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# GREAT JEWISH WRITERS

(Ethnicity and Literary Texts)

JSP/LIT/REL 131 & ETS 184

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## Overview

A wide-angle panorama of great stories written by Jewish authors, including Kohelet, S. Y. Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, Franz Kafka, S. Y. Agnon, Elie Wiesel, and Yiddish women writers. Topics include ancient biblical wisdom, shtetl life, superstition, modernization, alienation, rebellion against authority, radical textualism, love, marriage, and the Nazi genocide.

Our literary approach to works in the Jewish literary tradition emphasizes interconnections between theme and rhetoric. Immersion in texts, a particular tendency in traditional Jewish circles, sometimes appears as an escape from Jews' powerlessness in the outside world. The strategy has limitations.

## Interactive Method

To ensure that we are all on the same page, short assignments will be due before each class session (submitted on Blackboard before 8 a.m.). Answer the questions listed below! By reading carefully and writing 100-200 words, you will keep on schedule and come to class with something to contribute. Post your analysis on the Discussion Forum in Blackboard under "Discussions" and read other students' postings. One advantage of this method is that it makes a final exam superfluous, because everyone will have completed the reading, writing, and participation requirements for the course.

## Goals

While learning about Jewish literature and ethnic literary traditions in this course, students develop skills such as close reading and rhetorical analysis, critical thinking, and incisive scholarly writing.

If you take this course seriously, responsibly completing all assignments, it could change the way you read and write; it could even change your life.

## How to Succeed in this Course

- attend all class sessions, take notes (by hand, not computer), participate actively, and ask questions;
- buy the books at the beginning of the semester and start to browse in them; print out all of the readings that have been posted on Blackboard;
- read the assigned texts carefully and critically, marking important passages (preferably in pencil) and writing marginal comments that will help you participate in class discussion; look up unfamiliar words or expressions; write down questions that occur to you;
- post your short analyses in answer to the daily class questions on Blackboard, and read other students' posts;
- work ahead of schedule on assignments, leaving time to enjoy the readings, think about them, write your analyses, and revise your submissions;
- meet with the instructors to review your writing and learn how to improve your writings by revising, incorporating the suggestions you have received.

## Texts (in order of appearance):

Alter, Robert. *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*. New York: Norton, 1997.

*Classic Yiddish Stories of S. Y. Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and I. L. Peretz*. Ed. Ken Frieden. Trans. Ken Frieden, Ted Gorelick, and Michael Wex. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004.

Kafka, Franz. *The Complete Stories*. Ed. Nahum N. Glatzer. New York: Schocken, 1983 [or subsequent Schocken editions of *The Complete Stories*].

Agnon, S. Y. *A Book that Was Lost: Thirty-Five Stories* [this edition preferred]. Ed. Alan Mintz, Anne Golomb Hoffman, and Nahum N. Glatzer. New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2008.

Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Trans. Marion Wiesel. New York: Hill and Wang, 2006.

Appelfeld, Aharon. *Badenheim 1939*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001.

Keret, Etgar. *Four Stories*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010.

*The Exile Book of Yiddish Women Writers*. Ed. Frieda Johles Forman. Toronto: Exile Editions, 2013.

## Schedule

- 30 Aug. Introduction to Jewish literature. Is “Jewish literature” an ethnic literary tradition? Discuss Jewish radical textualism, interpretation, and world reference.
- Biblical Wisdom Literature: Ecclesiastes (PDF on Blackboard)  
Robert Alter’s edition of *The Wisdom Books* is recommended, not required. As you read the selection and prepare for class on Thursday, write a short analysis in answer to the question and post it on Blackboard.
- 1 Sept. Biblical Wisdom Literature: Ecclesiastes (Hebrew *Kohelet*)  
*Write a 100- to 200-word analysis in answer to one of these questions:*  
**#1** What world view is represented by Ecclesiastes? What does Ecclesiastes tell us to do? Does Kohelet foster a “seize the day” approach to life?  
*Post your analysis in the Discussion Forum on Blackboard!*
- 6 Sept. Genesis 11-22: From the Tower of Babel to Abraham and Isaac  
**#2** Analyze what appear to be “gaps” in the biblical narratives (e.g., lack of represented psychology). How do the stories of Babel and of Abraham present different views of success or greatness?
- 8 Sept. Genesis 38-50: Joseph and Pharaoh  
**#3** What is Joseph’s method of dream interpretation? Sibling rivalry and threats to children and descendants are two major issues in Genesis; how does the story of Joseph try to resolve them?
- 13 Sept. Proverbs 1-10 (PDF on Blackboard) Print it out and bring it to class!  
**#4** Respond to one of these questions: 1) What is the relationship between fear of God and knowledge? 2) How does physical place/setting relate to the feminine forms portrayed in proverbs? 3) Does proverbs portray a competing moral system to Ecclesiastes?
- 15 Sept. S. Y. Abramovitsh, “Fishke the Lame,” sections 1-3, in *Classic Yiddish Stories*, pp. 32-37. Also read Binshtok’s essay, pp. 181-201.  
**#5** Write about the significance of Alter’s mistake.
- 20 Sept. S. Y. Abramovitsh, “Fishke the Lame,” section 4-end, pp. 38-54.  
**#6** Pay attention to all of the different narrative voices in this novella, and discuss how they express different social classes.
- 22 Sept. Sholem Aleichem, from *Tevye the Dairyman*: “Hodel,” in *Classic Yiddish Stories*, pp. 57-73.  
**#7** Why does Tevye quote incessantly?  
In class: Film clips from the Yiddish film *Tevye* (1939)

