

“SO WE BEAT ON”: THE FAILURE OF AMERICAN JUSTICE IN
F. SCOTT FITZGERALD’S *THE GREAT GATSBY* AND
E. L. DOCTOROW’S *RAGTIME*

THESIS

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For my family, the Girls of 504, Slumber Party USA, and my Brownwood support group—the people who always knew I could.

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INTRODUCTION

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." –Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

American popular literature has often promoted and encouraged the lore of the American Dream. Characters, plots, and themes reflect the idea that most Americans hold dear: that all people can become part of the successful and elite upper class if they work hard and apply themselves. Many works about the American Dream, however, break down and expose the myth of the Dream. F. Scott Fitzgerald and E.L. Doctorow are two authors whose works can be viewed in this light. Specifically, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Doctorow's *Ragtime* examine the weakness of the Dream's allure.

The thought that anyone can become successful with hard work, determination, and the blessings of an entire nation is an ideal synonymous with the very word *America*. It is an essential part of America's self image. Lionel Trilling states, "Ours is the only nation that prides itself upon a dream, and gives its name to one, 'the American dream'" (qtd. in Long 163). If this statement is true, then America, unlike other countries, places a good deal of its self-value in a dream. In the minds of Americans, they, their children, or their neighbors can be the next influential millionaire, president—or simply the owner of successful business that will support them in a comfortable life style. One of the vital components of the Dream, which ensures its staying power, is its followers' belief that

their children will have a better life than they have had as a direct result of the success of the Dream. Grown to mythic proportions, the American Dream is more of a concrete reality in the minds of most Americans, something that is definitely obtainable, rather than a pipe dream. With such emphasis placed on an ideal, it is hardly surprising that the American Dream is frequently a theme in American literature.¹

Most often, the Dream is reinforced positively in the literature of America. The storyline of a poor citizen who works to be rewarded eventually with the life of his/her dreams can be found in plots from both fiction and nonfiction genres and in any historic period. In such stories, the main character is always able to rise above adverse circumstances and fight the injustices of his/her world to end triumphant. Benjamin Franklin and Horatio Alger are authors whose works follow this basic thread and promote the American Dream. With this theme as such a focal point of American literature, the myth of the Dream has not only been able to survive but also grow. The image of America as the land of endless possibilities and opportunity became a standard icon in early literary works. In later years, however, literature began to question the legitimacy and actuality of this ideal.

Works of American literature written before World War I used the theme of individual success so often that literature itself became a generator and advocate of the American Dream. As time passed and society changed, that support began to dwindle. With events like World War I, the flu epidemic of 1918, and the Great Depression, American society began to be aware of the inequalities that existed in the country and were disenchanted with the promises made about success that were not kept. Authors, as well, took notice and began to comment on the flaws of their society and the emotions

that arose from those flaws. In a critical essay, Roger Lewis discusses the American idea of individual success in fiction during historic time periods, such as World War I, and refers to Mark Schorer who believes that the “disillusionment with the American system and the efficacy of individual effort is the distinguishing characteristic of postwar American writing” (42). Instead of promoting the America Dream, literature began to criticize it as being untrue and unobtainable. While in previous works the individual searching for success usually met with triumph, now the hero/heroine could start on a journey toward personal accomplishment and fail to achieve his/her goal. To emphasize further the impact that World War I had on society and literature’s belief that “individual effort counted [...and that] a man could rise by his own efforts” (41), Lewis states, “World War I shattered this vision. It ended once and for all the faith in individual effort that had been eroding since the Industrial Revolution and had persisted—sometimes naively and sometimes defensively—in the fiction” (42). As a result of these societal movements, the eras of modern and postmodern American literature began, and the authors of these periods often reflected views that opposed their predecessors on the reality of the American Dream. One such novelist of the modern era was F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose work, *The Great Gatsby*, set a new standard for the American novel.

The Great Gatsby is one of the most recognized American novels. While its first publication in 1925 saw little response, it is now on the reading list of almost every high school and university in America, demonstrating that it has climbed from relative obscurity to a place of cultural recognition in the American canon. Often it is discussed as representing the success of the American Dream. The title character, Jay Gatsby, rises from Midwestern poverty and becomes an East Coast millionaire. Gatsby is able to live

in the opulent life style of the roaring Twenties, purchasing a mansion and throwing large, elaborate parties for hundreds of people. With his wealth, Gatsby is able not only to buy expensive goods but also pursue his goal of winning back Daisy Buchanan, a goal that relies heavily on Gatsby no longer being a poor boy from the Midwest.

Ultimately, Gatsby fails to realize his dream, even though he acquired the wealth that he thought was the only thing needed to obtain that dream. That Fitzgerald creates Gatsby as a character with a murky past and present who fails to win the woman he loves demonstrates the move away from literature of the past. Gatsby does not act like, possess qualities of, or overcome adversity like a typical hero of early American literature. With no character as a definite hero and without the qualities normally associated with a hero, *The Great Gatsby* breaks with and questions the traditions and themes of the past.

Like other authors of his time, Fitzgerald demonstrates through the plot and characters a criticism of his society and country. Fitzgerald was a member of the generation that participated in World War I and so was writing for a group who had been jaded and hardened by the experiences of that war. The attitudes of his contemporaries are reflected in Fitzgerald's novel, which shows a different view of the American Dream than that of earlier authors. Marius Bewley believes "that the great achievement of this novel [*The Great Gatsby*] is that it manages, while poetically evoking a sense of the goodness of that early dream, to offer the most damaging criticism of it in American literature" (27).

Offering more than an ephemeral observation of the American Dream, the plot of "*The Great Gatsby* offers some of the severest and closest criticism of the American dream that our literature affords" (Bewley 11). Bewley's stance is supported throughout

The Great Gatsby as Fitzgerald examines the Dream, not as a concrete possibility, but as an unobtainable illusion. Gatsby is unsuccessful in the end because he is not able to win Daisy, even though he gains all the material wealth he thought he would need to win her back. In commenting about the role of *The Great Gatsby* in American literature, Bewley also states that it “is an exploration of the American dream as it exists in a corrupt period, and it is an attempt to determine that concealed boundary that divides the reality from the illusions” (12). The reality or illusion of the American Dream in a corrupt time is a central question not only in *The Great Gatsby* but also in E.L. Doctorow’s novel *Ragtime*.

Ragtime gave the literary world a view of how novels can record history and challenge traditional historic writing. While *Gatsby* was as a contemporary social commentary, *Ragtime*, written in 1975, views history retrospectively, commenting on society during and shortly after the Industrial Revolution. Influenced by a different set of historical events, E.L. Doctorow was writing for generations who had been molded by their experiences in World War II and the Vietnam War. Like Fitzgerald, Doctorow uses his novel to comment on more than the time period he was writing about. He brings into play the setting of his novel only as a backdrop to discuss issues relevant to contemporary society and uses fictional and non-fictional characters throughout the narrative, believing that “[f]or all of us to read about what happened to us fifty or a hundred years ago suddenly becomes an act of community. And the person who represented what happened fifty or a hundred years ago has a chance to say things about us now” (Doctorow qtd. in Levine 13-14).

Reflecting this view, the plot of *Ragtime* follows the lives of a family from New Rochelle, New York, and Coalhouse Walker Jr., a pianist from New York City. The characters' lives entwine with each other and with historical figures like Harry Houdini, Henry Ford, Evelyn Nesbit, and J.P. Morgan to create a portrait of America during this era. In using historical figures alongside his fictional characters, Doctorow is able to make the story of Coalhouse and his destroyed Model T Ford more realistic as he examines the injustices of American society. Coalhouse has worked to make a good living for himself and displays that in the purchase of his Model T. When he is inexplicably detained by a group of local firemen, Coalhouse becomes incensed and leaves to find help. Finding no assistance from the local authorities, he returns to find his car vandalized and is later told to forget the matter. After this incident, Coalhouse starts down a revolutionary road that he had not expected to take. Asking only to be fairly treated and for the restoration of his car, Coalhouse seeks to find the American Dream of equality.

Throughout the narrative, Doctorow describes the injustices and flaws of a society that is often portrayed as idealistic. For many, the Industrial Revolution is synonymous with progress and wealth. By examining subjects such as the unsanitary living conditions of tenements, racial inequality, and poverty of the working class immigrants, *Ragtime* "begins with the conventional view of the turn of the century as an age of innocence but then reveals the social and economic conflicts that remained barely suppressed beneath the surface" (Levine 51-52). Commenting on Doctorow's narrative viewpoint, Paul Levine states, "If American history has traditionally been written from the vantage point of the dominant culture, then in *Ragtime* Doctorow rewrites it 'from the bottom up' " (52)

using the underdog to progress the plot. In *Ragtime*, Doctorow sets out to display the disparities between the idealized America that thousands of immigrants flocked to and the actual America that was controlled by robber barons and similar groups.

Through characters such as J.P. Morgan and Coalhouse, Doctorow examines the quest for the American Dream. Like *Gatsby*, *Ragtime* questions the reality of the Dream. Doctorow does not paint an idealized portrait of this time period as earlier writers had. Coalhouse is not able to gain the respect or equality that he demands, and people like J.P. Morgan are able to retreat into their wealth and racism without rebuke. By drawing such drastic distinctions between these characters' fates, it becomes apparent that Doctorow is commenting on the American Dream and that he "describes the gap in American life between its ideals and its reality" (Levine 19). Fitzgerald's and Doctorow's examination of this gap brings to light the frailty and fantasy of the American Dream. Each novel, though, goes beyond questioning the reality of the American Dream to examine the failure of American justice and its relation to the success or failure of the Dream.

The debate of whether justice exists is a particularly modern one and so "it is not surprising to find in Doctorow's fiction an obsession with the idea of justice" (Levine 19). Doctorow's personal conviction about what is just and what is not is evident in *Ragtime*, especially in the storyline of Coalhouse. The idea of justice seems to be a compelling force behind Doctorow's writing when he confesses that "his political convictions arise from a pre-theoretical intuition of injustice" (Morris x). The failure of justice, however, is not limited to the storyline of *Ragtime* or of Coalhouse. *The Great Gatsby* also deals with the failure of American justice. While critics have discussed the failure of the American Dream in relation to the two novels' main characters (Jay Gatsby

and Coalhouse Walker, Jr.) and their acquisition of wealth, critics fail to mention a key component of the American Dream: the idea of justice. Justice is, perhaps, a more vital part of securing the American Dream than wealth.

America has always stood by the idea that justice is for all and will serve its citizens. According to popular belief, every man, woman, and child—no matter how poor or insignificant—should be served and protected by American justice. Justice is as important to the image of America as the American Dream. It is not surprising then, to find it discussed in literature in much the same way as the Dream. If the American Dream is obtainable for anyone wishing to work for it, then American justice should prevail in situations where others might stop the efforts of the individual pursuing the Dream. In both novels, justice fails the characters who are pursuing the American Dream and influences their failure. For *Gatsby*, the failure of justice lies in the sequence of events that are put into action by the Buchanans, who are never held responsible for the outcome of those events, and by the society they represent. In the case of Coalhouse, justice fails when he is not only victimized but also vilified by a society that ignores his demands for justice after he is terrorized by members of the fire station.

Justice is typically described as a moral characteristic that promotes equality and righteousness (“Justice”). If the American Dream is to be obtainable for everyone, then American justice must become an integral part of the Dream. The person who is seeking to better himself/herself by pursuing the Dream should also be able to attain justice—one of the bedrock ideals of America. These two novels reflect how this result is not always the case. Just as the Dream should serve and be available for every man, woman, and child of the nation, so too must justice. In *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime*, these groups

of people are failed by justice and as a direct result, the American Dream itself is a failure. This thesis will examine the failure of justice in both novels, how it affects the different groups of characters in each narrative, and will also compare and contrast the differences between the two novels. The focus will be on the modern and postmodernist views that each author respectively expresses on the relationship between the American Dream and the failure of justice and their similar views, regardless of the fact that *Gatsby* and *Ragtime* were written fifty years apart. This thesis will include, in addition to the introductory and concluding chapters, four chapters that will look at how the two novels examine the Dream and justice for men, women, and children. The structure is as follows:

Chapter One will focus on the central characters, Gatsby and Coalhouse. These characters pursue the American Dream and are stopped in their absolute conquest of it by people like Tom Buchanan and Father. Failed by justice, Gatsby and Coalhouse fail to obtain the American Dream and represent that it is, in fact, a myth because one “approved” group (i.e., Tom and Father) has power over whether others can actually achieve the goal of the Dream and become part of their select group.

Chapter Two will extend the examination of men and the failure of justice, but will discuss the men who represent old money and traditions. Both Tom Buchanan from *Gatsby* and Father from *Ragtime* come to represent the upper class that resists the attempts of people like Gatsby and Coalhouse to enter their inner circle. Instead of discussing how justice fails to aid these two characters as they attempt to gain a better life, this chapter will examine how justice fails to hold Tom and Father accountable when

they act in opposition to people like Gatsby and Coalhouse and even act outside the laws of society.

Chapter Three will consider the lives of Daisy Buchanan from *Gatsby* and Sarah from *Ragtime*. This chapter will discuss how each woman is confined by society and therefore not in control of her fate. If they are, in fact, participants in the search for the American Dream, they should have more control over what happens with their lives. Each woman's confinement is different, in that Daisy is subjected to the rules of the upper class, while Sarah is restricted by poverty and race and the problems that go with them. Justice, however, fails both women when others halt the actions they take to change their lives with irreversible outcomes.

Chapter Four will discuss the children in both novels. While some of the child characters have a more prominent role in the texts than others, all share the common trait of having their futures determined by their parents' actions. Specifically, the chapter will examine Pamela, Daisy and Tom's daughter from *Gatsby*, and Boy, Girl, and Coalhouse Walker, III from *Ragtime*. If justice thwarts their parents, will the children, too, fall victim to the same fate? This chapter will examine this question and the relationship that these children have with their parents. The children are affected by the failure of justice in their parents' lives and are also failed by justice, which determines and influences their future.

While much has been written about these two novels, no significant criticism has yet addressed how the two novels compare and contrast as they deal with related themes, conflict, and characters. This thesis will discuss these unexamined aspects and bring a new analysis of these texts. The focus of this thesis will center on the argument that the

American Dream fails not only in the characters' inability to obtain their ultimate goal, but also because the groups of Tom and Father have the ability to keep others from being successful. In having the power to do that, American justice fails as well. By using *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime* as my primary texts, I hope to demonstrate how this prevalent theme in American literature spans several generations and historical time periods and continues to influence American thought into the 21st century.

