Early US Jewish Women Immigrant Writers: 1900-1939

Among the vast body of early 20th-century literature by Jewish immigrant women — Eastern and Western European, Sephardic and U.S. born — there exist many texts that address the tensions between maintaining cultural and religious Jewish identity and recognizing the necessity and/or inevitability of integration, acculturation, and assimilation. Through their memoirs, autobiographies and fiction, women writers of this period reflect a variety of Jewish attitudes toward the "old home" in Europe and toward their new U.S. surroundings. Much of their writing also documents a quest to realize their full potential and gauges how this potential is limited or expanded in Jewish and non-Jewish communities on both sides of the Atlantic. This search for self — as a Jew, as an American, and as a woman — parallels a search for a voice and a language that can articulate the needs of each identity.

It would be misleading, however, to assume that Jewish identity was a sole preoccupation for all writers. Many addressed issues inherent in American society and in western societies in general and not specific to Jewish culture or identity. Their work will also be examined in relation to their vision of America and in contrast to more consciously Jewish writers.

The majority of the texts were written in English. But since many Eastern-European immigrants also produced a rich American Yiddish literature, a number of Yiddish women writers in translation (with original texts provided) are included for discussion. These Yiddish stories will be analyzed for the ways they mirror or contradict writing in English and for the ways the chosen language intersects with issues of gender. Fiction by two male writers will provide students with still another point of comparison of how Jewish women's immigrant experiences have been represented in American literature.

Together with supportive secondary materials, texts will be discussed from multiple perspectives: their historical context, their genre and literary achievement, their depiction of European and U.S. Jewish experiences, their attitude to Jewish and gentile communities, their authors' awareness of gender issues and their use/rejection of anti-Semitic and gender stereotypes.
Required Texts & Films

Texts that are out of print are readily available from amazon, alibris, Strand Bookstore

Antin, Mary. *The Promised Land* (1912)

Antler, Joyce ed. *America and I: Short Stories by American Jewish Women Writers* (1991) oop (A & I in syllabus)

Cahan, Abraham. *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories* (1896)


Ferber, Edna. *A Peculiar Treasure* (1939) oop


Gold, Michael. *Jews Without Money* (1930)

Simon, Kate. *Bronx Primitive: Portraits in a Childhood* (1972)

Yezierska, Anzia. *Bread Givers* (1925)

-----*The Open Cage*, ed. Alice Kessler-Harris (1979)

Film: Joan Micklin Silver. *Hester Street* (1975) (Barnard Media Center)

COURSE REQUIREMENTS & GUIDELINES

(a) Class attendance and class participation: The seminar relies on the active participation of all students. Bring all texts to class—including hard copies of texts on Courseworks—and be ready to engage with other students in discussions on the primary and secondary readings.

(b) Class presentation: A one 15-minute class presentation on an assigned reading(s) and secondary materials. Do not read an essay. Do not summarize. The presentation should offer the class significant background on the text and author, interpretative suggestions for discussion as well as relevant questions to be explored.

Plan your presentation carefully. Time yourself. You will only have 15 minutes for the presentation and no more.

Create an outline of your presentation (not more than one side of one page) to be distributed to the class at the beginning of your talk. Also, include a list of questions that the class should address as well as 4 references that you researched. Be ready to lead class discussion.
A student giving an oral presentation is not required to submit a response essay for that day and may not submit a paper on the topic covered by the texts.

(c) Current journal/newspaper presentation: A 5-minute presentation on a relevant journal/newspaper article. The article should focus on American Jewish women and should address directly or indirectly issues of gender in the arts or topics related to class readings.

Book/film/theater/museum reviews or profiles and interviews with American Jewish women in the arts are appropriate. Possible resources: Bridges magazine, Lillith, The Forward, The Jewish Week, Nextbook, general, local newspapers, etc.

Check websites of these and other newspaper/journals.

Post articles by Monday 10 AM (before Tues. class) in “Weekly Articles” – Begin title of file with Monday's date followed by abbreviated title of article, and student's last name. Articles should not run more than 2-3 pages.

This presentation does not exempt the student from either the response essay or from submitting a paper for that session's readings.

(d) Two Response Essays:

Before: A response essay of about 500+ words + 2 questions + 4 words/ideas, references that need research and/or definition—due the day of required reading to be handed in at the beginning of class. In addition to raising issues about the readings, the essay should reflect a mastery of all the readings. Avoid summaries and simple elaborations on “why I liked or hated this book.”

After: A response essay of about 250+ words on the class discussion. This can be further exploration of issues raised, critique of discussion, complaints about omissions by students and professor. This should be e-mailed as an attachment to the professor no later than Thursday 6 p.m.