- 27 Sept. Sholem Aleichem, from *Tevye the Dairyman*: “Chava,” in *Classic Yiddish Stories*, pp. 74-88  
**#8** Analyze one of Tevye’s quotations. Does he quote correctly? How does he give the passage new meaning in a new context? Film clips from *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971) and *Get Thee Out* (1991)
- 29 Sept. I. L. Peretz, from the Hasidic Stories: “Kabbalists” and “The Rebbe’s Pipe,” in *Classic Yiddish Stories*, pp. 147-151 and 158-162.  
**#9** Give examples of narrative irony that serves a critical purpose.
- 4 Oct. I. L. Peretz, “Teachings of the Hasidim,” in *Classic Yiddish Stories*, pp. 152-157.  
**#10** The narrator is a disciple of the Rebbe, but Peretz was not hasidic. How does Peretz counterbalance the biases of the narrator?
- 6 Oct. Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer: “An Imperial Message,” “The Great Wall of China,” “On Parables,” pp. 4-5, 235-249, 457.  
**#11** What is the relationship between “An Imperial Message” and the story in which it appears, “The Great Wall of China”?
- 11 Oct. Franz Kafka, “The Hunter Gracchus” followed by “A Fragment,” pp. 226-234. **#12** What is Gracchus’ view of “coherence,” and how does it relate to this story and fragment?
- 13 Oct. Franz Kafka, “A Country Doctor,” pp. 220-225. **#13** How does Kafka create the aura of a dream narrative? What does this dream reveal?
- 18 Oct. Midterm Exam
- 20 Oct. S. Y. Agnon, “The Tale of the Scribe,” pp. 177-193.  
**#14** How does the narrator view Raphel’s devotion to the Torah? Or: Make a detailed diagram of the characters’ living space.
- 25 Oct. S. Y. Agnon, “The Lady and the Peddler,” pp. 209-221.  
**#15** Is this a story of Gothic horror, or is it an allegory with another level of meaning?
- 27 Oct. S. Y. Agnon, “To the Doctor,” “To Father’s House,” and “Friendship,” pp. 369-371, 433-436, 441-446.  
**#16** What might justify calling these stories “Kafkaesque”?
- 1 Nov. Aharon Appelfeld’s “Badenheim 1939,” pp. 1-18.  
**#17** Analyze the allegorical significance of one character.
- 3 Nov. Aharon Appelfeld’s “Badenheim 1939,” pp. 19-30.  
**#18** Analyze the allegorical significance of another character.

- 8 Nov. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, pp. 3-46.  
#19 Discuss illusions or the narrator's ironic tone
- 10 Nov. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, pp. 47-97.  
#20 How does the narrative present Eliezer's loss of faith?
- 15 Nov. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, pp. 98-115.  
#21 Analyze the representation of fathers and sons.
- 20-27 Nov. **Thanksgiving Break**
- 29 Nov. Lili Berger, "The Teacher Zaminski and his Pupil Rifkele," and Sarah Hamer-Jacklyn, "She Found an Audience" (1954), from *The Exile Book of Yiddish Women Writers*, pp. 3-13, 103-114.  
#22 Analyze the difference between presenting women's experience by means of third-person and first-person narrative.
- 1 Dec. Rachel Brokhes, "The Shop" (1922-24), from *The Exile Book of Yiddish Women Writers*.  
#23 Analyze the use of narrative voice or different points of view.
- 6 Dec. Rachel Korn, "Shadows" (1957), from *The Exile Book of Yiddish Women Writers*.  
#24 Analyze the effect of juxtaposing multiple stories.
- 8 Dec. Etgar Keret, *Four Stories*.  
#25 Analyze how Keret uses the perspective or narrative voice of children to create his literary effects.

### Requirements and Grading

Twenty-five 100-200 word papers (60% of grade); careful preparation of readings, regular attendance, and class participation (25% of grade); midterm examination (15% of grade). If students do not show in class that they are reading attentively, we reserve the right to introduce quizzes and a final examination.

### Extra Credit

There may be opportunities for you to earn extra credit by attending pertinent lectures on Jewish Studies outside of class. After you go to an event of this kind, submit a one-paragraph synopsis to receive credit.

### Attendance

Your final grade will be adversely affected if you miss more than two classes. Save these permissible absences for when you really need them!

## Plagiarism

Always acknowledge your sources, because plagiarism is a serious offense. Don't even think of taking anything off the web without using quotation marks. It's unethical, as easy for professors to catch as it is for students to steal, and the consequence is a failing grade. Or, in other words:

“The Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy holds students accountable for the integrity of the work they submit. Students should be familiar with the Policy and know that it is their responsibility to learn about instructor and general academic expectations with regard to proper citation of sources in written work. The policy also governs the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments as well as the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verifications of participation in class activities. Serious sanctions can result from academic dishonesty of any sort.” Further information at <http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>.

## Disability-Related Accommodations

“If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS), to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. ODS is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations and will issue Accommodation Authorization Letters to students with documented disabilities, as appropriate. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact ODS as soon as possible.” For further information, see the ODS website, <http://disabilityservices.syr.edu/>

## Please Note

*Cell phones, laptops, and other electronic devices may not be used in class unless approved by Ken Frieden or Mitchell Moreau. If a student uses an electronic device in class, that student will be marked absent, because in this class we study texts. “Text is not a verb!”*