¹ The American Dream has had and continues to have varied definitions. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*, a recently published book by Jim Cullen, looks at the many definitions of and examines, in detail, the origins and history of the American Dream. Cullen begins his book by discussing the Puritans' influence on the Dream, with their strict views on individual productivity, the will of God, and their very determined will to progress and endure (Chapter 1). From there, his discussion moves to the Declaration of Independence's influence on the Dream (Chapter 2), to historical movements that promoted the accumulation of individual wealth or "upward mobility" (Chapter 3) and equality (Chapter 4), to components of the Dream such as being a homeowner (Chapter 5). In Chapter Six, Cullen concludes his discussion of the American Dream by examining its spread across America and briefly mentions *The Great Gatsby* and its tie to the idea of the American Dream. Cullen includes a short final chapter that summarizes his thoughts. In a section found at the end of his book entitled "Notes on Sources", Cullen documents a few sources from his research that also discuss the American Dream. This book and others, like *The Frontier Experience and the American Dream*, discuss in detail the role of the American Dream in American culture. For further research and reading, see these titles and their bibliographies.

CHAPTER ONE

"Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy." - F. Scott Fitzgerald

The American Dream began as a popular and uncriticized idea, touted by authors who created heroes that rose from adverse circumstances to end triumphant over the odds and successful in all efforts. As time progressed and the nation faced times of hardship, authors strayed from a supportive, pedestal view of the Dream and began to examine the flaws of the dream that once held a golden allure for its followers. In response to historic and cultural shifts, a literature that at one time produced authors who were supporters of the American Dream began to criticize openly the once nationally accepted mantra. Modern and then postmodern literature set in motion the movement away from the traditional themes of previous periods. Disillusionment with the American Dream also led to an examination of other culturally accepted ideas, which included the relationship between the American Dream and American justice. No longer thought of as intrinsically flawless, the idea of American justice became as scrutinized as the American Dream when writers adopted disillusioned and skeptical tones about the nationally accepted ideals.

With the change of view on the American Dream and justice came an alteration in the way writers presented heroes/heroines. Traditional literature often presented heroes/heroines as model, almost perfect citizens. In modern and postmodern literature,

however, the heroes/heroines of fictional works were no longer so perfect. E.L. Doctorow seems to be aware of such a shift when he comments about modern heroes saying, “The hero, if he exists, is a hero of impropriety...the critic of society, the man or woman whose life is lived and defined in terms of its opposition to the prevailing values” (Lubarsky 40). Such traits can be seen in his own hero, Coalhouse Walker, Jr. The modern heroes/heroines were fundamentally flawed and not always victorious in their endeavors to achieve the American Dream. They were held back and not supported by those around them. Though the reader’s sympathies might still lie with these characters, they were no longer icons of perfection and success that readers once admired. This shift is evident in the characters Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and Coalhouse Walker, Jr. in E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*.

As authors of the modern and postmodern movements, respectively, Fitzgerald and Doctorow were aware of the inconsistencies in the accepted ideas of the American Dream and American justice. Each author records his observations about these two accepted societal ideas and examines the inconsistencies and flaws of both. In their novels, Fitzgerald and Doctorow establish characters—Jay Gatsby and Coalhouse Walker, Jr.—who represent the hero of the story.ⁱ Their narratives expose the imperfections of the American Dream and justice, so it is unlikely that by the end of their novels either character will be successful in his endeavors. Each author makes it clear that his characters are halted in their attempts to achieve their goals by the failure both of the American Dream and justice. Gatsby and Coalhouse reveal that the American Dream is no more than a myth, that American justice is flawed and for some nonexistent, and that both are controlled by an elite and “approved” group of people.

Gatsby and Coalhouse, while different, share many common traits. They represent not the traditional hero but the tragically flawed hero of modern and postmodern literature. Gatsby and Coalhouse are not flawless; the actions that they take and values they hold reveal that they are far from the perfect heroes of the past. However, they still command the reader's sympathy. Fitzgerald and Doctorow use these characters to show the flaws of America and the values to which its citizens subscribe. Gatsby and Coalhouse search for the American Dream and struggle to secure a place in society, only to find that both are deceptive goals. Justice fails them in their quests for success, and they are thwarted by an elite class determined to keep outsiders out of their group. Gatsby and Coalhouse fall short in their attempted initiations into the societies of their choice and demonstrate the breakdown and undermining of both the American Dream and justice through negative aspects of the American character like classism and racism.

Jay Gatsby is one of the most recognized characters in American literature, especially in discussions of the American Dream. He is often characterized as a potential exemplar of the American Dream: he successfully acquires the affluence and lifestyle characteristic to the Dream—exceptional wealth, expensive cars, and a palatial mansion. For many, Gatsby stands for the opulence of the Roaring Twenties and the standard example of what the American Dream represents—a poor boy now wealthy and successful. Behind his drive for wealth, however, is a desire to be loved by Daisy Buchanan, and accepted by her social class. This goal pushes him to seek out the American Dream, so he will be worthy of her. When he finally climbs from his poor-boy status to that of a wealthy, self-made man, he believes that he has everything needed to

win Daisy and be accepted by the elite upper class that she represents. Gatsby seems to be the poster child for the American Dream in that he obtains all of the wealth he set out to acquire. Fitzgerald writes the character of Gatsby, however, as an example of the failure of the American Dream for “Gatsby is the American self-made—indeed, self-invented—man. He believes in the American Dream of success [...but] he is betrayed by it” (Brucoli xi).

Gatsby’s character is somewhat mysterious, which allows others to speculate about who he is and how he has made his fortune. At the first party he attends, Nick Carraway, the narrator of the novel and the only character who could be considered a true friend of Gatsby’s, listens to a conversation between partygoers who think they know Gatsby’s origins. One attendee believes that “he killed a man once,” another “that he was a German spy during the war” (Fitzgerald 48). Nick, too, wants to know exactly who is Gatsby. At the same party, Nick questions Jordan, asking her, “‘Who is he?’ [...] ‘Do you know?’” (53). Jordan’s response is the most truthful of the evening and is a simple, “‘He’s just a man named Gatsby’” (53). What Nick does eventually learn about Gatsby, however, does not make him a traditional hero. The manner in which Gatsby acquires his wealth is questioned from the beginning by the other characters. Nick knows that Gatsby’s business dealings are shady and more than likely illegal when he learns that Gatsby makes his living through bootlegging and connections with Meyer Wolfshiem, the man credited with fixing the World Series. In an effort to reveal that Gatsby is a person not of his class, Tom Buchanan confesses that he has looked into Gatsby and says he “‘found out what your ‘drug stores’ were [...]. He and this Wolfshiem bought up a lot of side-street drug stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter.

That's one of his little stunts. I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him and I wasn't far wrong'" (141). Nick's observations and Tom's statement demonstrate that Gatsby might have achieved wealth, but his achievement resulted from actions that the traditional American hero would normally not take.

Fitzgerald reveals Gatsby's shady business dealings as one way to show Gatsby's character; his fixation with wealth and status is another. As Ronald Berman points out, "Gatsby is imperfect. In spite of his idealism, his idea of the good life seems merely to be the acquisition of money, things, property" (57). When examined carefully, Gatsby reveals himself to be a man consumed with material objects. This obsession starts when Gatsby falls in love with Daisy Fay, later to become Buchanan, and realizes that he is not of her class. If he ever wants to be worthy of her, he is going to have to become a member of the affluent upper class. In Gatsby's mind, the way to accomplish this goal is to have the material objects and money that Daisy's class possesses. Once he acquires what he thinks is the necessary wealth, Gatsby believes that all he needs to be accepted into the upper class is to demonstrate his material success—thus he throws elaborate parties and drives expensive cars.¹¹ He reveals this point when he and Daisy are finally reunited. Gatsby takes Daisy and Nick to his house to show her all that he has accomplished and/or bought since they were parted. At one point, Nick says that Gatsby "took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them one by one before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher" (Fitzgerald 97). By displaying mass quantities of "such beautiful

shirts” (98) Gatsby seems to not only be seeking Daisy’s approval but is also proving that he has the tangible evidence of the wealth he lacked in their earlier relationship.

Gatsby might have romantic and “immortal longings, but the only way he knows how to express them is through acquisition and display” (Berman 6). Such displays leave him as nothing more than a rich man that no one really knows or cares about. Gatsby throws large and elaborate parties in order to show off his newly acquired wealth, and he hopes, to attract Daisy. Hundreds attend these events, with only a mild interest in the mysterious host. When Gatsby is killed, Nick assumes that these same people will attend his funeral, as they did his parties. Nick is surprised, however, when no one shows. Only one lone partygoer appears at the burial and remarks about the poor attendance, ““Why, my God! they used to go there by the hundreds”” (Fitzgerald 183), verbally confirming that Gatsby was only used by the people who came to his parties and that he was never known or liked by any of them. Unlike a traditional hero, Gatsby dies alone and admired by almost no one. Only Nick notices Gatsby’s tragic arc and says that in his final moments, Gatsby “must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream” (169). In living too long with one dream, “Gatsby never succeeds in seeing through the sham of his world or his acquaintances very clearly” (Bewley 13).

An example of Gatsby’s not seeing through his wealth and the people around him occurs when Tom Buchanan brings a riding party by Gatsby’s house. Trying to be as hospitable and friendly as possible, Gatsby invites them into his house for drinks. A brief conversation follows and as a formality, the woman in the riding group extends an insincere invitation to Gatsby to join them. Unaware of the social graces of the wealthy,

Gatsby, instead of declining, as he should, accepts her invitation even though Tom says, “Doesn’t he know she doesn’t want him?” (Fitzgerald 109). Such a situation reveals Gatsby’s naiveté when it comes to the group that he is trying so desperately to join. He puts all of his faith in a group that will never accept him, and he fails his initiation into the upper class, demonstrating, once again, his status as a flawed, modern hero and the failure of the American Dream and justice.

Though he tries to make his dream into a reality, Gatsby remains “an embodiment (as Fitzgerald makes clear at the outset) of that conflict between illusion and reality at the heart of American life” (Bewley 14). He throws himself into accomplishing the American Dream, yet he fails to see that life and Daisy have moved past him and that a group that will never accept him controls his fate. The fact that Gatsby’s success and happiness depend on a closed social group is unjust because he should have the freedom to fully integrate into that group regardless of whether or not he has their approval. If the American Dream and justice are a reality, then Gatsby’s background should not matter. Nor should he be kept from successfully achieving his goals by one group only because they are affluent and more specifically because their wealth is older than Gatsby’s. If, as the quote says, Gatsby represents the conflicts in American life, then does he not also stand for the conflict inherent in the American Dream and justice?

It is unjust that Gatsby works for and achieves the wealth of Daisy Buchanan’s society but cannot, in the end, become an accepted member of her social class. The American Dream promises that anyone can be successful if he or she works hard enough for it; however, Gatsby proves that this is untrue. If American justice is a reality, Tom Buchanan and his friends should not have the power to exclude or deprive people like

Gatsby simply because of who they are and what type of money and class they possess. As Nick rightly tells Gatsby, “They’re a rotten crowd [...]. You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together” (Fitzgerald 162). The breakdown of the American Dream and justice is also shown when the socially elite are able to take the good qualities that Gatsby possesses and use them against him.

Nick retrospectively describes Gatsby as person with “an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again” (Fitzgerald 6). Gatsby’s trait of endless hoping described by Nick is typical of the American Dream because “[h]istorically, the American dream is anti-Calvinistic, and believes in the goodness of nature and man” (Bewley 11). The hope that Gatsby clings to contributes to his death because he continues to hold onto it instead of seeing the reality around him. In a way, this hope and romance become another aspect of Gatsby’s tragic flaw as he allows the two ideals to cloud his judgment. Tom Buchanan senses these qualities in Gatsby and realizes that they will continue to drive Gatsby toward his ultimate goal of winning Daisy. Tom’s recognition of Gatsby’s weaknesses is evident in the hotel scene where Gatsby asks Daisy to admit that she never loved Tom. Not willing to lose a fight or the battle itself, Tom reminds Daisy of their romantic and personal past, making it difficult for her to profess the thing that Gatsby so desperately wants her to. When Daisy cannot, Tom secures defeat over Gatsby by reminding him that for a time ““She didn’t know you were alive. Why,—there’re things between Daisy and me that you’ll never know, things that neither of us can ever forget”” (Fitzgerald 140). Nick observes Gatsby’s immediate reaction to Tom’s statement and says that “[t]he words seemed to bite physically into

Gatsby” (140) demonstrating that Tom, indeed, knows Gatsby’s weakness. In knowing what drives Gatsby, Tom, and the group that he represents, are able to use the hope and “the colossal vitality of his [Gatsby’s] illusion” (101) to bring about his downfall. Blinded by hope and his own dream, Gatsby unknowingly gives the elite class an advantage over him, proving once again their unjust ability to control the American Dream.

Gatsby’s tragic downfall reveals the flaws and inconsistencies of the American Dream and justice. For Gatsby, both are controlled and influenced by wealth and an older, accepted group that excludes him and those like him. By creating Gatsby as a flawed and unsuccessful hero, limited by the socially elite, Fitzgerald shows that he “perfectly understood the inadequacy of Gatsby’s romantic view of wealth” (Bewley 13) and points out that “Gatsby, divided between power and dream, comes inevitably to stand for America itself” (Trilling 19). Such a portrayal begins to unravel our accepted versions of America’s identity and its myths and institutions, like the Dream and justice, demonstrating that America’s ideals are beginning to be torn apart by the realities that exist in the world of people like Gatsby.

E.L. Doctorow does not immediately associate his character, Coalhouse Walker, Jr., with the American Dream. Perhaps this association is not immediate because so much of Coalhouse’s story focuses on the vandalism of his Model T Ford and the revolutionary actions that he takes in response to that ordeal. Not being directly connected with the traditional idea of the Dream, however, does not mean that Coalhouse does not represent it at all. From the point of his introduction to the story, it is obvious that Coalhouse seeks the American Dream. He has worked to become financially stable

and displays this in his dress and other material goods. Coalhouse also wants to begin a life and family with Sarah, a former love interest, and their son—a very central part of the American Dream. This drive to be successful and obtain the Dream, though, comes with the desire to be treated equally by the other classes and races around him. When it is apparent that groups to which he does not belong will neither accept nor grant him the equality he seeks, Coalhouse abandons his initial goals and focuses entirely on being justly served by the groups who deny him justice. From that point on, Coalhouse's dreams for the future extend beyond the typical definition of the American Dream, and Doctorow examines the connection between justice, or more accurately, the lack of it, and the American Dream. In this search for justice and equality Coalhouse becomes "a man who cannot find justice from a society that claims to be just" (Doctorow in McCaffery 84), bringing about his eventual murder—and Doctorow's examination of the injustices of society. Coalhouse's search for equality and justice represents one aspect of the American Dream. When his quest for these ideals fails, he also serves as an example of the failure of American justice.

