

LITR 163 Jewish-American Literature
Winter 2015
M. Shichtman
EMAIL: martin.shichtman@emich.edu

Office 613 K
Hours: MW 3:30-5:00
and by appointment
Phone: 734-487-0978

Course Description:

Since arriving in the United States, Jews have found themselves alternatively persecuted and assimilated. They have occupied an uneasy space between being regarded as a racial minority—a scientifically unsupportable claim which, nonetheless, is believed by a majority of Americans, including many Jewish-Americans—and a religious minority. Out of this often awkward relationship with the majority culture, American Jews have fashioned a literature that simultaneously looks back to the Torah, back to the Jewish ghettos of Eastern Europe, as well as forward towards a defining role in the intellectual life of the twenty-first century. In "Jewish American Literature," students will read the poetry, prose, and drama of one of our nation's most vibrant minorities.

The cultural position of American Jews has been the subject of intense discussion (and often angry controversy) among authors and scholars. This course will be no exception. You will undoubtedly hear points of view being presented that will conflict with your own, or that will simply be disturbing. You are encouraged, first of all, to consider the material being presented, and second, *to formulate your own response to it*. I hope this course will be a forum for a great deal of discussion and debate, and I hope that each of you will contribute to a frank, open atmosphere.

Rationale for U.S. Diversity:

Most Americans have little notion as to how much Jewish culture permeates the fabric of our national consciousness. Since September 11, 2001, "God Bless America" has taken on new meaning for a new generation. But we seem to have forgotten that it was a song of celebration authored by a Jewish immigrant, Irving Berlin, for a nation that offered him extraordinary opportunity—even as it came with grudging acceptance. When Jewish-American Carl Reiner created a television show about his experiences as a comedy writer, he had to re-imagine himself as Dick Van Dyke before network television would provide air time. Even now, Jews tend to be portrayed as eccentric outsiders by the media—consider, for example, Debra Messing's Grace Adler on *Will and Grace*. Americans speak Yiddishisms all the time, without even reflecting on their source. "Jewish American Literature" asks students to consider what kinds of contributions Jews have made to American life, and what kinds of struggles they had to endure in order to make those contributions. "Jewish American Literature" meets the U.S. Diversity requirement of the EMU general education curriculum because it demonstrates how Jewish Americans have constructed themselves within a nation that has often been far from accommodating of difference. It asks students to appreciate how literature written by Jews has helped to reconstruct American attitudes about the accommodation of marginalized groups.

Texts: Chametzky, Jules, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, Kathryn Hellerstein. *The Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature*

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*

Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale. My Father Bleeds History*

Films: *An American Tail*

A Night at the Opera

Hester Street

Weeks 1-4 Arrival in America

Readings: Sheldon Harnick, "If I Were a Rich Man"
Emma Lazarus, "In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport;" "1492;"
"The New Colossus"
Abraham Cahan, "A Ghetto Wedding"
Mary Antin, "The Lie"
Letters: "From a 'Greenhorn'" (1906); "Anti-Semitism on the Job"
(1907); "Sexual Harassment in the Workplace" (1907); "Socialist
Freethinking and the Jewish Tradition" (1908); "Staying in
School" (1911); "Returning to Russia" (1917)
An American Tail
Hester Street

Some Topics for Discussion:

Why did European Jews come to America?
What did European Jews expect to find in the United States?
In what ways did the U.S. meet the expectations of European
Jews? In what way did it fail?
How did Jewish Americans deal with being marginalized?

Weeks 5-7 Assimilation and difference:

Readings: Aaron Glanz, "The God of Israel;" "New York"
Michael Gold, "Fifty Cents a Night," from *Jews Without Money*
Irving Berlin, "God Bless America"
Nathanael West, "International Jewish Bankers and Bolsheviks"

Some Topics for Discussion:

What sorts of stereotypes are associated with Jews?
What was life like in America's Jewish ghettos?
In what ways do Jewish-Americans embrace the notion of the
American dream?

Examination #1

Paper #1

- Weeks 8-10 Assimilation and difference (continued):
 Readings: Clifford Odets, *Awake and Sing*
 Muriel Rukeyser, "More of a Corpse than a Woman;" "To be a Jew in the Twentieth Century"
 Delmore Schwartz, "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities"
 Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*
- Weeks 9-14 Achievement and ambivalence
 Readings: H. Leyvik, "To America"
 Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Gimpel the Fool"
 Tillie Olsen, "Tell Me a Riddle"
 Bernard Malamud, "The Magic Barrel"
 Howard Nemerov, "Lot's Wife;" "A Song of Degrees;" "Nicodemus"
 Denise Levertov, "Illustrious Ancestors;" "The Jacob's Ladder;" "Candles in Babylon"
 Allen Ginsberg, "America"
 Phillip Levine, "Zaydee;" "The Sweetness of Bobby Hefka"
 Art Spiegelman, *Maus*
A Night at the Opera

Some Topics for Discussion:

Why do some American Jews reject the prospect of assimilation?
 Why is there in some Jewish-American writings nostalgia for the ghettos of Eastern Europe?
 In what ways do issues of race, gender, and class play into the writings of Jewish Americans?
 What is Jewish self-hatred? Why does it exist?

Examination #2

Paper #2

Evaluation:

"Jewish-American Literature" is a lecture/discussion class. Students are required to attend lectures, read the books, see the films, and participate in classroom discussions. Your learning will be tested by two objective examinations and two short written essays (each approximately three to five pages in length). The objective examinations will cover readings, films, and materials discussed in class. Essay questions will be provided at least two weeks before papers are due and will ask you to expand on classroom discussion. Your grade will be computed thusly

Objective Examinations	25% each
Essays	25% each