in the man. (Chapter 21)

You think you are special, losing your lover. It happens every day. Suppose she consented to live with you after all. You're a bourgeois, you would want to marry her. You would destroy each other inside of a year. You would see her begin to turn old and bored under your very eyes. You would sit across the table from each other in bondage, in terrible bondage to what you thought was love. The both of you. Believe me, you are better off this way. (Chapter 22)

Now every morning Father rose and tasted his mortal being. He wondered if his dislike for Coalhouse Walker, which had been instantaneous, was based not on the man's color, but on his being engaged in an act of courtship, a suspenseful enterprise that suggested the best of life was yet to come. (Chapter 29)

Father remembered the baseball at Harvard twenty years before, when the players addressed each other as Mister and played their game avidly, but as sportsmen, in sensible uniforms before audiences of collegians who rarely numbered more than hundred. He was disturbed by his nostalgia. (Chapter 30)

He shaved his blond moustache and he shaved his head. He blackened his face and hands with burnt cork, outlined exaggerated lips, put on a derby and rolled his eyes. Having in this way suggested his good faith to Coalhouse's other young followers by appealing to their sense of irony, he went out with them and threw bombs into Municipal Firehouse No. 2, thereby proving himself to everyone including himself. (Chapter 32)

No longer expecting to be beautiful and touched with grace till the end of her days, she was coming to the realization that whereas as 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. (Chapter 33)

This statement constituted Coalhouse's first modification of his demands since the night of the Emerald Isle, but Washington did not understand this. He heard only the rejection



of his plea. Without another word he rose and walked out. He went back across the street believing his intervention had accomplished nothing. (Chapter 37)

Is the goddamn Ford your justice? said Younger Brother. Is your execution your justice? Coalhouse looked at him. As for my execution, he said, my death was determined the moment Sarah died. As for my Godforsaken Ford it is to be made over as it was the day I drove past the firehouse. It is not I who reduced my demands but they who magnified them as long as they resisted them. (Chapter 38)

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. (Chapter 40)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Many of the main characters are allegorical; in what ways do they enhance the story? Detract from it? What ideas or social movements might they represent and why?

Topic 2

Many secondary characters were real live people. Why did the author include these historical characters? What purpose do they serve in the narrative?

Topic 3

What role does truth, and specifically historical truth play in the novel? Why may more than one version of historical truth exist? Is one more right than the other? How do characters like Father, Coalhouse Walker, J.P. Morgan, Emma Goldman, Mother, and Mother's Younger Brother understand truth and react to new truths as they come into and influence their lives?

Topic 4

No single characters the main character of the novel. Rather, multiple characters stories are featured and woven together. What effect does this have on your understanding of the story? Why might the author have decided to focus on multiple narratives verses a single narrative?

Topic 5

When Coalhouse Walker's attempts at diplomacy regarding the vandalization of his car are rejected, he escalates to violence. Is this an appropriate response? Why or why not? Is Coalhouse a victim, or a violent criminal? Why or why not?

Topic 6

Comparing and contrasting Evelyn Nesbit and Mother, consider the changing role of women at the beginning of the 20th century. In what ways are Mother and Evelyn Nesbit similar? How are they different? What purpose does their inclusion in the novel serve and why (or why not) are they important to the narrative?



Topic 7

Throughout the novel, characters experience varying degrees of instability. What role does the search for stability play in the novel? In what ways are characters seeking stability? Why might stability be important to these characters?

Topic 8

What role does imprisonment and false liberation play in the novel? What metaphors does the author use to illustrate these concepts? How does imprisonment manifest itself in and affect the novel's characters, psychologically, economically, and physically?

Topic 9

The main characters fall into three groups of people: wealthy, poor/immigrant, and minority. What purpose does focusing on the narratives of these three groups of people serve? Is it effective? Why or why not? Is one group portrayed as more sympathetic than another and, if so, how and why?