JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF AMERICA

GERSHON KEKST GRADUATE SCHOOL

Fall 2021 Prof. David G. Roskies

**LIT 5217x  *Schlemiels and Shlimazls:***

***Sholem Aleichem and the Comic Tradition in Yiddish***

W. 10:15-12:55

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Office Hours: By appointment



**Course description**: Jewish humor entered into literature thanks to the comic genius of Solomon Rabinovitsh, aka Sholem Aleichem. As Mr. How Do-You-Do, he created a *comédie humaine* that embraced children (especially orphans), market women, country bumpkins, petty merchants, henpecked husbands, star-crossed lovers, gamblers, pimps, greenhorns, dreamers and revolutionaries. While there was a comic tradition that came before and came after, Itzik Manger himself admitted that “There is only one Sholem Aleichem.”

**Course goals**: The goals of this course are (1) to break Jewish humor down into its recognizable parts: character, place and plot; proverbs, jokes, monologues, tag-lines, miscommunication and comic exegesis; (2) to examine the interplay between the what and the how, the open and the closed, the sublime and the ridiculous, and (3) to situate this humor in Jewish time.

**Course objectives**: To discover the meaning of laughter-through-fears.

**Required texts**:

Sholem Aleichem, *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl and Motl, the Cantor’s Son*, translated and with an introduction by Hillel Halkin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

Out-of-print. Available digitally at Columbia, and NYPL

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/0300092466#reader_0300092466>

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

Available for purchase on–line or at Book Culture on 112th Street <https://www.bookculture.com/book/9780805210699>

All other readings are posted on CANVAS

**Expectations & Assessment:** The final grade will be based on four assignments, as follows:

* Three 5-8-pp papers and a creative writing assignment each worth 25% of the final grade.
* All papers are to be submitted via CANVAS.
* The format should be in WORD, printed in 12 pt. Times New Roman, double-spaced.

Because of the Jewish holidays, our course does not begin until October 6th. This is both a challenge and an opportunity: a challenge to cover such a rich topic in only ten sessions and an opportunity to gear up for the course during the month of September. It will also be an opportunity for me to meet with each of you one-on-one. (See below.)

Director Joe Dorman has been kind enough to provide us with free access to his excellent documentary film, *Laughing in the Darkness*. Here you will meet some of Sholem Aleichem’s major interpreters on screen (including yours truly) and also learn indirectly from Dorman himself. (There’s a bar mitzvah picture of him at the very end.)

After viewing this film, please proceed (in chronological order) through the critical writings of Erik, Sadan, Wisse and Miron. So doing, please consider the following questions:

* What drives Sholem Aleichem’s humor? What are its sources?
* How does he make people laugh through their fears?
* How did the critical understanding of Sholem Aleichem’s genius change over time?
* Which of these critical approaches speaks to your interests—and why?

**During the month of September**, please set up an individual meeting time with me via Zoom. At this half-hour meeting, please tell me something about yourself and ask informed questions about your first writing assignment.

I encourage you to set up additional meetings with me as the semester progresses to discuss your third and fourth assignments as well.

**First Writing Assignment** (due Monday September 27): **Approaches to Sholem Aleichem.**

**Midterm Assignment** (due Sunday Nov. 7): **A comparison of Menakhem-Mendl and Tevye**.

* How is each of them at the mercy of historical forces beyond his control?
* How does each of them grapple with his manhood vis-à-vis the women in his life?
* How does the way he communicates (through formal letters, dialogue-in-monologue) shape his sense of himself?

**Third Writing Assignment** (due Wednesday Dec. 8): **Reading “On Account of a Hat”**

* Is this another Holiday Tale or a late addition to the *Railroad Stories*?
* Is Sholem Shachna a classic schlemiel or a shlimazl?
* Is Sholem Shachna Solomon Rabinovitsh in disguise?
* How in the world did Sholem Aleichem turn a “mere anecdote” into a command performance?

**Fourth Writing Assigment** (due December 20). A creative writing assignment in which you retell a true story or rehash an old joke by imitating something that we read in class. Then explain how you went about your writing.

**Academic integrity**

JTS students are expected to bear individual responsibility for their work, to learn the rules and definitions that underlie the practice of academic integrity and to uphold its ideals.

Students are expected to maintain academic integrity and academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. JTS Student Disciplinary Procedures may be found at <http://www.jtsa.edu/academic-integrity>

The JTS policy on disabilities may be found at <http://www.jtsa.edu/students-with->disabilities

September **Approaches to Sholem Aleichem**

Sholem Aleichem: Laughing in the Darkness, directed by Joseph Dorman (USA, 2012), 1 hour 34 mins. <https://vimeo.com/131673774>

Password: kasrilevke

Max Erik, “Menakhem-Mendl [A Marxist Critique],” *Prooftexts* 6 (1986): 23-39.

