

JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF AMERICA
GRADUATE SCHOOL

Fall 2003

Prof. David G. Roskies

Lit. 5217x *Sholem Aleichem: The Comedy of Dissolution*

Objectives: To understand how comedy turns one thing into another: a goat into a gilgul, losers into victors, grown-ups into children, a pot into a parable, a Gentile into a Jew, Scripture into nonsense, nonsense into Scripture, disaster into miracle; the end into the beginning; and all on account of a Russian Jew named Solomon Rabinovitch, who turned himself into Sholem Aleichem.

Requirements: Three 8-10 pp. writing assignments chosen from among the suggested topics. These papers are due on the assigned date.

Logistics: Whosoever is doing the reading in English should purchase the following two books, which are available from Labyrinth Books, 536 W 112th Street. Everything else is in your course packet, Secondary readings are on reserve.

1. *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*. Hillel Halkin, trans. Schocken, 1987. Paperback.
2. *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl & Sheyne-Sheyndl and Motl, the Cantor's Son*. Hillel Halkin, trans. Yale Univ. Press, 2002. Hardback.

Office hours: Thursdays 1:00-3:00; Unterberg 506. daroskies@jtsa.edu, ext. 8914.

Scheduling: Please note that the October 17 class has been rescheduled for Thursday at a time TBA.

5 Sept. **Solomon Rabinovitch, The Letters and the Life**

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.

12 Sept. **The Comic Quest**

דער האוצר / האוצר (1889)

דער פֿאַרפֿישױפֿטער שניידער / The Haunted Tailor (1901)

Zoya Prizel, "The Narrator in SA's 'The Enchanted Tailor'," *Yiddish* 2:4 (1977); 55-60 - article on reserve.

Dov Sadan, "Three Foundations," *SA and the Yiddish Literary Tradition* (=Proof texts 6 [1986]: 55-63) - article on reserve.

19 Sept **The Comic Capitalist**

+מנחם-מענדל / *The Letters of Menakem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl*

Max Erik, "Menakhem-Mendl (A Marxist Critique)," *SA and the Critical Tradition* (=Proof texts 6 [1986]): 23-39) - article on reserve.

Dan Miron, "A Dash for Freedom: Sampling Menakhem-Mendl." in *The Image of the Shtetl*, chap. 5.

Ruth R. Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (Chicago, 1971), chap. 3. PN 6149 J4W5 1971.

26 Sept. **Erev Rosh Hashanah** [no class]

3 October **Exegetical Comedy**

Tevye the Dairyman, trans. Hillel Halkin:

דאָס גרויסע געוויקס / Tevye Strikes It Rich (1895)

plus orig. version from *Hoyzfraynd* 4 (1895)

אַ בוידעם / Tevye Blows a Small Fortune (1899)

היינטיקע קינדער / Today's Children (1899)

Hillel Halkin, "Introduction" to *Tevye the Dairyman*
 Michael Stern, "Tevye's Art of Quotation," *SA and the Critical Tradition*
 [=Prooftexts 6 [1986]]:79-96 - article on reserve.

10 October **The Monomaniacal Mind**
 Erev Sukkot [Regular classes]

ווען איך בין ראטשילד / If I Were Rothschild (1901)
 דאָס טעפל / The Pot (1901)
 יוסף / Joseph (1905)

Ken Frieden, *Classic Yiddish Fiction: Abramovitch, Sholem Aleichem, & Peretz* (Albany, 1995), chap. 7. PJ5124 F75 1995, .
 Hana Wirth-Nesher, "Voices of Ambivalence in SA's Monologues,"
Prooftexts 1 (1981): 158-71 - xerox on reserve.

16 Oct. **The Comedy of Endurance**
 Make-up Class

Hodl (1905),
 Chava (1905),
 Shprintze (1907)
 טביה פֿאַרט קיין ארץ-ישראל / Tevye Leaves for the Land of Israel (1909)

Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (California, 1990), pp. 102-7.
 PJ 5113 H33 1990,

Ruth R. Wisse, "The Comedy of Endurance," *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey Through Language and Culture* (The Free Press, 2000),
 chap. 1. PN842 W57 2000.

17 Oct. **Hoshana Rabba** [no class]

TBA Screening of Maurice Schwartz's *Tevye* (USA, 1939)

24 Oct. **The Comedy of Childhood**

דאָס מעסערל / The Penknife (1886)

די פֿאַן / The Flag (1900)

דער אורח / The Guest (1906)

David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Harvard University Press, 1995). pp. 147-75.

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

31 Oct. **The Comedy of Dislocation**

מאָטל פייסי דעם חזנס+ / *Motl, the Cantor's Son* (1907-1916) -

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

Khone Shmeruk, "Sholem Aleichem and America," *YIVO Annual* 20 (1991): 211-38 - xerox on reserve.

7 Nov. **Trains, Stories, & Miracles**

אייזנבאן-געשיכטעס / *Railroad Stories*:

To the Reader, The Slowpoke Express, The Miracle of Hoshana Rabba, The Wedding that Came Without its Band, Third Class -

Leah V. Garrett, "*Journeys beyond the Pale: Yiddish Travel Writing in the Modern World* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), chap. 3. PJ 5120.7 T73 G38 2003.

Nov. 14 **Patriarchal Comedy**

שווער צו זיין אַ ייד / It's Hard to Be a Jew (1914)

דאָס גרויסע געווינס / The Jackpot (1915)

Jacob Weitzner, *Sholem Aleichem in the Theater* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994), pp. 111-49. PJ 5129 A3S5 Z885 1994.

21 Nov. **The Comedy of Dissolution**

Railroad Stories - the other 16 tales

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

דן מירון, 'מסע באיזור הדמדומים: אחרית דבר לסיפורי רכבת, סיפורי רכבת, עמ' 227-300.
PJ 5129 A3 S5 K675 1989

28 Nov. THANKSGIVING

5 Dec. **The Artist as Comic Hero**

פֿונעם יריד / *From the Fair: The Autobiography of Sholom Aleichem* (1908-1916), Curt Leviant, trans.

David G. Roskies, "Unfinished Business: Sholem Aleichem's *From the Fair*," *SA and the Critical Tradition* (=Proof texts 6 [1986]): 65-78 - xerox on reserve.

Writing Assignments
(choose any three)

19 Sept. *Menakhem-Mendl* begins with an act of instant transformation. What forces and factors in this novel belie the presumption of change?

10 Oct. Can a treyf pot be rendered kosher? Can a woman's world be redeemed by a man? Can a flawed universe be set aright?

16 Oct. How does Tevye manipulate the retelling in order to give himself the best advantage? How does the natural setting serve as a backdrop and a foil? When does speech no longer rescue the speaker from despair?

31 Oct. How does Motl's perspective cut the trauma of mass immigration down to comic size?

21 Nov. In "The Man from Buenos Aires" a pimp becomes a master performer. Does his performance differ from that of other stand-in storytellers on board the train?

5 Dec. In *From the Fair*, SA returns to his archetypal plot of the comic quest. Is Sholem Nokhem Veviks the hero of that quest or its ironic victim? Is Solomon Rabinovitch the author of that quest or is Sholem Aleichem?