Coalhouse, like Gatsby, faces the harsh realities of America as he tries to grasp the American Dream. Coalhouse's struggles, however, differ from Gatsby's as they stem not only from economic discrimination but also from racial prejudice. He not only has to face the challenge of making a financially stable life, but he must do this as a black man in a society dominated by whites. It is apparent from the beginning, that Coalhouse seeks approval and acceptance from this society, which will only challenge and oppose his success. Despite this opposition, Coalhouse is partially successful in his attempts to achieve the American Dream in that he does secure himself financially and wins back the

estranged Sarah, but his success goes no further. Coalhouse's greatest challenge comes when his Model T is vandalized and he is not compensated for the damages. When Coalhouse demands justice from the authorities but is given no aid, he takes actions that a traditional hero in American literature would not.ⁱⁱⁱ Such actions, though, place him in a category with other modern heroes.

Like *Gatsby*, little is known about Coalhouse other than he is a professional piano player in New York City (Doctorow 158) and the father of Sarah's baby. Sarah is a poor, young black woman who works as a servant in the suburban town of New Rochelle, where Mother and Father live. Coalhouse had an affair with Sarah, which left her pregnant, and for reasons that are not known to the reader, left her. After delivering her son, Sarah buries him alive in the family's backyard, where Mother finds him. News of the event eventually reaches Coalhouse, who begins to visit New Rochelle in hopes of reconciling with Sarah. From their first meeting with him, it is apparent to Mother and Father that Coalhouse is a man who wants to portray himself as accomplished. Coalhouse "is well-spoken and conducts himself as a gentleman" (Doctorow 158) with appropriate manners and respect for those he is visiting, demonstrating that he is a man who has worked hard to establish himself financially. He displays this in his nice attire, new custom-made Model T, and "a bouquet of yellow chrysanthemums which [...] had to have cost him a pretty penny" (157) that he brings for Sarah. This display of material goods is reminiscent of *Gatsby*'s display of his multitude of shirts, as they seem to be used by Coalhouse to communicate with the rest of the world that he has financial means.

The desire to establish himself in a higher social class is not only similar to *Gatsby*'s desires but also demonstrates the additional prejudice working against

Coalhouse. Coalhouse's possessions and manner leave him open for criticism from the Mother and Father's society, which has definite views about the structure of society and the distribution of wealth. Coalhouse's race immediately works against him as he tries to prove himself to Mother and Father, members of the elite class from which he seeks equality, and raises questions about his character. The descriptions that the other characters give of Coalhouse on first meeting him show that they view him only with regards to race, making their descriptions one-sided and questionable. Since Coalhouse's personality traits are relayed through other characters and not by Coalhouse himself, his character remains somewhat ambiguous, and discrimination follows him throughout the novel. He is not portrayed as the hero who immediately wins people over. Mother's first impression of Coalhouse was that "there was something disturbingly resolute and self-important" about him and that he "dressed in the affectation of wealth to which colored people lent themselves" (Doctorow 155-156). Though her first impressions are harsh, Mother comes to alter her opinion of Coalhouse after she becomes better acquainted with who he is when he continues to visit her home. Mother begins to see Coalhouse as a person and suitor of Sarah instead of remaining an unknown black man. The other characters in the novel, however, do not follow this change in opinion.

Father views Coalhouse much as Mother does initially, but unlike her, he never forgets the racial difference between him and Coalhouse. Unimpressed by Coalhouse's manners, Father does not understand why Coalhouse is not uncomfortable in the home of white, upper class people and "noted that he suffered no embarrassment by being in the parlor [...] he acted as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The surroundings did not awe him nor was his manner deferential" (Doctorow 158). Father's observations

make it seem as though Coalhouse should be uncomfortable in Father's home because their races are different. It does not matter to Father that Coalhouse's manners were "courteous and correct" (158); what does matter is that Father is white and Coalhouse is not. The racism found in the characters of *Ragtime* demonstrates that prejudice is not only a reality but common. As Paul Levine states in his book, *E.L. Doctorow*, "there is the intractable element of racism in American society which makes a normal life impossible for the protagonist despite all his efforts. Coalhouse Walker's problems begin with his refusal to accept his assigned social role" (57). Mother and Father's reactions reflect the racial prejudice inherent in their society and reveals that bigotry will be a common theme throughout the novel. Racial discrimination will affect the outcome of Coalhouse's fate because certain events will cause him to challenge his assigned role.

The crisis in the novel that sets in motion the eventual demise of Coalhouse begins with his Model T Ford. On his way back to New York after visiting Sarah one afternoon, Coalhouse is wrongfully detained by the volunteers of a local fire department who tell him he cannot pass unless he agrees to pay a non-existent toll. Refusing, Coalhouse leaves his car and goes back to New Rochelle to seek assistance from the authorities. When he returns, having found no one willing to help him, he discovers that "his car stood off the road in the field...[i]t 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 177). Showing restraint, Coalhouse's only demand is that he wants his "car cleaned and the damage paid for." In response, "[t]he Chief began to laugh and a couple of his men came out to join the fun" (177). The police officers that arrive at this point also offer Coalhouse no assistance telling him to "Scrape

off the shit and forget the whole thing” (178). From that moment on, Coalhouse’s dream extends from the traditional American Dream to include finding American justice.

Unwilling to “forget the whole thing,” Coalhouse begins his fervent campaign for justice. When Coalhouse refuses to let the matter go, one of the officers at the scene demonstrates racism similar to the firemen when he began “to appreciate Coalhouse’s style of speech, his dress, and the phenomenon of his owning a car in the first place. He grew angry” (Doctorow 178), arrested Coalhouse, and charged him with petty crimes. After Father pays Coalhouse’s fine, Coalhouse tries to handle the matter in a lawful, orderly way. He goes to several lawyers in order to take legal action against the fire station, but “[i]n all cases they refused to represent him” (183). In the midst of trying to resolve the matter of his destroyed Model T, Coalhouse becomes a victim of another tragic event when Sarah is wrongfully killed in an attempt to find justice for Coalhouse. Sarah’s death, in addition to the overwhelming situation with his car, destroys Coalhouse’s dreams for the future. Finding no legal help for the matter of his Model T and bereaved over Sarah’s death, Coalhouse decides to seek retribution in his own way. The subsequent actions that Coalhouse takes characterize him as a non-traditional, modern hero and reveal the inner qualities that will bring him down.

Determined to see justice served, Coalhouse decides to retaliate against the firehouse and the fire chief. He promises in a letter sent to several newspapers that he and his followers will “kill firemen and burn firehouses”(Doctorow 212) until his car is restored to him. After taking actions against two firehouses, Coalhouse and his followers hold the J.P. Morgan library hostage, escalating the situation to a national level. It is during the siege of the library that Coalhouse realizes that he will not survive the

standoff. In an effort to placate Coalhouse, the officials bring the fire chief of the New Rochelle fire department to restore Coalhouse's Model T so that he can see it back in its original condition. This concession was made, however, not to admit that Coalhouse was correct and that he was unjustly treated but rather to make a good public showing and ensure that Coalhouse and his followers would not destroy the library.

Throughout the ordeal, Coalhouse remains steadfast in his demands for his car. He knows he has been treated unjustly and deserves to have his case heard and his car returned to him. Coalhouse also knows how and why Sarah was killed; it was not an accident but an attack on a black woman who was also trying to seek justice. In his growing hostility and determination, it seems that Coalhouse's obsession with the restoration of his car begins to symbolize a type of apology for the death of Sarah and not just the return of a material object. This desire for justice from the people who have denied him justice becomes the driving force behind Coalhouse. As Doctorow describes it, "Coalhouse Walker had militarized his mourning. His grief for Sarah and the life they might have had was hardened into a ceremony of vengeance in the manner of the ancient warrior" (244). Coalhouse's vengeance and determination become his weaknesses. In being completely unwilling to let go of the matter entirely or to admit defeat, Coalhouse does not sense that those qualities will be used by the society around him to bring about his downfall. He becomes too absorbed in the illusion that everything will turn out as he would like it and that his Model T will be restored to him. In hanging on to that illusion, Coalhouse displays his weakness, a weakness that will be used by the authorities.

His brash and aggressive actions grab the attention of the news reporters, who turn him into an "isolated crazed killer" (Doctorow 212), a profile that the society at large

accepts so that Coalhouse's original misfortunes are lost and his campaign for justice is forgotten. Those around Coalhouse only see him as the dominant culture portrays him instead of recognizing that he is a victim of racial and social injustice who has sought justice. The resolute, confident manner that Coalhouse displays when he initially meets Mother and Father is demonstrated in his search for justice. Because of its racial prejudice, the dominant society around him misinterprets Coalhouse's actions. Commenting on the white society that surrounds Coalhouse and their possible interpretation of him and his motives, Levine suggests that Coalhouse brings his problems upon himself as his "ignorance of his racial identity is more calculated than innocent. He knows that possession of a car will be provocation for many white people" (57).

Coalhouse's self-confidence, joined with a strong commitment to seeing justice served brings about his demise because "[m]ost of all, he is a man of absolute devotion to principle; he defends his personal dignity fanatically, refusing to bend at all in the face of money-power and racial prejudice" (Gross 131). Instead of seeing such traits as the makeup of a good citizen, the people around Coalhouse twist them into negative attributes, especially when he finds himself the center of a highly controversial situation. Coalhouse is determined to see justice enacted on his behalf and will not stop until he has seen this accomplished. When the authorities realize this, they decide that they must use Coalhouse to set an example for anyone else who might try the same thing. In order to stop any future retaliations that might copy Coalhouse's, the officials decide that they must show even the strongest willed person that their forces can stop any similar actions.

Coalhouse holds onto his illusion of justice and his self-determination until the very end. Knowing that his death is imminent and that bargaining is his only hope, Coalhouse agrees to alter some of his demands. In doing so, Coalhouse enrages Brother, one of his followers, who demands: "Is the goddamn Ford your justice? [...] Is your execution your justice?" (Doctorow 292). In response to Brother's questions, Coalhouse shows that he knows how the larger, white society works and how they view justice. He tells Brother, "my execution [...] 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 reduce my demands but they who magnified them as long as they resisted them" (292). These words, spoken at the end of his fight for justice, reveal that Coalhouse understands the situation he is in and how it will end. As the narrator describes it, "To get justice Coalhouse Walker was ready to have it done to him" (292).

Coalhouse lives to see his Model T restored by the fire chief but is immediately killed by the gunmen sent by the mayor of New York City. This action is not taken, however, before the powerful men who unofficially govern the country can defile Coalhouse's name. Coalhouse's story and his fight to find justice reveal that he has not only been failed by justice but also by the American Dream. Like Gatsby, the social classes that Coalhouse wishes to be recognized and accepted by do not want to grant his request. In fact, they will do everything they can to show Coalhouse and the rest of the country that they are in control and cannot be joined by outsiders. It is unjust that Coalhouse's successful start at possessing the American Dream can be shattered by this group. It is also unjust that once Coalhouse is dead, his death and fight for equality disappear from public consciousness. Coalhouse's story demonstrates, once again, that

the American Dream is not only an illusion but one that is controlled by an elite group of people. Richard Trenner offers a possible explanation for the outcome of Coalhouse's story. Trenner believes that as a writer "Doctorow is both consciously and intuitively committed to an ideal of universal justice, yet he is everywhere confronted by the failure of that ideal" (5). He elaborates on this, saying that Doctorow:

locates the cause of failure and injustice in the social forces that ineffably combine with hearts and minds to *make* individual destinies; chief among them: politics, economics, and class hierarchies. Doctorow repeatedly presents characters struggling for fulfillment against the often destructive or repressive effects of such forces. (6)

At the end of both *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime*, the novels' heroes have been unjustly slain as the result of thoughtless actions of others. In each case, the parties responsible for their deaths are not held accountable. In *Gatsby's* case, both the Buchanans share responsibility for his death. Daisy is essentially responsible for *Gatsby's* death in that she was driving his car when she hit and killed Myrtle Wilson. Tom, however, contributes to the situation when he identifies the car's owner and helps Daisy cover up what she has done. Daisy and Tom use *Gatsby* as a scapegoat and leave him to be murdered by George, who knows that *Gatsby's* car killed his wife and also believes that *Gatsby* was driving at the time. By having wealth and belonging to a high social class, the Buchanans are able to avoid the legal system and distance themselves from what they have done. Nick describes Daisy and Tom as "careless people [...] they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the

mess they had made....” (Fitzgerald 187-188), illustrating that not only will they not be held accountable for their part in Gatsby’s death but that their wealth creates a system that allows them to avoid responsibility. Gatsby’s death reveals the failure of justice not only in that he is murdered but also in that Daisy and Tom are never brought to justice presumably because of the wealth they possess.

Coalhouse Walker, Jr. is also a victim of the carelessness and thoughtlessness of the elite classes around him. During Coalhouse’s struggle to have his car restored to him, no one around him, except perhaps Sarah and Brother, realize what he is truly searching for—equality. Instead, the others allow their racial prejudices to cloud and direct their thinking. Father and the social group that he represents only sees Coalhouse as a hostile black man; they do not see beyond the stereotype to realize that he is simply a man trying to find justice. It is the callous feelings of people like Father that cause Coalhouse to terrorize firehouses and hold the J.P Morgan library hostage, for as Doctorow’s narrative points out, “More than any mayor or governor he [Morgan] represented in Coalhouse’s mind the power of the white world” (Doctorow 268). In attacking Morgan’s library, Coalhouse is symbolically attacking the entire society.

The people who order Coalhouse’s killing justify it as setting an example for others, but in failing to evaluate Coalhouse and his situation, they unjustly kill a man who is searching for an ideal that his country openly promotes. In an essay about *Ragtime*, Mel Gussow briefly mentions Coalhouse and reports that when “[a]sked if this angry black man were a real person Mr. Doctorow said, ‘There are several hundreds of thousands of Coalhouse Walkers in this country’” (5). As effective as any passage from the novel, Doctorow’s statement reveals the truth behind Coalhouse. He is not just a

fictional character but a person that represents the flaws of American society and the Dream. Coalhouse's tragic death demonstrates that American justice is flawed. Not only does he never see justice served, but the authorities who are charged with keeping justice seem to interpret and enforce the laws at will rather than being unbiased and upholding them.

The deaths of Gatsby and Coalhouse are unjust and meaningless. Neither death elicits an outcry from society or changes the daily pace of life. Apart from a few characters, the deaths elicit no visible mourning for either Gatsby or Coalhouse. Nick's quote about Daisy and Tom points out that they are practicing old habits, having learned nothing from the events they have caused. The final pages of *Ragtime* also deal with this issue as the lives of the other characters are described with no reference to Coalhouse or his death. It is as if Coalhouse and his Model T never existed for the other characters. Such a hardened view continues the common theme of Doctorow's fiction, which Levine concludes is "the pursuit of justice [that] is never resolved: those who try to redress an injustice by an act of vengeance are often destroyed. Apparently, the idea of justice, like the idea of truth, lies beyond human grasp" (19).

