

JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF AMERICA
GRADUATE SCHOOL

Fall 2009

Prof. David G. Roskies

Lit. 5217x **Schlemiels and Shlimazls: Sholem Aleichem and the
Comic Tradition in Yiddish**
Tues. 5:40-7:30

Office hours: Thurs 10:00-12:00 or by appointment
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Aims of the Course:

The course will survey Sholem Aleichem's comic art with an eye towards its folkloric base and use of traditional materials. Lying at the core of Sholem Aleichem's humor is the fault-line between what is being communicated and how it is communicated; between fixed, closed, immutable forms, and the unfinalizability of life; between divine promise and facts on the ground; between hard-nosed women and starry-eyed men; between them and us.

Because this course is aimed at two kinds of students--those with enthusiasm and curiosity but no prior knowledge of Yiddish and those who are already hooked--the readings will be supplemented by the best of Sholem Aleichem criticism and scholarship. Students with a reading knowledge of Yiddish are encouraged to attend a supplementary 2-hour tutorial given each week, time TBA.

Requirements and Evaluation:

(1) **Midterm paper** (5-8 pages), due Oct. 29th at 10:00 am. Worth 25% of the final grade.

(2) **Take home exam.** A take home exam will be provided at the next-to-last class. You will answer three (of five or more) questions that will be the equivalent of three medium-length essays (about 4 pages each). If you prefer, you may substitute an essay of about 15-20 pages. Both will be due on **December 15**. 75% of final grade.

Readings: A course packet is available from Broadway Copy Center.

The following books are available for sale at the JTS Bookstore:

Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman & the Railroad Stories*, Schocken, \$15.95.

The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl & Sheyne-Sheyndl and Motl, the Cantor's Son. Hillel Halkin, trans. Yale Univ. Press, 2002. \$40.00.

Readings marked by an asterisk appear in the course packet. The secondary reading, marked (**BB**) in the syllabus, is available on-line via Blackboard.

Abbreviation: *SACT* = *SA and the Critical Tradition* (=Prooftexts 6 [1986]).

The "optional" readings are required of all graduate students.

8 Sept. **Hat Tricks**

Iber a hitl / On Account of a Hat (1913)

Required: David G. Roskies, "Inside Sholem Shachnah's Hat," *Prooftexts* 21 (2001): 39-56. (**BB**)

Optional: Joseph Sherman, "'God and the Tsar': Ironic Ambiguity and Restorative Laughter in Gogol's 'Overcoat' and Sholem Aleykhem's 'On Account of a Hat,'" *The Waking Sphinx: South African Essays on Russian Culture*, ed. Henrietta Mondry (Johannesburg, 1989), 59-82. (**BB**)

15 Sept. **"As My Mother Says": The Woman's Art of Quotation**

Funem yarid / From the Fair, chap. 45*
Menakhem-Mendl: Letters of Sheyne-Sheyndl
London / Londons: The Odessa Exchange (1892)
Papirlekh / Stocks & Bonds: The Yehupetz Exchange (1896)

Required: Robert A. Rothstein, "Gender in Epistolary Discourse: Sholem-Aleykhem's *Menakhem-Mendl* and Sheyne-Shyendl," MS. (**BB**)
Idem, "Proverb," *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (Yale, 2008). (**BB**)

Optional: Dov Sadan, "Three Foundations [Sholem Aleichem and the Yiddish Literary Tradition]," *SACT*, 55-63. (**BB**)

22 Sept. **Exegetical Parody: The Male Art of Quotation**

Readings: Tevye der milkhiker / *Tevye the Dairyman*:
 Dos groyse gevins / *Tevye Strikes It Rich* (1895)
 A boydem / *Tevye Blows a Small Fortune* (1899)
 Hayntike kinder / *Today's Children* (1899)

Required: Hillel Halkin, "Introduction" to *Tevye the Dairyman*
Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (California, 1990), pp. 102-7.

Optional: Michael Stern, "Tevye's Art of Quotation," *SACT* 79-96.

Sept. 29 **Yentes and Other Women**

Dos tepl / The Pot (1901)*
Gitl Purishkevitsh (1911)*

Required: Hana Wirth-Nesher, "Voices of Ambivalence in SA's Monologues," *Prooftexts* 1 (1981): 158-71. (BB)

Optional: Victor Erlich, "A Note on the Monologue as a Literary Form: Sholem Aleichem's *Monologn*: A Test Case," *For Max Weinreich on His Seventieth Birthday* (The Hague, 1964), with supplements. (BB)

Nov. 6 **The Monomaniacal Mind: Male Voices**

Ayznban-geshikhtes / Railroad Stories:

Der gliklekhster in Kodni / The Happiest Man in All Kodny (1909)

Gimnazye / High School (1902)

Funem priziv / High School (1902)

Der nisref / Burned Out (1903)

* A mentsh fun Buenos-ayres / The Man from Buenos Aires (1909)

Required: Meyer Wiener, "On Sholem Aleichem's Humor" (1941)*

Optional: Dan Miron, "The Dark Side of SA's Humor," MS. (BB)

13 Oct. **Myths of the Mundane: Jewish Children**

Dos meserl / The penknife (1888)*

Di fon / The Flag (1900)*

Der oyrekhn / The Guest (1906)*

Required: David G. Roskies, "Mythologist of the Mundane," in *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Harvard University Press, 1995). pp. 147-75. (BB)

Optional: Khone Shmeruk, "Sholem-Aleykhem un di onheybn fun der yidisher literatur far kinder," *Di goldene keyt* 112 (1984): 39-53.