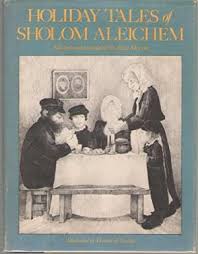
Dov Sadan, “Three Foundations [Sholem Aleichem and the Yiddish Literary Tradition],” *Prooftexts* 6 (1986): 55-63.

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

Dan Miron, “The Dark Side of Sholem Aleichem’s Humor,” *Derekh: Judaica Urbinatensia* 1 (2003): 16-55.

Sept. 27 First Writing Assignment Due: Approaching Sholem Aleichem

Oct 6 **Myths of the Mundane: Jewish Children**



Di fon / The Flag (1900) – bilingual format

Der oyrekh / The Guest (1906) – bilingual format

Zalmen Schneour – Making Jam (1914)

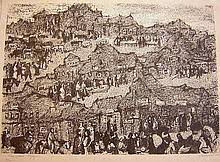
Zalmen Schneour – Stealing Apples

Itzik Manger – The Adventures of Hershel Summerwind (1947) – bilingual format

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.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, “Shtetlspeak: The Triumph of the Dialogical in Zalmen Schneour’s Shklov,”MS.

Oct. 15 **The Comedy of Place**



Ayzik–Meyer Dik – *The Panic, or The Town of Heres*(1868) – bilingual format

Sholem Aleichem – The Town of the Little People (1899) – bilingual format

Sholem Aleichem – Dreyfus in Kasrilevke (1901) – bilingual format

Sholem Aleichem –The Great Panic of the Little People (1904)

Zalmen Schneour – Uncle Uri Reads Newspapers (1913/1929)

David G. Roskies, “Sholem Aleichem and Others: Laughing Off the Trauma of

History,” *Prooftexts* 2 (1982): 53-77.

Ruth R. Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*. Chicago, 1971, pp. 25–49.

Oct. 20  **Love as Comedy**

Sholem Aleichem – *Stempenyu* (1888) – bilingual format

Avraham Novershtern, “Sholem Aleichem’s *Stempenyu*: Speaking through Song”

In geveb.

Naomi Seidman, *The Marriage Plot Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature*. Stanford UP, 2016, ch. 1.

Oct. 27 **The Schlemiel: The Comedy of Character**

Sholem Aleichem - *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl*

Robert A. Rothstein, “Gender in Epistolary Discourse: Sholem-Aleykhem’s Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Shyendl,” MS.

Ruth R. Wisse, “Ironic Balance for Psychic Survival,” *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (Chicago, 1971), chap. 3.



Nov. 3 **The Comic Rashi**

Sholem Aleichem – *Tevye the Dairyman*:

Tevye Strikes It Rich (1895)

Tevye Blows a Small Fortune (1899)

Today’s Children (1899)

Hodl (1905) – bilingual format

Hillel Halkin, “Introduction” to *Tevye the Dairyman*

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

Michael Stern, “Tevye’s Art of Quotation,” *Prooftexts* 6 (1986):79-96.

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Nov. 7 Midterm Assignment Due: A comparison of Menakhem-Mendl and Tevye

Nov. 10 **The Comic Job**

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Sholem Aleichem – *Tevye the Dairyman*:

Chava (1906)

Shprintze (1907)

Tevye Leaves for the Land of Israel (1909)

Lekh-lekho (1914)

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

Nov. 17 **The Monomaniacal Mind**

Dos tepl / The Pot (1901) – bilingual format

Sholem Aleichem – *Railroad Stories*:

The Happiest Man in All Kodny (1909)

High School (1902)

The Man from Buenos Aires (1909)

Schmid, Wolf. 2013 “Skaz,” in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, edited by Peter Hühn et al. <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/skaz>

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.

Hana Wirth-Nesher, “Voices of Ambivalence in SA’s Monologues,” *Prooftexts* 1 (1981): 158-71.

Nov. 24 **The Comedy of Exile**



*The Railroad Stories:*

To the Reader

Third Class (1902)

The Slowpoke Express (1909)

The Miracle of Hoshana Rabba (1909) – bilingual format.

Bananovich Station (1909) – bilingual format

The Wedding that Came Without its Band (1909)

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

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

Dec. 1 **The Comedy of Innocence**

Sholem Aleichem - *Motl, the Cantor’s Son* (1907; 1914-1916)

Naomi B. Sokoloff, “Sholem Aleichem -- *Mottel, the Cantor’s Son*,” *Imagining the Child in Modern Jewish Fiction* (JHUP, 1992), chap. 3.

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

Dec. 8 Final Assignment Due: Reading “On Account of a Hat”

Dec. 8 **Hat Tricks**

On Account of a Hat (1913) – bilingual format

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

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.

**Additional Bibliography**

Jeremy Dauber, *The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem: The Remarkable Life and Afterlife of the Man Who Created Tevye* (New York: Schocken, 2013). PJ5129.A3 S5 Z576 2013.