Gatsby and Coalhouse's lives and deaths are in vain, as no one around them learns from their downfall. Each character struggles to accomplish all that each one believes is necessary to become the wealthy and successful individual that the American Dream promises. The social groups into which these characters want to be accepted and that Tom Buchanan and Father belong, however, block their attempts to achieve the American Dream. In Gatsby and Coalhouse's failure to achieve success, the validity of the American Dream becomes questioned. How could both men fail if the Dream

guarantees that *anyone* can have all that it promises if he/she works hard? Why is one group, the affluent upper class, able to determine whether or not an individual can achieve the ultimate goal of the Dream of being a member of their group? In writing characters who are failed by the Dream, both Fitzgerald and Doctorow comment that perhaps the American Dream is simply a myth. If the American Dream were a reality, then Gatsby and Coalhouse would have been successful in their attempts.

Gatsby and Coalhouse's deaths raise the same questions about American justice. In each novel, the idea of what is justice is questioned by the actions of the characters and the indirect commentary by the authors. Is justice a reality if it is so flawed that different groups can use it against others? The texts of *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime* seem to demonstrate that it is not, as the central characters of both stories are failed by justice. Gatsby's death is barely acknowledged, and the Buchanan's lives are not in any way altered or interrupted. Coalhouse is vilified for his demands for justice, not the people who wronged him initially. Though Fitzgerald and Doctorow wrote at different times and about different periods, through the characters of Gatsby and Coalhouse these two writers dramatize the myth of the American Dream and how the breakdown of justice is not limited to one group or time period. Both novelists show that these problems transcend time and groups. In the characters' tragic downfalls, Gatsby and Coalhouse illustrate that the American Dream and justice are ideas that are mythic rather than obtainable realities.

¹ Some might consider the character of Tateh from *Ragtime* also worthy of the title hero. In the novel, Tateh successfully raises his daughter and himself out of immigrant poverty to become an affluent filmmaker, demonstrating the only victorious story of achieving the American Dream. However, when asked who he thought was the hero of *Ragtime*, Doctorow's response was, "I don't know. I've never thought about it. Tateh becomes an American success story, but at the expense of his socialist principles. I don't know if that's heroism" (*Nieman Reports* 23). Having read that statement, I then felt it was appropriate to focus the discussion on Coalhouse Walker, Jr. and not include Tateh in my evaluation.

¹¹ In Chapter Three of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald gives his readers a detailed description of one of Gatsby's infamous parties. This is the first Gatsby party that Nick attends, and so vivid descriptions of the preparations, food and cocktails, setting, attendees and events of the party, and some description of Gatsby's house are given. Although chapters Four and Five provide additional details and descriptions of the people who attend the parties and Gatsby's house, this first description allows the reader to imagine exactly how elaborate these parties are and the type of wealth that Gatsby has achieved.

¹² The idea of ownership and personal property is a central one not only to the American Dream but also the collective identity of America. In his book, *E.L. Doctorow*, Paul Levine discusses all of Doctorow's works, but in his analysis of *Ragtime*, he touches on the idea of ownership and its effects on society and justice. In his chapter on fiction and history, Levine makes a comparison between *Ragtime* and German author Heinrich von Kleist's story, "Michael Kohlhaas." Kleist's story highly influenced Doctorow when he was writing *Ragtime*, and critics have commented on the strong similarities between the two works. In regards to the tension between justice and property in both works, Levine believes that "*Ragtime* depicts the growing class conflict which characterized the era of the emerging modern American state where the belief in the sacredness of property took precedence over the commitment to the principle of equality before the law. Thus both Kohlhaas and Coalhouse become victims of their faith in a social system which is revealed to be based upon power and not justice" (57).

CHAPTER TWO

"Probably the greatest harm done by vast wealth is the harm that we of moderate means do ourselves when we let the vices of envy and hatred enter deep into our own natures."

—Theodore Roosevelt

Just as important as the hero is to a storyline, so, too, is the antagonist or villain. Like the definition of hero, the characterization of an antagonist altered with the changes in society that occurred with the modern and postmodern movements in American literature. Instead of representing antagonists as traditional malcontents who kidnapped the beautiful maiden and opposed the actions of the hero simply to cause trouble, authors changed these characters to take on personas that symbolized actual members of society and the prejudices that were part of that group. No longer causing trouble for trouble's sake, characters in the antagonist role were used to comment on the flaws and leaders of society. These characters were people who opposed the hero based on elements such as classism and racism, and they often worked in opposition to the American Dream, as they represented and created obstacles for the characters trying to grasp that dream successfully.

Working to stop the success of the hero in achieving the American Dream, antagonists in American modern and postmodern literature have used their status and wealth to break down the myth of the Dream. Not willing to let just anyone become a part of their group, fictional characters representing members of the American elite make it very clear through their words and actions that simply having material wealth does not

make a person an immediate member of their class. For them, there is a clear distinction between the “old money” they possess and the “new money” that others have. This prejudice is evident in *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime*, where the antagonists are Tom Buchanan and Father, members of the elite social groups of which Gatsby and Coalhouse are trying to become a part.

Though they appear in novels written fifty years apart, both Tom Buchanan and Father represent similar stereotyped beliefs and ideals based on their gender and socio-economical backgrounds and the underlying prejudices that run through their elite social classes. Fitzgerald and Doctorow seem to use these two characters not only to oppose the actions of the hero but also to represent an entire social group that holds the values that their antagonists demonstrate. Tom and Father’s opinions about how society should work, their belief in the traditions of their social group, and the opposition they pose to Gatsby and Coalhouse reveal the fundamental flaws of American society. The ideals to which these men adhere not only bring about the destruction of the characters they directly oppose but also of the American Dream and justice. By including such characters, both Fitzgerald and Doctorow are able to examine sources of the breakdown of the American Dream and justice, as both Tom and Father contribute to Gatsby’s and Coalhouse’s failure to achieve the American Dream or find justice. If there are villains in these novels, then Tom Buchanan and Father represent them by virtue of the prejudices that they demonstrate.

Tom Buchanan is portrayed from his first appearance as a force with which to be reckoned, both physically and philosophically. Nick describes him as having:

a supercilious manner. Two shining, arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face and gave him the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward. Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body [...]. It was a body capable of enormous leverage—a cruel body. (Fitzgerald 11)

Nick's description of Tom's physical appearance suggests the type of person Tom is.

Nick is not the only character in *The Great Gatsby* to describe Tom Buchanan in less than positive terms. Even Daisy says that Tom is “a brute of a man, a great big hulking physical specimen” (16). Fitzgerald immediately establishes Tom as a hard and intimidating person, allowing his character to be associated with the prejudices and opinions that he demonstrates later on in the novel.

These physical descriptions illustrate Tom Buchanan's personality. Like his hulking and haughty frame, Tom is a domineering, bullying, high-minded person. He believes that not only is he superior to the people around him, but he seems to consider that his wealth is better as well. Nick's description of Tom's physical appearance is followed by a short account of Tom's wealth. He divulges the information that Tom's “family were enormously wealthy” (Fitzgerald 10). This statement reveals that not only is Tom “enormously” well off, but his wealth is “old money” that has been passed down from his family. Robert Long comments that the Buchanans' wealth allows them to be members of a “‘secret society’ [...] the money that stands behind them, has conditioned them to regard other people unequally” (150). The mental distinction that Tom makes of his wealth and status, as compared to other peoples', works to define who he is as a person and what he values and disvalues. Nick says Tom's “voice, a gruff husky tenor,

added to the impression of fractiousness he conveyed. There was a touch of paternal contempt in it, even toward people he liked” (Fitzgerald 11). This outlook of contempt is shown in several ways, including in a discussion with Nick about a book Tom has been reading entitled “The Rise of the Coloured Empires” (17). Tom describes it as “a fine book and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged [...]. It’s up to us who are the dominant race to watch out or these other races will have control of things” (17). In this seemingly unimportant description of a book, Tom Buchanan reveals his feelings about his race and social status. He believes that his is the superior race and social group and that he and the other members of this elite class should remain in a position of control. Tom’s opinion on this subject foreshadows the future actions that he will take against Gatsby when he attempts to become part of the elite group of which Tom Buchanan is a member.

Tom’s disdain towards others and his belief in a dominant race are further revealed and carried out through the entirety of the novel. The way he bullies Daisy, Nick, and Myrtle—people that he supposedly likes—and his attitude toward Gatsby demonstrate that he is the antagonist in the novel and “[i]n many ways [...] the most sinister character in *The Great Gatsby*, as he seems to typify the American business man (man of power) who remains the perpetual adolescent intellectually” (Miller 251). Tom is a very controlling and unfaithful husband who insists on making decisions for Daisy but cannot remain faithful to her. Tom thinks nothing of his affair with another woman, but he is offended when he discovers that Daisy is having an affair with Gatsby. Tom thinks that he can behave as he wishes, but his wife, who is a part of the image he wants to portray to the rest of the world, can only act as he dictates and is, in short, his property.

Tom constantly interrupts Daisy, dismisses and belittles the suggestions and remarks she makes, and bullies her when she tries to make decisions for herself. This treatment is most evident in the hotel scene when Gatsby asks Daisy to tell Tom that she was never in love with him and that she is leaving him. Daisy seems to be at the point of following Gatsby's wishes until Tom begins to confuse and scare her with small remembrances from their past. Although he does not intend to remain faithful to Daisy, Tom with his domineering ego cannot fathom the idea that Daisy could copy the behavior that he has demonstrated throughout their marriage and that she would destroy the image of their "happy" high class marriage to be with someone of a lower class. Tom's controlling nature is also apparent after Daisy kills Myrtle Wilson while driving Gatsby's car. He knows what has happened, but instead of letting Daisy decide what to do about the situation, Tom steps in and makes the decision for her, allowing them to avoid any confrontation with the law and to pass the blame onto Gatsby. Nick observes Tom telling Daisy his plan and says that "[h]e was talking intently across the table at her and in his earnestness his hand had fallen upon and covered her own. Once in a while she looked up at him and nodded in agreement" (Fitzgerald 152). These brief examples of Tom's interactions with Daisy show one side of his elite views and dictatorial personality.

Tom's elitist behavior is not limited to Daisy but extends to others that he would consider friends. Although Myrtle Wilson is his mistress, Tom treats her with disrespect and superiority, never letting her forget that she is from a lower class and not his equal. He takes her out, much to the disapproval of his class who "resented the fact that he turned up in popular restaurants with her" (Fitzgerald 28) and treats her like a possession that he can discard whenever he is tired of her. Tom demonstrates, once again, his brutishness

and domineering attitude when he hits Myrtle in front of a group of people at a party they are having at their apartment. Myrtle dares to speak Daisy's name even after Tom has ordered her not to and when she does not do as he tells her, "Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand" (41). With Nick, Tom is not physically aggressive, but he does subtly remind Nick that they are not equals. They might have gone to the same college and shared a few common acquaintances, but they are not the same. Nick says that he felt that Tom "wanted me to like him with some harsh, defiant wistfulness of his own" (12), but kept him at arm's length and asserted his position by reminding Nick of their differences. One example of Tom's accomplishing this goal occurs when he asks Nick what he is doing. Nick tells him that he is working as a bondsman for some company and when Tom does not recognize the name, he immediately ends the conversation with, "[n]ever heard of them" (14), making it sound as though Nick's work is less legitimate because it is not on Tom's list of approved businesses. Tom's treatment of these other characters, though, is only a small demonstration of his feelings compared to how he treats Gatsby and his attempted move into Tom's social class.

As Robert Long describes it, "The wealth of the Buchanans has not been recently acquired, like Gatsby's; they have grown up with wealth, and their sense of superiority, molded by it, prevents a genuine relationship with other people" (94). Not only does their wealth prevent Tom and his elite society from having real relationships, but it also allows Tom to create barriers for others so he is able to maintain control over them and situations. This result is most evident in the interactions that he has with Gatsby. Although Gatsby is wealthy, his wealth is not like Tom's. Gatsby's desire is to become a member of Tom's elite group and is successfully moving toward that goal. Tom,

however, does not want this outcome to happen, as it means his group will no longer be so elite and privileged. If Gatsby is able to become an accepted member of Tom's society, then it means the fears that Tom vocalized at the beginning of the novel about the dominant race being overrun will come true because although his statement is about other racial groups, it is also about other socio-economic groups, including Gatsby's. Gatsby might be of Tom's race, but in Tom's mind "boundary lines have already been firmly drawn [...] between those who 'belong' and those who do not, and when Gatsby attempts to cross these boundaries he finds only a ruthless exclusion" (Long 94).

Tom disproves of Gatsby in every way possible and is not impressed with his "nouveau riche" mansion and parties, telling Nick that "[a] lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers, you know" (Fitzgerald 114). Skeptical of how Gatsby has acquired his wealth and his stories of attending Oxford, Tom openly criticizes Gatsby, once referring to him as "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" (137), and makes it his business to expose Gatsby's identity. When Tom discovers that Gatsby has made his fortune through illegal business dealings, he immediately takes on a superior attitude and tone. Tom fails to notice that the very dealings that he disproves of are acts in which he has participated and that his "world of established wealth, which, though contemptuous of the blatant kinds of corruption represented by Gatsby and his associates, itself indulges quietly and discreetly in bribery, blackmail, and manipulation (preferably legal) to maintain and consolidate its power" (Miller 250-251). Tom and Gatsby are more similar than Tom would ever admit, and his snobbery and older wealth allow him to pretend that there are distinctions between him and Gatsby, no matter how small and insignificant those distinctions are.

Through his attitudes and actions, Tom Buchanan comes to represent not only the collective identity of his class but also the force that keeps the American Dream from being a flawless reality. His staunch beliefs in class and the prejudice that results from those beliefs work directly against Gatsby and his dream of success. In working to defeat Gatsby in his attempts to become a member of his elite group, Tom also works against the American Dream. In asserting his power over Gatsby, Tom comes to represent his entire class and the members' control over the Dream. Tom's domineering attitude—how he subtly reminds others that his wealth places him in control—and the prejudice to which he clings are the very things that destroy Gatsby and his dream.

Tom's last display of power against Gatsby not only reveals Tom's corruption, but it also "reflects the corrupting effect of money on values" (Long 150) in the Buchanans' world. When Daisy kills Myrtle Wilson in Gatsby's car and Tom does nothing to change George Wilson's perception of the events of the accident, Tom undermines American justice. Though they are essentially responsible for the deaths of George and Myrtle Wilson and Gatsby, the Buchanans are never held responsible for their roles in them. Since he is wealthy, Tom is able to deflect suspicion from Daisy and himself. Such an action seems to show that not only does Tom feel it is his right to use his money to flee justice, but that justice, like most things, can be bought and sold. Tom and Daisy's failure to admit any type of involvement in Gatsby's murder shows that wealth can corrupt values and justice. If this is true, then justice, like the American Dream, is flawed because justice should not be affected by wealth but should be available for everyone.