Oct. 20 **The Schlemiel: The Comedy of Character**

The Letters of Menakem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl

Required: Ruth R. Wisse, "Ironical Balance for Psychic Survival," *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (Chicago, 1971), chap. 3. (BB)

Optional: Max Erik, "Menakhem-Mendl (A Marxist Critique)," *SACT* 23-39. (BB)

Oct. 27 **The Comic Quest**

Der farkishefter shnayder / The Haunted Tailor (1901)*

Oylem-habe / Eternal Life (1902)*

Af peysekh aheym / Home for Passover (1903)*

Required: Ruth Wisse, *Sholem Aleichem and the Art of Communication* (Syracuse, 1979). (BB)

Oct. 29 **Midterm paper due**

Making it Home: The Tragicomic quest in Sholem Aleichem's stories.

Situated between home and exile, the men in SA's stories are always trying to make it home in time. But life conspires against them. Some succeed and most do not.

Choosing one of the readings for Oct. 27, but reading it against the other two, explore and explain the hero's quest, its structure, its social-psychological context, and its outcome.

Nov. 3 **Kasrilevke: The Comedy of Place**

The Fools of Chelm*
Dreyfus in Kasrilevke (1901)*
Oysgetreyslt / A Yom Kippur Scandal (1902)*
Di groyse behole fun di kleyne mentshtelekh / The Great Panic of the Little People (1904)*
A peysakhdiike ekspropriatsye / A Passover Expropriation (1908)*

Required: Dan Miron, "Sholem-Aleykhem: Person, Persona, Presence," *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Essays in the Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse, 2000), chap. 4. PJ 5129 A3 S5 Z7642 2000. (BB)

Optional: Yekhezkl Dobrushin, "Tsvey grunt-oysgabn fun Sholem-Aleykhems Kleyne mentshelekh mit kleyne hasoges," *Visnshaftelkhe yorbikher* 1 (1929). (BB)

Nov. 10 **The Comedy of Deceit**

Stories of Hershele Ostropolier*
Menakhem-Mendl:
Shlim-shlimazl / Always the Loser: Menakhem-Mendl the Insurance Agent (1900-1909)
Railroad Stories:
Stantsye Baranovitsh / Baranovich Station (1909)
A zeks un zekhtsik / A Game of Sixty-Six (1910)
Der talis-kotn / The *Tallis Koton* (1910)
Nito keyn mazl / Hard Luck (1910)

Nov. 17 **The Comedy of Dislocation**

The Railroad Stories:
Tsu di lezer / To the Reader
Der leydikgeyer / The Slowpoke Express (1909)

Der nes fun Hoyshane-rabe / The Miracle of Hoshana Rabba(1909)
A khasene on klezmer / The Wedding that Came Without its
Band (1909)
Der tsenter / The Tenth Man (1910)
Driter klas / Third Class (1902)

Required: Leah V. Garrett, *Journeys beyond the Pale: Yiddish Travel Writing in the Modern World* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), chap. 3. PJ5120.7 T73 G38 2003. (BB)

Optional: Dan Miron, "Journey to the Twilight Zone: On SA's Railroad Stories," *The Image of the Shtetl*, chap. 7. (BB)

Nov. 24 **The Comedy of Endurance**

Tevye:
Hodl (1905); Chava (1906); Shprintze (1907);
Lekh-lekho (1914)

Required: Ruth R. Wisse, "The Comedy of Endurance," *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey Through Language and Culture* (The Free Press, 2000), chap. 1. (BB)

Optional: Janet Hadda, "Shprintse," in *Passionate Women Passive Men: Suicide in Yiddish Literature* (SUNY, 1988), 43-55. (BB)

Dec. 1 **The Comedy of Innocence**

Sholem Aleichem - *Motl, the Cantor's Son, part I* (1907)

Required: Naomi B. Sokoloff, "Sholem Aleichem -- Mottel, the Cantor's Son," *Imagining the Child in Modern Jewish Fiction* (JHUP, 1992), chap. 3. PN842 S6 1992. (BB)

Optional: Dan Miron, "Bouncing Back: Destruction and Recovery in Sholem-Aleykhem's *Motl peyse dem khazns*," *The Image of the Shtetl*, chap. 6. (BB)

Dec. 8 **Democracy and the multilingual muse**

Sholem Aleichem - *Motl, the Cantor's Son, part II* (1914-1916)
Preface to American ed. of *Ale verk* (1912)*
Sholem Aleichem in America: The Story of a Culture Hero (YIVO, 1990)*

Required: Lawrence Alan Rosenwald, "More than an echo, or, English in Yiddish in America," *Multilingual America: Language and the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, 2008), chap. 3 (BB)

Optional: Khone Shmeruk, "Sholem Aleichem in America," *YIVO Annual* 20 (1991): 211-38. (BB)