Both essays will be evaluated on the originality of ideas and critical insights, not on writing or style and will receive numerical grades 1-10, 10 being the highest.

(e) Three papers: (1250-1500 words--no longer) on a primary text. Papers should, when appropriate, refer to secondary sources and previously assigned works and should address a significant theme or issue; analyze (not summarize) it succinctly. These papers will be graded on both the argument and the writing (letter grade).

Papers may only be submitted on the day of discussion. No late papers will be accepted. You must skip at least one week between papers.

A revision is permitted, but not required, for the first paper only and should be submitted the week after it is returned. No late rewrites will be accepted.

Students can select the works they write on. But they must submit papers by the following dates: Paper I—Feb. 12, Paper II—March 12, Paper 3—April 30.

(f) One conference with instructor before Feb 12. Office Hours: Tues. 11:15-1 or by appointment. Telephone conferences are also an option.
SYLLABUS

Session 1—Jan 22—Introduction


Session 2--Jan 29—The Old Country in English & Yiddish
Mary Antin and Fradel Shtock

Mary Antin--"Malinke's Atonement" in The Atlantic (1911) (C)

Fradel Schtok--"The Shorn Head/Opgeshnitene hor" (1919) (English, Yiddish—C)
--- "The Veil/Der shlayer" (1919) (English—FT; Yiddish—C)

Baum, et al. The Jewish Woman in America: "Preface" and Ch. 1 (C)

Session 3--Feb. 5—The New Home in Yiddish
Yente Serdatzky

Yente Serdatzky--"Unchanged/Umgebitn" (1913) (English—FT, Yiddish—C)
--- "Confession/Vide" (1913) (English & Yiddish—C)


Irena Klepfisz. "Queens of Contradiction: A Feminist Introduction to Yiddish Women Writers" in FT.

Session 4--Feb. 12—Abraham Cahan’s “Yekl” (1896) and Ghetto Girls

Last day to submit Paper I

Abraham Cahan--"Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto" (1896)

Baum, et al.--The Jewish Woman in America, Ch. 2 (C)

Hyman, Paula “Gender and the Immigrant Jewish Experience in the United States” from Jewish Women in Historical Perspective, Judith Baskin, ed. (1991) (C)

“The Forward” (a brief history)

Riv-Ellen Prell--“Introduction” and "Ghetto Girls and Jewish Immigrant Desire" from Fighting to be Americans: Jews, Gender and the Anxiety of Assimilation (1991) (C)

Film—Hester Street—Joan Micklin Silver (1975) (available in Media Center—watch only after reading "Yekl")
**Session 5--Feb. 19—Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912)**

Mary Antin—“The Lie” in *The Atlantic* (1913) (short story) (C)

Mary Antin—*The Promised Land* (1912)—Preface and Chs. 1-7


**Session 6--Feb. 26—*The Promised Land* (cont’d)**

Mary Antin—*The Promised Land* (1912)—Chs. 8-20; “How I Wrote The Promised Land"

Burch, C. Beth. "Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* and the Unspoken Failure of Assimilation," in *Studies in American Jewish Literature*. 12, 36-41. (C)

Baum, et al. *The Jewish Woman in America*, Chs. 3-4 (C)


**Session 7--March 5—Edna Ferber**

Edna Ferber—"The Girl Who Went Right" (1918) (A & I)

Edna Ferber—*A Peculiar Treasure* (1939) Chapters 1-10


**Session 8--March 12—Edna Ferber (cont’d)**

**Last Day to submit Paper 2**

Edna Ferber—*A Peculiar Treasure* (1939) Chapters 11-22


Session 9--Tues. March 19—Spring Break

Session 10--March 26—1st day of Passover

Session 11--April 2—Anzia Yezierska’s—The Bread Givers (1925)

Anzia Yezierska. *Bread Givers*. 1925

Baum, et al. *The Jewish Woman in America*, Chs. 5-6 (C)


Session 12--April 9—Anzia Yezierska (cont’d)


Session 13—April 16—Fannie Hurst

Fannie Hurst. "Seven Candles" (1923) (A & I)

Vera Caspary. The White Girl (1929) (e-book—in C)


Session 14—April 23—Michael Gold

Michael Gold. Jews Without Money (1930)

Michael Brewster Folsom—“The Education of Michael Gold” in Proletarian Writers of the Thirties, David Madden, ed. (1968).

Session 15—April 30—Jewish Reconsiderations

Last Day to Submit Paper 3

Celia Dropkin. "A Dancer/A tentserin" (1935) (English--FT, Yiddish—C)

Miriam Raskin. "At a Picnic/Oyf a piknik" (1941) (English--FT, Yiddish-C)

Kate Simon. Bronx Primitive: Portraits in a Childhood (1972)