Although he does not directly kill Gatsby, “Tom Buchanan is virtually Gatsby’s murderer in the end, but the crime that he commits by proxy is only a symbol of his deeper spiritual crime against Gatsby’s inner vision” (Bewley 25). Whether it is from prejudice or fear of no longer being in control, Tom Buchanan becomes “a compendium of American failures. He is rich with no conscience, moralistic without being moral, exclusionary, racist” (Berman 56). In working adamantly to destroy Gatsby and his dream, Tom shows that there is a flaw in the American Dream and justice. Instead of being accessible to anyone, the American Dream is controlled by an elite class, which can decide whether people will be successful in their attempts to achieve their goals based on their current status. This wealthy, elite group also has sway over American justice, proving that it, too, is fragile and controlled by those in power because of their wealth and is not the unbiased, accessible entity that the ideal America extols.

The prejudice, racism, and elitism shown in Tom Buchanan’s character are also found in Father’s character in *Ragtime*. Though not a bully like Tom, Father agrees with many of the same opinions that Tom has about class and race. As Hilton Kramer describes it, “The villains in *Ragtime* [...] are all representatives of money, the middle class, and white ethnic prejudice” (74), which accurately describes, unfortunately, Father. Doctorow provides no description of Father’s physical appearance to hint at his inner character traits, but the novel’s emphasis on Father’s belief in tradition accomplishes the same purpose. His loyalty to following traditions and the norms of his society is Father’s driving force. After his return from an expedition to the North Pole, Father is troubled by the fact that things have altered in his absence. Not able to guess immediately the source of this change, “Father related it to the degrees of turn in the moral planet. He saw it

everywhere, this new season, and it bewildered him” (Doctorow 110). Such bewilderment follows Father throughout the novel, as his world continues to change and he is powerless to stop it.

Even in the realization that things are changing around him, Father clings to his traditional beliefs and values. He is not willing to accept the changes made to his business and home during his absence, believing that the adjustments are wrong simply because they are different from what he has come to expect. Father disproves of members of his factory joining unions and his wife’s new interest in things like women’s rights and business (Doctorow 110 –112). Even though he finds no fault in the changes Mother has made to the business, Father continues to hold to the view that women should not be interested in a man’s occupation. Like Tom Buchanan, Father meets these attempts at change with a controlling, domineering attitude. This control extends primarily to his household and wife, the only parts of his world that he feels he can direct. As a result, Father berates his wife for the small inconveniences they have to endure during Coalhouse’s rebellion. In a moment of asserting control, Father criticizes Mother for bringing Sarah into their home, which he believes has brought such trouble into their lives. He tells her, ““We are suffering a tragedy that should not have been ours [...]. What in God’s name possessed you on that day? The country has facilities for indigents [...]. You victimized us all with your foolish female sentimentality’ [...]. He did not realize the pleasure he felt in having made her cry” (Doctorow 210). Such moments demonstrate that Father is threatened by change and will assert his power to keep change from happening, even if it includes criticizing and acting superior to his wife—reminiscent of Tom Buchanan’s treatment of Daisy.

In addition to denying the inevitable changes in the world, Father also does not understand that others might not be as content with the idea of things staying as they have always been as he is, thus his factory workers look to unions to improve the quality of working conditions and his wife reads “a pamphlet on the subject of family limitation” (Doctorow 112) by Emma Goldman. Father seems to believe that the country and his society are running flawlessly and that no one should have any complaints. He fails to see that he is in a prosperous and elite position and that not everyone, his wife included, has the same liberties and opportunities that his wealth, status, and gender have brought him. Such status makes him blind to the problems that those around him must face.

Trusting the larger society unquestioningly, Father’s confidence in tradition extends to adopting their prejudices and bigotry. Instead of questioning the events around him, Father accepts the views of his elite society and blames others, like Coalhouse, for their own misfortune, basing his opinion on the fact that they are not following the traditional, stereotyped rules of race and class that his society has set. This belief is especially evident in his treatment of Coalhouse after first meeting him and after he begins his crusade for justice. When Coalhouse begins to visit Sarah, Father is annoyed by the level of comfort that Coalhouse seems to have as a visitor in Father’s house. In Father’s opinion, Coalhouse does not display the manners that a person of Coalhouse’s race and economic background should have when visiting a white, wealthy home. Coalhouse is not uncivil to Father and Mother, but he is very at ease in their home and converses with them as equals. Such behavior does not impress Father, who insists on keeping a racial distinction between him and Coalhouse, remarking “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" (Doctorow 162). Even though Coalhouse shows that he is courteous, respectful, and an equal to Father in manners and intelligence, Father's prejudice against Coalhouse continues because Coalhouse does not demonstrate the manners that Father thinks are appropriate for Coalhouse's race and class.

The prejudice that Father has against Coalhouse and his race influences how he acts when the members of the firehouse vandalize Coalhouse's Model T. Instead of immediately seeing fault in the behavior of the men of the firehouse and of the police, who are of no help to Coalhouse, Father blames him for his misfortunes. He comments, "It seemed like such a foolish thing to have happened. It seemed to be his fault, somehow, because he was Negro and it was the kind of problem that would only adhere to a Negro" (Doctorow 186). Such an opinion shows that Father is unwilling to become involved in Coalhouse's fight for justice because he disapproves of Coalhouse on the grounds of race. Only the members of his household who have become dissatisfied with the workings of society, Mother and Brother, immediately see the injustice of Coalhouse's situation. Father remains loyal to traditional ways of thinking, regardless of the fact that they reveal him as a bigot and further isolate him from his family.

Although he is unwilling to amend his views, Father seems surprised when others display the same beliefs about race that he has. Coalhouse tries to handle the matter of his vandalized Model T through legal means, but he is unable to find a lawyer willing to take the case. Father is shocked when he hears that no one will represent Coalhouse and comments that "any lawyer who loves justice will do, I should think" (Doctorow 180), not recognizing the bigotry that he has already displayed in the actions of the other

members of his society. If Father is reluctant to help Coalhouse, then it should not surprise him that others of his group are as well. Unlike the lawyers and other members of his society, Father does occasionally concede to help Coalhouse. When Coalhouse is thrown in jail, Father pays his fine, and when Coalhouse seizes the J.P. Morgan library, it is Father who goes in to try to negotiate a peaceful resolution. Yet even during these acts, Father remains suspicious and judgmental of Coalhouse.

The judgment and prejudice that Father displays, merely mirrors the sentiments that his society holds about race and class. Unfortunately, Father never sees the errors in the way his society functions and sides completely with the ideals of the upper elite, deviating only occasionally, and with resentment, to help Coalhouse. The characteristics Father shows are a direct contrast to those exhibited by Coalhouse. Father never questions his society, following their set norms faithfully, nor does he ever take action if he does think wrongs have been committed. The distinction between these two men illustrates that “the characters who maintain a special sense of integrity and wholeness in that book [*Ragtime*] are all in rebellion, betraying their society or their own particular class in that society; and the characters who are the most deluded, the most self-betrayed, are the defenders of society” (Lubarsky 39). As a defender of his society, Father ironically works to break down the American Dream and justice.

Though he is not as adamant as Tom Buchanan about keeping outsiders from becoming part of his social group, Father accomplishes the same result through his apathy towards Coalhouse and his situation. Whether it is to keep up appearances in front of the other members of his social group or because he truly believes in the class and race distinctions that he acts on, Father demonstrates the force that keeps the

American Dream from being a reality. Believing that there are certain ways that races and classes should behave, Father does not approve of Coalhouse's trying to conduct himself as though he were a member of Father's group. In Father's mind, Coalhouse should not try to climb above the social status that he currently holds. Such a viewpoint from a person of Father's class shows that the American Dream has basic prejudices working against it—the upper class will never find it suitable to have outsiders as members of their elite group.

By reinforcing the social stereotypes and prejudices of his class, Father aids in Coalhouses' demise. He facilitates this result not only by offering little help to Coalhouse but also by siding with the officials who order Coalhouse's murder. Father knows that the events that have led Coalhouse to this point are unjust, as his comment about the lawyers reflects this, yet he does nothing to convince those around him of the injustice that has befallen Coalhouse. Instead, he continues to be swayed by his prejudices, describing Coalhouse and his group as "monstrous! Their cause had recomposed their minds. They would kick at the world's supports. Start an army! They were nothing more than filthy revolutionaries" (Doctorow 292-293). Clearly, Father has not altered his faith in the views of his class or his initial opinion of Coalhouse. When he does not object to the plan to kill Coalhouse, Father not only reinforces his loyalty to his group but also helps to break down the ideal of American justice. In aligning himself with this group closely, Father shows that the American Dream and justice are controlled by this group, as they are the ones who keep Coalhouse from reaching his ultimate goal.

More than any of the other characters in their novels, Tom Buchanan and Father represent the forces that keep the American Dream from being a reality. For these

characters, any race or class outside of their own poses a threat to their current way of life. With the possibility that others could work their way up to a position in their class, both men work to keep the racial and class distinctions in place that their elite class has created.¹ Though the Dream promises to be obtainable for all, Tom Buchanan and Father demonstrate that it is not. Their actions against Gatsby and Coalhouse show that those who already possess wealth control the Dream, as it seems they are able to say who can gain access to the elite group that the Dream promises anyone can be a part of. Gatsby and Coalhouse challenge the barriers established by the classes of Tom and Father, only to end unsuccessfully when these two men halt their attempts. Whether through bigotry, fear of change, or loyalty to tradition, both men represent not only their classes but also the elite classes of both the past and the future confirming that their views on race and class are long lasting. With such groups in existence and in a position to decide who succeeds in grasping the Dream, it seems that the American Dream is in fact mythic. If the Dream were accessible, then it would not be regulated at all, much less by such a group of elitists.

The actions that Tom and Father take against Gatsby and Coalhouse also raise questions about the reality of American justice. It is unjust that one particular group can have control over the lives of others, yet in *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime* it is apparent that there is one group that dominates the society at large. Tom, Father, and the groups they represent should not be able to stop Gatsby and Coalhouse's quests for the American Dream simply because they do not approve of them or want them to join their class. They do, however, stop them and in the process break down the idealized image of American justice. Tom Buchanan proves that power if not justice can be obtained

through the possession of old wealth, as he and Daisy are able to escape any type of punishment because of their wealth and status. Father shows that justice can be ignored by the upper classes when acknowledging it could potentially cost them the comfort of their traditions and established place in society. In each case, justice does not serve the people who need its assistance. Instead, it proves to be fleeting and flawed, submissive to the will of the wealthy and not the protective force that the American myth of justice for all has.

ⁱ One example of the stereotyping imposed by the classes of Tom Buchanan and Father that Gatsby and Coalhouse, and people like them, face is brought up in a tense conversation between the historic figure of Booker T. Washington and the fictional Coalhouse. Not supportive of Coalhouse's campaign for the restoration of his car, Washington asks Coalhouse to stop for the sake of their race. Washington says:

For my entire life I have worked in patience and hope for a Christian brotherhood. I have had to persuade the white man that he need not fear us or murder us, because we wanted only to improve ourselves and peaceably join him in enjoyment of the fruits of American democracy. Every Negro in prison, every shiftless no-good gambling and fornicating colored man has been my enemy, and every incident of faulted Negro character has cost me a piece of my life. What will your misguided criminal recklessness cost me! What will it cost my students laboring to learn a trade by which they can earn their livelihood and still white criticism! A thousand honest industrious black men cannot undo the harm of one like you. (Doctorow 281)

The words of Washington vocalize how Coalhouse's actions will be perceived by people like Tom Buchanan and Father.

CHAPTER THREE

"We ask justice, we ask equality, we ask that all civil and political rights that belong to the citizens of the United States be guaranteed to us and our daughters forever." - Susan B. Anthony

In literature and conversation, the American Dream is commonly associated with men. For whatever reason, women are not often linked to this common theme in literature. Perhaps this practice stems from early American literature, when male authors exposed similarly male audiences to themes advocating the American Dream or perhaps it is simply that, as Judith Fetterley states, "American literature is male" (xii). With a genre inundated by male authors and characters, it is not surprising that discussions and criticisms of that genre would focus on male characters, causing its literature to seem "male" and leaving the discussion of women who seek the American Dream a less examined topic. Like other feminist critics, Fetterley examines the roles of female characters in American literature, a subject that is often debated and the main focus of her book, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1978). Fetterley believes that the cause for the limited roles that women have in American literature is that "[o]ur literature neither leaves women alone nor allows them to participate" and "is frequently dedicated to defining what is peculiarly American about experience and identity. Given the pervasive male bias of this literature, it is not surprising that in it the experience of being American is equated with the experience of being male" (xii).

Whether or not they are given the same critical attention as male characters, women in fiction are just as motivated and active as men in pursuing the idealized life that America promises. Not every female character in American literature actively seeks the goal of the American Dream, but those who do have tended to be overlooked when paired with male characters. Striving to overcome societal norms and expectations, women portrayed in literature have as much working against their efforts as their male counterparts. While most discussions of *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime* traditionally focus on the male characters and their pursuit of the American Dream, the novels' women characters also play a vital role in the theme of the quest to find the Dream. The characters of Daisy and Sarah offer a contrast to each other in their pursuit or lack of pursuit of the American Dream and demonstrate that women have a definite role in literature that examines this theme.

Daisy Buchanan and Sarah serve as the love interest in both novels and represent the women of each era. Each is repressed by her society and is generally not empowered to control her life completely. In both historic periods, women were given home and workplace roles that were inferior to the roles the men in their generations occupied. Such roles limited possibilities of advancement for women and put them at the mercy of their societies. Daisy and Sarah exemplify women who are confined by their surroundings and therefore limited in their pursuit of the American Dream.

Since Daisy and Sarah are confined by society, they do not determine their own fates. Instead, their destinies are decided by the actions and mindset of those around them. While the women's pursuits are different, they serve to remind the reader that, as women, their search for the American Dream differs from their male counterpart's.

Though the stories of each novel take place decades apart, through these female characters, *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime* examine the plight of women seeking the American Dream and justice. In Daisy Buchanan's case, her failure to obtain the American Dream arises from the injustices of her society, the wealth that binds her to that group, the men who are involved in her life, and her failure to break free of the expectations of each group.

Daisy is a perfect example of a smart, Southern woman ruled by her roots and wealth and "ought not to be dismissed as the 'beautiful little fool' she says she wants her daughter to be" (Fryer 154). In the descriptions that he gives of her, Fitzgerald portrays Daisy with all of the typical qualities given to well brought-up Southern women. She is well mannered, inviting, and does her best to hide any family disturbances from her guests. When Nick Caraway, the narrator of the novel and cousin to Daisy, first meets her at a small dinner party given at the Buchanan's home, he says that he had not seen his cousin in many years, but Daisy gave him a warm welcome when she "held my hand for a moment, looking up into my face, promising that there was no one in the world she so much wanted to see" (Fitzgerald 13). Such hospitality is typical of women in Daisy's class and social background. It is also during this dinner party that Nick finds out that Daisy's husband, Tom Buchanan, is unfaithful to her. Even when Tom's mistress calls during dinner, Daisy does her best to change the subject to distract her guests from the interruption.

Her hospitality, good manners, and personality demonstrate Daisy's strong connection to her past and heritage. While she may display the qualities and characteristics of her background and social class, Nick senses that Daisy is not entirely

content with her life and upon meeting her describes her face as “sad and lovely” (Fitzgerald 13). Nick’s observation seems to imply that Daisy is discontent with her background. Despite this observation, however, Daisy still allows her loyalty to her Southern roots to sway the direction in which the rest of her life will go. It is not only her background that determines what type of person Daisy is but also her money.

Daisy comes from a family of old wealth, and as the reader learns early in the narrative, has also married into a family of “old money.” Such wealth and status put the Buchanans in a different class from people like Nick, who has very little money, and Gatsby, who has “new money.” With such wealth come certain expectations about behavior and maintaining a reputation suitable to that type of money. Daisy seems to realize the absurdity of such rules and the shallowness of the group in which she is placed because of her wealth and upbringing and says “with thrilling scorn” of her situation, ““Sophisticated—God, I’m sophisticated!”” (Fitzgerald 22).

In response, Nick comments that he “felt the basic insincerity of what she had said” (Fitzgerald 22), and it seems that Daisy reveals her true feelings about her class. In the same passage, however, Nick observes a “smirk on her lovely face as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged” (22). She might resent it, but through her actions, Daisy demonstrates that at some level, she has aligned herself with this group, which Gatsby notes when he describes her voice as being “full of money” (127). Perhaps she does so to survive societal pressures or maybe she believes that her class is better than others. Regardless of the deciding factor, it seems that whatever opinion Daisy has formed about her class and others has been shaped by extrinsic rather than intrinsic factors.

Besides being controlled by her wealth and background, Daisy is at the mercy of the men in her life. Whether it is a weakness of her character or Daisy's succumbing to the social norms of her times, every aspect of her life seems to be affected by the men around her. This fact is reflected not only in the relationship that she has with Tom but also with Nick and Gatsby. Only in her conversations with Jordan does Daisy provide a glimpse of who she really is. Beyond those conversations, Daisy is a chameleon, changing with her environment and present companion. This easily changed aspect of her personality makes Daisy a difficult character to evaluate. Is she this way because it is an innate part of who she truly is? Or, is it a reflection of yet another way that she is controlled by her surroundings? This second observation seems to fit logically with the previous discussion of Daisy and her servitude to her wealth and background. If she were free to make choices for herself with nothing to influence her, then perhaps she would act differently. Instead, Daisy reveals multiple versions of herself in the conversations that she has with Nick, Tom, and Gatsby.

It is at the same dinner party where Nick is introduced to the Buchanans and their family affairs that Daisy demonstrates her changeable personality. While Daisy is warm and inviting to Nick, she is also very juvenile. She flirts and makes very superficial conversation with Nick in a way that does not fit her surroundings. At one point in the evening she tells Nick that he reminds her "of a rose, an absolute rose" (Fitzgerald 19). Comments like this one do not sound like something a grown woman would say. Rather, they sound like something one might hear from a child or adolescent. Later in the narrative, when Daisy visits Nick's cottage, her conversation's tone continues to stay light and childish. In this scene, Daisy calls Nick "dearest one" (90) and jokingly asks if

he is in love with her. At times, she is so superficially happy that it seems to signal that things are quite the opposite in her world—depressed and restraining, rather than “paralyzed with happiness” (13). This behavior and these comments do not fit with those that she makes to Tom in similar situations.

Granted, Daisy is aware of the affair that Tom is having and might try to reveal that knowledge when responding to him. Regardless, the inconsistency that she shows when talking to these two men reveals her character’s instability. With Tom, none of the playful Daisy is present. Instead of calling him a “rose” as she does Nick, Daisy describes Tom “a brute of a man, a great big hulking physical specimen” (Fitzgerald 16). Such a statement not only shows Daisy’s dislike of Tom but also reveals the juvenile, baiting tone that she sometimes likes to use. While she continues to act childishly with Tom, she is completely different in her childishness than when she is with Nick. Daisy allows Tom to lead and be in control of situations. If Tom is with her, Daisy responds like a child would respond to a parent. Never does she assert her place in the marriage or conversation, allowing Tom to interrupt her and to make absurd comments whenever he likes. When Daisy does react to Tom’s comments, it is either with indifference or sarcasm instead of the flirtatious tone she takes with Nick. If she does try to flirt or joke with Tom, it is done with the same insincerity as she does with Nick, and it elicits no response or even acknowledgement from him. In letting Tom lead situations and control her, Daisy slips further from the intelligent individual she is.

Tom is not the only man who Daisy allows to influence her, as Gatsby also seems to have some sort of power over Daisy’s behavior. As soon as he reenters her life, Daisy begins to behave as she did before they were separated. No longer caring about the rules

of her elite class, she becomes indiscreet about her affair with Gatsby. Daisy visits him at any hour of the day and makes no effort to conceal their relationship from Tom. Nick comments that on the occasion that Daisy, Tom and, Gatsby are all in the same room, Daisy “told him [Gatsby] that she loved him, and Tom Buchanan saw” (Fitzgerald 125). She even masks her disapproval of Gatsby’s friends and parties from Gatsby, which she seems to do only to please him. Nick observes her at one of Gatsby’s parties and says that it “offended her—and inarguably, because it wasn’t a gesture but an emotion. She was appalled by West Egg” (113). Instead of revealing her true feelings, she continues to dissemble, even when Gatsby tells Nick that he knows the truth that “[s]he didn’t like it” (116). Regarding her capricious behavior, one critic states, “In many ways, Daisy is like Gatsby. At crucial moments in her life, she deliberately chooses to embrace certain illusions and play certain roles as a way of creating for herself a sense of meaning and purpose and as a way of coping” (Parr 66-67).

The only indication that Fitzgerald gives of Daisy’s true personality comes in the stories that Jordan Baker relates to Nick. Jordan tells Nick about how Daisy and Gatsby met and about their relationship until Gatsby left for the war. In this story, Jordan reveals that on the eve of her wedding to Tom, Daisy received a letter from Gatsby that told her to wait for him because he would be returning soon from the front. After reading this letter, Daisy shuts herself up in her room, drinks heavily, and says that she has changed her mind about marrying Tom. In her drunken state, Daisy tells Jordan to “[t]ell ‘em all Daisy’s change’ her mine. Say ‘Daisy’s change’ her mine!’ ” (Fitzgerald 81). In witnessing this scene, Jordan becomes a kind of confidant for Daisy, and is the only one to hear Daisy confess that she does not want to marry Tom. Jordan also adds that before

Daisy's engagement to Tom, she was determined to marry Gatsby and was ready to leave her family and social position for him. As her family would not allow that outcome, Daisy marries Tom. Jordan also tells Nick that Daisy came into her room in the middle of the night, after the dinner party where Gatsby's name is first mentioned, to ask Jordan about Gatsby and to see if it was "the man she used to know" (83). Jordan's remarks offer a very interesting insight into Daisy, as they are the first indication of a personality that belongs solely to Daisy's creation and not to external influences.

All of these examples illustrate the restrictive situation in which Daisy lives. From the limiting social order of which she is a part, to the isolation that her money creates, to the control that the men of her life have, Daisy loses herself in society's expectations of whom she should be. She is ready to leave her family and wealth for Gatsby but changes her mind in the end. Readers never learn if she does this act on her own or through her family's persuasion. It is likely, though, that her family leaned very hard on her not to leave the lifestyle in which she had been brought up. Daisy also keeps herself in this position by allowing Tom, especially, but also the other men in her life to control what happens to her. When Daisy hits Myrtle Wilson with Gatsby's car, she immediately returns to Tom and lets him take the lead on what to do rather than using her own intelligence. When Daisy reveals her true identity, it is always behind closed doors and only to another female. The conversation that Daisy has with Jordan about Gatsby takes place in the middle of the night in Jordan's bedroom. The scene before her wedding takes place behind another closed door, this time in Daisy's room. These are the only two instances where Daisy can be viewed as completely unaffected by those around her.

Even with all of her wealth and advantages, Daisy fails to take charge of her life and in doing so fails to achieve the American Dream. It seems, however, that Daisy was never truly in search of it. Daisy's failure to search for the American Dream probably stems from the apathetic attitude she adopts from living a life controlled by others and her affluence. When given opportunities such as marrying Gatsby instead of Tom, she decides against it. Instead of making the choices that would make her happy, Daisy chooses to follow the examples and suggestions of the society around her.ⁱ In such a case, it is easy to feel sympathy for Daisy. With such pressures from the outside world, it is not surprising that she would act as she does. In a critical essay, Susan Fryer comments on Daisy's personality and attributes her behavior to the fact that those around Daisy misunderstand her. One example that Fryer gives in defense of Daisy's character is how Nick misinterprets her. Fryer says Nick's interpretation "describes Daisy in terms of gaiety, restlessness, fear, artificiality—but while he recognizes that she is affected, he fails to comprehend what lies beneath her affectation" (155). Fryer believes that Daisy's affectation comes from her desire to portray herself as carefree and happy, while she is inwardly protecting herself from the pain of emotions "because she recognizes the pain they can entail" (154).

This view of Daisy raises many interesting questions about the justice that surrounds her life. Is it just that Daisy has so many advantages over most people, yet fails to utilize them? Her intelligence, wealth, and upbringing are all wasted when she allows them to either go unused or misused by others. Is it just that she has all of the elements of the American Dream but is not living it? It seems that, for Daisy, both the American Dream and justice are corrupted because she wastes the opportunities given to

her to grasp the Dream successfully. Instead, she allows her wealth to dictate the events of her life and deny her the justice of having an individually determined life. Daisy's wealth also sways justice and raises the question of whether it is just that she is never held accountable for Myrtle Wilson's death. Justice fails in Daisy's case, for she is never accountable for her actions. If justice were obtained for women like Daisy, she would not be forced into a certain way of living by society or able to go free after killing another person because of her economic status. The breakdown of American justice can be seen not only in its failure to hold her accountable for Myrtle's murder but also in the fact that Daisy is denied opportunities to improve her life through her wealth, so in a sense denies herself these possibilities. If Daisy were successfully living the American Dream, then she would have more control over her own life, and there would be a more satisfying ending to her story.

Similarly, in Doctorow's *Ragtime*, Sarah finds herself at odds with the society in which she is placed. Unlike Daisy, Sarah does not have wealth or the pressures that come from having that wealth to influence her life. In fact, she is almost the complete opposite of Daisy. Not only is Sarah impoverished and uneducated, but she is also black. Sarah is described as "transient" (Doctorow 158), which means she has neither the support nor the demands that come from belonging to a group such as Daisy's. Not being a part of or accountable to a group makes Sarah an even more sympathetic character. Mother observes Sarah's unfortunate situation and says, "[s]he began to regret Sarah's intransigence" (158).

To make her situation worse, she is unmarried and pregnant, with no knowledge of where the father of that child can be found. Her race already puts Sarah a social

disadvantage, but having a child out of wedlock breaks societal expectations that will put her at even more of a disadvantage. While Daisy has the world at her disposal, Sarah essentially has nothing. The beginning of Sarah's story finds her on the point of arrest for having buried her newborn son alive. Struck with guilt, Sarah goes into a state of shock and becomes essentially mute. She is rescued by Mother and slowly begins to recover from her traumatic experiences. It is apparent from the beginning that any improvement that Sarah makes to her life will come solely from her own hard work. She does not have the cushion of wealth to help her, nor does she have a social class that can in any way help or guide her decisions.

Since Sarah does not have the benefits that wealth or an education can bring, she is at the mercy of society. As a result, she is often treated like a child or generally mistreated. Little or no education and the perception of others that she is a child seems to leave Sarah open to the control of others, which is a plight common to people of Sarah's status. Most people believe that in America, the mistreatment of people like Sarah would not happen because it is against the founding ideals of America. The belief that a person could be kept in a lower position only because others perceive her as lowly works against the philosophies that make America unique and establish its national identity. To reiterate this, Ben Siegel points out a comment made by Doctorow, who believes that "America may be a remarkable country [...] but it has often been hostile to the poor and vulnerable" (2). Much of the narrative of *Ragtime* focuses on this type of mistreatment, and Sarah, who is both poor and vulnerable, is no exception.

At the beginning of the novel, Doctorow spends several pages describing the common blindness American upper classes demonstrated and then describes what was

actually taking place in America. He begins by saying, “There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants” (Doctorow 4), but several pages later describes the tenement housing for the immigrants. Doctorow describes the tenements through the eyes of Jacob Riis, a journalist, who observed that the immigrants “lived too many to a room. There was no sanitation. The streets reeked of shit. Children died of mild colds or slight rashes. Children died on beds made from two kitchen chairs pushed together. They died on floors” (17). The previous statement about the upper class view of the way things were was not at all uncommon to the people of that class, and it is no surprise that such apathy would affect Sarah. Unlike Daisy, who receives too much attention from the elite upper class, Sarah receives too little, yet the same group regulates her life. As Siegel noted above, Sarah is poor and vulnerable and mistreated by the country that proclaims to accept anyone. Against high odds and behind her childlike face (Doctorow 70), Sarah demonstrates a character with a strength that Daisy Buchanan never displays.

Coalhouse’s courtship of Sarah is unstable and unsuccessful in the beginning. While Doctorow never presents the full details of their past relationship, readers can conclude that Sarah is much younger than Coalhouse and that he left her when she became pregnant. When he decides to make amends and reestablish the relationship, Sarah is unresponsive after spending several months in a secluded and silent state. Coalhouse’s first visit triggers a type of awakening in Sarah. When Mother asks Sarah if she will see Coalhouse, Sarah responds, “No, ma’am [...] Send him away, please” which is, as Mother observes, “the most she had said in all the months she had lived in the house” (Doctorow 156). From that point on, Sarah seems to have a stirring in spirit.

For several weeks, she refuses to see Coalhouse but does begin to participate in the daily activities around the house. Mother says that in response to Coalhouse's visits, "Sarah had taken on the duties of the departed housekeeper and now cleaned rooms so energetically and with such proprietary competence that Mother laughed with the momentary illusion that it was Sarah's own house she was cleaning" (Doctorow 161). Sarah also takes on her motherly responsibilities, which she had neglected until Coalhouse arrived back in her life. The entirety of their courtship demonstrates a test of wills between Sarah and Coalhouse. Sarah's reluctance to see Coalhouse immediately reveals an inner strength and determination to have an equal standing in their relationship. Sarah defines herself through such qualities and her desire to have a life of her choosing in spite of her situation or the opinions of those around her. Unlike Daisy, Sarah chooses to accept Coalhouse's proposal of marriage on her own accord and timetable, regardless of the consequence. This strength of character shows its full potential when her future marriage with Coalhouse is threatened by the actions of others.

The event of Coalhouse's encounter with the New Rochelle volunteer fire department sets in place the rest of the action for the novel. It also defines what will happen to Sarah and Coalhouse. While Coalhouse is essentially the center of the scandal, Sarah, by association and her own determined will, becomes involved, too. Instead of sitting idly by and watching events unfold before her, Sarah acts to save her relationship and future with Coalhouse. Knowing that his situation will either temporarily or indefinitely postpone their marriage, Sarah decides to seek help from the Vice President, who is visiting New Rochelle. Doctorow describes Sarah's plan of action, saying, "Knowing little of government, nor appreciating the degree of national

unimportance of her Coalhouse's trials, Sarah conceived the idea of petitioning the United States on his behalf" (189). Like Coalhouse, Sarah mistakenly believes that those in charge will help those in need. When she arrives at the hotel where the Vice President will be making his speech, Sarah pushes through the crowd calling his name. The crowd and recent assassination attempts on Theodore Roosevelt make the guards of the event careless and on edge, and in their ignorance, one strikes Sarah in chest with his baton. The injuries that she sustains eventually cause her death, an unnecessary death, caused by the poor judgment of a group who should be protecting, not hurting, people like her.

Mother describes Sarah as "the kind of moral being who understood nothing but goodness. She had no guile and could act only in total and helpless response to what she felt. If she loved she acted in love, if she was betrayed she was destroyed" (Doctorow 187-188). It is this kind of emotion that destroys Sarah. By placing such faith in her own emotions and naively believing that those in power will always aid those below them, Sarah seals her own fate. While some may question her ideas of what the government is able to be involved in, her naive views do not excuse the injustice that befalls her. Where most would remain detached and uninvolved, Sarah takes an active role in her destiny and though it comes to no good end, Sarah displays her inner strength and determined will. Her death, however, raises many questions about the justice of the society in which she lives.

From the beginning, when she is almost arrested for burying her son, justice works against Sarah. Her race and social status label her as disadvantaged, and those around her only see her in this simple definition and fail to notice the intrinsic qualities of strength and determination she possesses. For Sarah, the American Dream is to marry

Coalhouse and start a life together. The decision to petition the Vice President for help is done to secure her future with Coalhouse and achieve the goal of that dream. It instead leads to Sarah's untimely death. Are the actions taken against Sarah just? Doctorow seems to set up Sarah's story to show that it is not. Justice is not served in Sarah's case and abused by those who are in control and should be protecting it. This sub-plot in *Ragtime* demonstrates the frailty of American justice and how often those who most need to be protected by justice are instead destroyed by it. If American justice were a strong reality, then Sarah, and people like her, would not be judged by looks and race. Instead, Sarah would have been protected by justice, not destroyed and failed by it.

While there is a great difference between the characters of Daisy and Sarah, their stories illustrate the adversity that women face while pursuing the American Dream. Both are unsuccessful in their attempts to secure the futures they desire. Daisy demonstrates this result in the apathy that she has in pursuing the Dream when the social group to which she belongs persuades her to abandon her own goals and accept theirs. Sarah's failure comes when she actively fights for her future and is stopped by the hostile actions of others. Each woman illustrates not only the restraints that society has put on her but also the obstacles that any woman could face. Their particular struggles raise the question of whether it is ever possible for women to obtain the Dream.

If Daisy and Sarah represent women as a group, then they seem to be always at the mercy of the people around them and therefore unable to pursue the American Dream. In dealing with such adversity, does the American Dream become redefined for women? If it is, are Daisy and Sarah now on a quest for equality rather than material gain? It seems for these two women the Dream is redefined but instead of looking for

status and wealth, they are in search for a stable and equal place in society. Daisy and Sarah resist the injustice that surrounds them and keeps them from attaining the dream, albeit Sarah's fight is more forceful than Daisy's. The stories of these two women also show how American justice is integral to the acquisition of the American Dream. Justice fails each woman, Daisy in that she is never held accountable for her actions and Sarah in that she is mistakenly held accountable by justice. If American justice prevailed for those who needed it as the ideal suggests, then the stories of Daisy and Sarah would end much differently than they do. Blind justice would aid rather than impede these women in achieving the American Dream. Daisy and Sarah's stories, however, end with them as the victims of a society based on the fragile idea of justice.

¹ The weakness of Daisy's personality is often attributed to Fitzgerald's deliberate intentions for her character. However, in her critical essay, Sarah Fryer quotes a letter from Fitzgerald to Maxwell Perkins where Fitzgerald confesses, "Chapter 7 (the hotel scene) will never quite be up to the mark—I've worried about it too long and I can't quite place Daisy's reaction....I'm sorry Myrtle is better than Daisy...." (154). Fitzgerald's comment suggest that the flaws and shallowness of Daisy's character stems from a lack of development in the artistic process rather than a calculated move on Fitzgerald's part. The original publication of this and other letters of Fitzgerald's can be found in Andrew Turnbull's publication of *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: Scribner's, 1963). This specific letter is found on page 172-173.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Childhood is very often a humiliating state for the individual who has these sophisticated powers of perception and understanding without having any power to effect change or control what happens or even gain recognition as a sentient being in the adult world." – E. L. Doctorow

If women hold a low place in the discussion of the American Dream and justice in literature, then children do as well. As in real life, the actions of adults usually take center stage over those of children and therefore receive more attention from authors, critics, and readers. Occasionally, authors will use their child characters as a means of demonstrating the flaws of the larger society about which they are writing and to discuss the marginalized roles that children hold. Typically, though, children are not the primary focus of authors or literary criticism on the American Dream. Often relegated to an afterthought in discussions of *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime*, the children of these novels are sometimes overlooked. Not only are the children disregarded in literary discussions, but they are also devalued by the adult characters within the texts. Children and their futures remain a large part of the goals for the American Dream, yet their power to influence and determine their destinies remains outside of their control. Like their adult counterparts, children are affected by the search for the American Dream and the failure of American justice, and the children represented in *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime* are no exception.

In *The Great Gatsby*, children are hardly mentioned at all, except for the few and minor references about Daisy and Tom's daughter, Pamela. *Ragtime*, however, has three

fairly prominent child characters: Boy, Girl, and Coalhouse Walker, III. While they have a larger role in the text than Pamela, all these children remain at the mercy of the world around them and are sometimes neglected by the adults who are responsible for them. Collectively these children illustrate the effects that parents' actions and the actions of the adult world as a whole can have on children. Through their marginalized roles, the potential fates of all three children again demonstrate the failure of American justice.

Pamela Buchanan is one child whose fate is influenced drastically by the adult society around her.ⁱ Mentioned briefly in the text, the daughter of Daisy and Tom Buchanan becomes significant ironically because she is almost absent from the text, suggesting how little her parents seem to think of her. From the beginning, this child has no prominent role in the novel or in the lives of her parents. In fact, the child's name can only be assumed to be Pamela because she is referred to only once in the entire novel as "Pammy" (Fitzgerald 124). This single reference is stated by Pamela's nurse and not her parents. Tom does not refer to her at all, and when Daisy mentions her, it is only by words like "the baby," "she," (14) or "Bles-sed pre-cious!" (123). Like most children of the affluent, Pamela is being raised by the hired help and seems to be treated by her parents as a possession. Instead of being involved directly in their child's life, Tom and Daisy have relegated the task of raising their child to a member of the household staff.

The brief reference that Nick makes about Pamela also demonstrates her marginalized role. At the same dinner party where he meets the Buchanans and Jordan Baker, Nick makes comments about Daisy's daughter that reveal a gap between his adult world and the child's world that should coexist with his. Although the comment is made at an awkward and somewhat tense moment in the evening, Nick tries to relieve some of

the tension of the evening by asking Daisy questions about her daughter. At this point, the child's name is not revealed and will not be for one hundred more pages. He says that he "returned rather feebly to the subject of her daughter. 'I suppose she talks, and—eats, and everything'" (Fitzgerald 21). Nick's question reveals not only his extreme bachelorhood but also the reality that Pamela is so unimportant that she is not given a name at this juncture, nor is she important enough for Nick to ask questions above whether she eats or not. They are related as cousins, yet Nick knows nothing about Pamela, not even her name, and Daisy is not connected enough to her child to offer any further information. Daisy's feelings about her child are introduced in this conversation, which also reveals the probable future of Pamela.

Daisy's description of the day that Pamela was born exposes how their daughter will be raised. In this brief conversation, she tells Nick:

Well, she was less than an hour old and Tom was God knows where. I woke up out of the ether with an utterly abandoned feeling and asked the nurse right away if it was a boy or a girl. She told me it was a girl, and so I turned my head away and wept. "All right," I said, "I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool." (21)

This story about her daughter's birth not only illustrates the harsh truth of Daisy and Tom's marriage and their personalities but also shows the reader that Daisy is aware of her fate and unhappy situation and will therefore try to mold her daughter's life so that she will not be like her mother. Daisy does not seem to realize that her plan to make her daughter a "beautiful fool" will determine Pamela's fate to be like that of her mother's.

Whether intentionally or by accident, Fitzgerald seems to use Pamela and her absence in the novel to communicate that the world of Daisy, Tom, Nick, and Gatsby is a world of adults. When she is introduced to the group, Nick remarks that Gatsby “kept looking at the child with surprise. I don’t think he had ever really believed in its existence before” (Fitzgerald 123). Gatsby’s reaction and Daisy’s comment to Pamela that she wanted to show her off to her friends proves that in this world children exist but only to be shown off to company. Children are little more than a possession, and so by their own doing, Pamela is detached from her parents. From the text it is clear that her parents have little to no involvement in her life. While they may never have an integral or involved role in her life, Pamela will be influenced by the decisions her parents make. Like Daisy’s life, Pamela’s future will be tied to her wealth and status and determined by her family.

Unfortunately, like her mother’s, Pamela’s destiny will likely be decided by circumstances outside her control and by someone other than herself. This cycle of history repeating itself in the lives of Daisy and Pamela demonstrates again the failure of justice and therefore the American Dream in the lives of women and also shows that these failures can be found in the lives of children. It seems unjust that Daisy’s child, from the moment of birth, should be resigned to a fate like her mother’s. Justice fails again when Daisy declares that she will raise her daughter to be a fool—a declaration that seems to seal her daughter’s fate to be just like her own. Pamela is not the only child who is neglected and influenced by the actions of her parents.

The three children in *Ragtime* also face these adversities. One of the central child figures in *Ragtime* is Boy. Like Pamela, his parents never refer to Boy’s real name,

which shows the level of importance that he holds in his parent's lives. While Doctorow might have done this as a narrative strategy, it demonstrates that this child, like others, will take a marginal place next to the personal and private problems of his parents. In addition to the drama of Sarah and Coalhouse's situation, which the family becomes involved in by housing Sarah and therefore forming a relationship with Coalhouse, Mother and Father have several private issues that pull their attention away from their child.

After traveling as part of a yearlong expedition to the North Pole, Father returns to find the dynamics of his household altered greatly. Because Sarah is living in the house, the servants quit their positions, and the family becomes a much-discussed topic around New Rochelle. In addition to this condition, Brother disappears for long stretches of time, and Mother's attitude about life in general has changed. Having run both a business and a household by herself, Mother no longer accepts that she is the docile, submissive wife that Father left behind. All of these circumstances, and the tension that arises from them, begin to consume Father and Mother's attention, leaving Boy to be "constantly admonished to get out from under people's feet" (Doctorow 224). At one point, Father realizes that his son has been swept aside by the drama surrounding their family and "condemned himself most for the neglect of his son. He never talked to the boy or offered his companionship" (225). This neglect by his family causes the boy to become very reflective and observant about things going on around him.

It is only Mother who notices the effects of this neglect on the boy and describes it as "the boy's oddity or merely his independence of spirit" (Doctorow 116). Even though she observes this result, Mother fails to recognize the boy's special qualities and

what his “oddity” allows him to perceive. Doctorow describes the boy as one who saw value in discarded, unwanted things and even extends this emotion to people (115). One example of this trait is the way Boy treats “his grandfather as a discarded treasure” (116), while the rest of the family sees him as an aged, somewhat senile old man. His mother goes as far to observe an oddity in his personality but fails to investigate what the trait truly is—a deep connection to the world around him that allows him to perceive things that most people would not. The boy is perhaps the most observant character in *Ragtime* next to Girl, but he is only recognized for this ability by her. When seeing him only for a moment, she describes his eyes as globes (93), suggesting that his eyes can perceive more than the average person’s.

The failure of the family to recognize the inner qualities that the boy possesses extends to their failure to see beyond the drama of their lives. Like Pamela’s, Boy’s world is one of adults only. Their adult problems take precedence over the neglect of their child. When Father decides that the family needs to leave New Rochelle temporarily to escape the drama that Coalhouse has caused, the decision is made more for Father and Mother than the boy. He is packed up and moved as if he were one more piece of luggage. The boy’s life is solely determined by the actions of his parents and most of the decisions they make are not done with his best interest in mind. This fact and his family’s not seeing who he is condemn him to whatever future he happens to fall into, rather than one which has been planned with him in mind. Even though he is part of an affluent family, does Boy seem to be living the American Dream? Is the disregard of his family just treatment? If America is the place of freedom and opportunity that the ideal promises, Boy’s family should recognize his internal qualities and not treat him as odd.

His future should be broad and open, rather than confined to whatever afterthought is thrown his way. Just treatment would be consideration in decisions made by his parents and treatment as a member of the family instead of as a household object. Boy, however, is not the only child in *Ragtime* who is moved about and misunderstood by their parents. Girl also faces these things in her relationship with Tateh.

After immigrating to America, Tateh and his family face poverty and life in the tenements. The living situation in the tenements is horrible and far from the paradise of America that Tateh and his family had imagined. Circumstances from the pressures of poverty cause Tateh to banish and disown his wife early in the narrative, leaving Tateh as the sole caretaker of his daughter, but his emotional state after his wife's banishment renders him incapable of raising a child. In her absence, the girl assumes the role of her mother. Tateh observes his daughter and notices that "[t]he little girl quietly prepared their simple meals in ways so reminiscent of the movements of his wife" (Doctorow 90). The situation in which she lives has caused the girl to assume the role of an adult as a child. Tateh realizes that the situation he finds himself and his daughter in is not what he had imagined for his family and that they cannot continue living the way they do. Tateh says that "Every once in a while he would look at his child, and seeing the sure destruction of her incredible beauty in his continuing victimization" (90), he decides to leave New York for good.

Tateh's decision to move is similar to the one that the family makes from New Rochelle. Tateh's choice is a little less selfish in that he realizes the awful situation he has put his daughter in, but Girl, like Boy, is also sometimes treated like an object. Tateh is a socialist and very quick-tempered. His political views sometimes take a central place

over the needs of his child, which is shown when he deliberates at length about whether he should send her away to a safe haven during a hostile union strike (Doctorow 125). Overall, Tateh's motives are good, but they often become lost in his own personal worries and interests. Several of his decisions about their lives are done with his daughter as a second thought. Had he been truly concerned about the welfare of his child, he would never have let his pride banish his wife. The girl's treatment as an object does not stop with Tateh but is shown also by the character of Evelyn Nesbit. Nesbit is strangely fixated by Girl and the child's beauty, but there is nothing in the attentions Nesbit pays to the child that reveal anything more than viewing her as an interesting diversion from her own problems.

Girl's life resembles Boy's very closely in that their lives are tied to the actions and personal dramas of their parents. While her ending is happy one, it seems unjust that the girl's life is determined completely by Tateh's actions and emotions. Does Tateh's eventual success make up for the unjust decisions that he makes with regard to his daughter's life? Does a happy ending excuse the fact that Tateh's pride causes the girl to be motherless? In the descriptions that Doctorow gives throughout the novel about the girl and Tateh's relationship, it seems that the girl accepts the position that she is in and forgives her father for his flaws. This result, however, does not seem to dismiss the fact that there is an underlying feeling of injustice in the girl's life because she has no control or say over any of the decisions that get made about her life throughout the novel but is continually affected by them. It is also unjust that the country that promised Tateh's family success, wealth, and happiness fails to hold its promise when they first arrive. Is it just that the girl's family, like so many other immigrant families, is essentially victimized

and torn apart by the myth of promise in America? Doctorow seems to comment on this by the fact that Tateh is successful eventually but not without sacrifice and suffering for the happy American ending that he provides his daughter.

The third child featured in the novel is Coalhouse Walker the third, who of the three children is the most influenced by the actions of his parents. His story is a sad and tragic one. While the other children in the novel are neglected and under-appreciated, Coalhouse Walker, III is orphaned by tragic events caused by an unjust society.

Coalhouse III is an infant throughout the entirety of the novel. Unlike Boy and Girl, who take a larger role in some of the passages, young Coalhouse never achieves individuality and is identified primarily as being the illegitimate son of Sarah and Coalhouse. The fact that he is illegitimate, in an indirect way, sets in motion the events that are responsible for the eventual death of his parents. Had Sarah and Coalhouse been married, she would never have tried to bury him alive shortly after delivering him, and Coalhouse would not have had cause to visit New Rochelle in his Model T, which in the end is responsible for his death. The actions and events that lead to their deaths, however, are done in an attempt to secure a better life for them all.

As noted above, Sarah and Coalhouse are in search of the American Dream. They may begin their journey to this goal in an unstable and unlikely way, but it is clear from the moment they become engaged that their future together and their son's future are important. Since they are both intent on providing their son a happy and promising life, Sarah and Coalhouse take dramatic measures to try and secure his future. Sarah's fear of losing the possibility of such a bright future with Coalhouse causes her to run into the crowd surrounding the Vice President and as a consequence, is beaten and dies from her

injuries. Coalhouse also wants to secure his son's future and demonstrates this goal in his passionate stand against the volunteer firemen that vandalized his car and his unwavering demand for justice.

Coalhouse is killed in his efforts to find justice that will not only serve him but last for his son. This is shown in Coalhouse's final conversation with Father in the Morgan library when he realizes that he will not leave the siege alive. Instead of asking questions about the situation or the stance of the police, "Coalhouse asked Father to tell him about his son. He wanted to know about his walking, whether his appetite was good, whether he'd said any words yet, and every detail he could think of" (Doctorow 298). In their search and demands for justice, both Sarah and Coalhouse demonstrate their desire for a better life for their son, but in doing so ironically leave him an orphan. While he is in no way responsible for the events that lead to his parents' death, it seems that the events surrounding his conception and birth affect the outcome of his life directly.

Such events make him the child most obviously affected by his parent's actions and the actions of other adults around him. He is orphaned both by the actions that his parents take against a society that is threatening their future and by the same society that will not grant his parents the justice they seek. Sadly, Sarah and Coalhouse's fight for justice leaves little changed and so their son will have to struggle against the same odds they did. History shows this point to be true, with segregation in the South still in place and the Civil Rights movement part of a distant future. Is such a future just? Even with their failure, the actions and sacrifice of Sarah and Coalhouse do not seem to be in vain, but it seems unlikely that their son will live to see the justice they sought. After the death of his parents, young Coalhouse is taken in by the family and treated by Mother as if he

were one of her own. Does being raised by a white, affluent family change the probable future that is in store for him? More than likely it does not, since his race will limit his future in a segregated, racist society. As postmodern readers, Doctorow's audience would be aware of the history of racism and race relations in America and would know that the future that lies ahead for Coalhouse III will be filled with the same problems that his parents faced. Doctorow ends *Ragtime* with a hopeful tone, however, with all three children playing together, the image inspiring the eventual creation of the *Our Gang* film series (319).

Both novels comment on the injustice that can befall children because of decisions made by the adults that surround them, despite the optimism of Doctorow's ending for *Ragtime*. The future that seems to become unavoidable for Pamela Buchanan is different from that of Coalhouse Walker, III, but they share a similarity in that both children's futures are predestined by their parents. All of the children are victims of the failure of the American Dream and justice because their parents are failed by the same thing. Daisy, Sarah, and Coalhouse's failures determine the futures of the children. With such failures comes the question of whether these children are given the chance to seek the American Dream because their futures seem set by their parents. Both American justice and the American Dream are supposed to offer all people the chance to decide the outcome of their own lives. The lives of these children, however, prove the ideas of the American Dream and justice to be mythic, as both are broken down in their lives, and they are not able to fully take advantage of either. The children in *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime* serve as yet another example of how American justice does not always serve the citizens that it is supposed to.

¹ In his discussion of the birth of the Fitzgerald's first child, Frances Scott Fitzgerald, Jeffrey Meyers reports that Zelda Fitzgerald "exclaimed: 'I hope it's beautiful and a fool—a beautiful little fool'—a sentence attributed to Daisy Buchanan" (76). Though this certainly did inspire Daisy's comments, it seems harsh to conclude from Zelda's statement that Scottie Fitzgerald had a childhood like that of Pamela Buchanan. In a collection of letters entitled, *Scott Fitzgerald Letters to His Daughter*, compiled and edited by Andrew Turnbull, Frances Fitzgerald Lanahan shares several years worth of letters that her father wrote to her. The letters show that like, Pamela, a child from a fairly affluent family, Frances was often away from her parents (i.e. school, camp). Unlike Pamela, however, father's letters show a fondness between Frances and her father and not the emotional distance that is evident between Pamela, Tom, and Daisy.

CONCLUSION

“One of the problems for modern readers is that they expect the American Dream of the first quarter of the century to be defined and accessible, but it is often described as unknowable.”
- Ronald Berman

At the center of both *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime* is the common idea of the failure of the American Dream and justice. Though the Dream “is a part of a long tradition” (Cullen 5) and has always been a part of the literary genre, according to Jim Cullen, author of *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, it “has long since moved beyond the relatively musty domain of print culture into the incandescent glow of the mass media, where it is enshrined as our national motto” (5). The poignant views about the myth of the Dream and flaws of American justice that Fitzgerald and Doctorow demonstrate in their novels reveal they were aware of the power of the Dream and its existence as a motto well before Cullen’s book examined chronologically the history of an idea that “shaped a nation.” If the American Dream is a motto accepted by the nation, then Fitzgerald and Doctorow’s examination of this motto becomes even more revealing as they criticize instead of champion the very motto that should represent the nation. In one chapter of his book, Cullen examines a component of the American Dream in a way that, like Fitzgerald and Doctorow, removes the Dream from its pedestal and discusses its flawed nature.

gerald and Doctorow comment on the flaws of our society, Cullen echoes and supports their views when he writes, “In the twenty-first century, the American Dream remains a major element of our national identity, and yet national identity is itself marked by a sense of uncertainty that may well be greater than ever before” (6). Such uncertainty about national identity brings Cullen to his examination of equality and its tie to the American Dream. Cullen focuses an entire chapter on equality and how it has become one of the many varieties of the American Dream. In his discussion of equality, Cullen comments that he regards the American Dream of equality “as one of the most noteworthy—and unsuccessful—of all American Dreams” (8). He goes on to say that

most of us have believed that equality must play a role in everyday American life, even if that role is almost wholly theoretical.

That’s because the American Dream depends on it. At some visceral level, virtually all of us need to believe that equality is one of the core values of everyday American life, that its promises extend to everyone. If they don’t, then not everybody is eligible for the American Dream—and one of the principal attractions of the American Dream, and its major moral underpinning, is that everyone is eligible: this has been the benchmark, commonsense notion of what equality has meant for quite some time. (108)

Cullen’s observation about the important role that equality has in the success of the American Dream nicely summarizes the shared opinion that Fitzgerald and Doctorow have on the same subject. Throughout his book, Cullen seems to believe in the existence of the American Dream, yet like Fitzgerald and Doctorow, admits that the failure of the

Dream to be a complete reality lies in the failure of America to establish firmly equality among its citizens. The failure to establish equality lies in the failure of the idea of American justice, as the two go hand in hand. Such failure is similarly examined in *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime* through the characters and plots of both novels.

As this thesis demonstrates, in each novel there is no group whose quests for the American Dream are not affected by the failure of justice that results from the prejudice of other characters. Members of the elite class, who represent the image of what the Dream promises, are the characters that display such discrimination. As Cullen's quote points out, for the Dream to be successful, it has to be equally obtainable for those who seek it. Through their plots and characters, Fitzgerald and Doctorow prove that the Dream is not obtainable for all and as a result not only does it fail, but justice, an idea that is as important, fails as well. As an ideal upon which the nation's identity is founded, justice's failure in each work makes these novels remarkable in their breakdown of its reality.

In an interview, Doctorow was asked why authors write and write on certain topics. He responded: "The big story is always the national soul—who are we, what are we trying to be, what is our fate, where will we stand in the moral universe when these things are reckoned? That's always the big story" (Moyers 147). Such questions are the focus of Doctorow's telling of the painful circumstances of the lives of Coalhouse Walker and Sarah, and the hardships of the children, and they require the reader to ask him/her self the same questions. Fitzgerald, too, asks his readers similarly uncomfortable questions about their society and nation when, instead of supporting the accepted national identity, he dismantles it. As Matthew Bruccoli comments, "*The Great Gatsby* does not

proclaim the nobility of the human spirit; it is not politically correct; it does not reveal how to solve the problems of life; it delivers no fashionable or comforting messages” (vii). This is evident not only in the story of *Gatsby*, but also in the stories of Daisy, Pamela, and even Tom Buchanan, who reminds the reader that nobility is not always present in stories about the American Dream.

When asked about the influences on his writings, Doctorow says, “Hemingway was an enormous influence on me [...] Fitzgerald more so” (Marranca 214). An examination of *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime* reveals similarities that link the plots of both novels to each other and the central idea of the failure of justice, which is not surprising, as both authors were concerned with the subject of injustice. As Doctorow acknowledges, he followed Fitzgerald’s lead. In *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime*, the protagonists, women, and children are all placed in similar situations and have common problems—all are misled by the promises of the American Dream and justice. The topic of injustice unifies the two novels and warns against the hubris of America’s national identity. Doctorow believes that injustice is an important subject to writers as “he says writers serve as ‘independent witnesses’ to injustice” (Morris xi). To support his view, Doctorow cites his own interests and the driving forces behind his writing commenting that the questions, “What is just? What is unjust? That’s where it all begins with me” (Morris x). This sense of justice is part of what Richard Trenner believes is “Doctorow’s most important quality: his moral vision” (5). Similarly, Fitzgerald accomplishes the same thing as the fate of *Gatsby* questions the very idea of whether or not American justice exists.

Though the novels were written fifty years apart and use two different historical eras as their settings, the contemporary view of Fitzgerald and the retrospective analysis of Doctorow capture the time periods about which they are writing, yet both successfully show that the problems in their novels are not limited to those eras. This conclusion is certainly true of *The Great Gatsby* because “[a]lthough *The Great Gatsby* is deeply rooted in its time, it is considerably more than a revelation of life in the jazz age. It transcends its time to reveal something about America, American character, and the American dream” (Miller 252). The relevancy of *The Great Gatsby* and its message to contemporary times and readers accentuates that “[u]ltimately the novel is about American history” (Brucoli xv). The themes and topics in *Ragtime* make it also a novel about American history. The events and emotions of the novel not only capture the era in which the plot is set, but also transcend time. Doctorow believes “that history, as insufficient and poorly accommodated as it may be, is one of the few things we have in common” (Levine 13) and is an important bond among America’s citizens.

Clearly, the idea of preserving an account of social problems for generations other than their own is one that is important to both authors. Their novels capture the events and problems of historic eras for future readers to see the commonality among the past, present, and future. Even in their historical settings, however, *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime* record and observe problems that moved beyond the text and time of their pages. Fitzgerald’s and Doctorow’s fiction allows their plots and characters to have relevancy beyond their text and original audience. Though the settings of *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime* are significant in both novels, they are not vital for Fitzgerald and Doctorow to convey their message about the flaws of the American Dream and justice. The plots and

characters of each novel could be lifted out of their settings, and the novels would still reveal the truth of what each author says about the failure of American justice. The trials and injustices with which Jay Gatsby, Coalhouse Walker, Jr., Daisy, Sarah, and the children are confronted would be no less powerful if their stories were set in the 1960's, present day America, or any other time period, demonstrating that both novels are strongly rooted in American culture and truthfully reveal the underlying problems of the ideas that compose America's identity.

In conveying messages that have been and continue to be relevant to American society, *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime* serve to warn against America's flaws and myths. In their quests for the American Dream and justice, Jay Gatsby and Coalhouse Walker, Jr. represent all who seek the Dream, while Tom and Daisy Buchanan and Father serve to remind readers of the opposition that the elite class in America poses to people like Gatsby and Coalhouse, for they "are figures of fiction but also of American philosophy" (Berman 11). In creating stories and characters that not only resemble each other but also stand for something more significant than themselves, Fitzgerald and Doctorow are able to demonstrate that the ideas America is founded on—the American Dream and justice—are frail and mythic, not the solid ideals that popular culture has portrayed them to be. More importantly through, by having similar plots, themes, and warnings in their novels, Fitzgerald and Doctorow show that history can be cyclical. From the perspective of the modern reader, the problems of America shown in the novels are still the problems of today. If the problems that Fitzgerald had written about in 1925 had been solved, then Doctorow would not have written about the same problems in 1975. If both authors had only been conjecturing about the flaws of America, then current readers would not be

able to identify with the, characters and action of their novels. The representation of the reality of the Dream that each author gives reinforces the opinion that “the American dream, stretched between a golden past and a golden future, is always betrayed by a desolate present” (Bewley 22). As it stands, *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragtime* continue to represent the best of American literature, as they raise awareness of the flaws of America and remind readers that they are “boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (Fitzgerald 189), historically connected by our prejudices and short comings.

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