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THE EMERGENCE OF THE MODERN WOMAN IN YIDDISH AND WESTERN LITERATURE

City University of New York Ph.D. 1987

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THE EMERGENCE OF THE MODERN WOMAN IN YIDDISH AND WESTERN LITERATURE

by

CHARLOTTE (SHEVA) ZUCKER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1987

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Professor Rosette Lamont

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Supervisory Committee

The City University of New York

To my parents who said,

"ענדיק צו, ייִדן האָבן ליב אַ דאָקטער!"

(Finish up, Jews like a doctor!)

And to Sandy who said,

"Finish, or you'll never forgive yourself!"

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Introduction

Several years ago, I sat in a restaurant in New York with a Yiddish feminist literary critic telling her of my plans to write about The Emergence of the Modern Woman in Yiddish and Western Literature. I would, I told her, concentrate on images of women in literature as portayed by both men and women. Immediately, I noticed that her interest in both me and the project began to wane. No doubt, having hoped to find in me a kindred spirit, one who would contend that the "wommanness" of a writer was more noteworthy than her writerly abilities, she was disappointed to find instead yet another person who would write of Sholem Aleichem and Peretz and Bergelson and other male writers already respectably treated by the Yiddish literary critics. "Why," she said to me with subtle reproach in her voice, "would you want to write about what men have to say about women?"

It was a good question and a relevant one. At the time, I found it hard to answer her, feeling myself something of a traitor to the woman's cause. The truth is that I _had_ wanted to deal with women writers but, to my disappointment, I had found that although there was no dearth of works written by Yiddish female writers, unless I confined myself to poetry—something I did not want or feel able to do—there was no one of the calibre of a Bronte, an Austen, or a Woolf in Western literature or to a Sholem Aleichem, a Bergelson, or even an Opatoshu in Yiddish. Even writers like Kadye Molodowsky or Celia Dropkin who wrote poetry of great emotional power were not able to sustain this level in prose. I do not mean to imply that women wrote no prose of note. Short story writers such as Fradl Shtock, Yente Serdatsky, Rokhl Korn (primarily known for her poetry), Blume Lempl

and others have produced some very fine short stories, but on the whole, the record is weak, and particulary so with regard to the novel, a genre in which, in other literatures, women have excelled. I don't know why this is.

I do know, however, that Yiddish women writers defied all of Virginia Woolf's hypotheses about women and writing discussed in _A Room of One's Own_ and _On Women in Fiction_. Woolf's contention that the need to have a room of one's own, that is, a conducive atmosphere as well as the financial means and leisure to write, made writing an occupation for middle and upper class women, may be true for British and other literatures, but it runs counter to everything we know about Yiddish literature. Almost all the women who wrote in Yiddish were from the proletariat. This is easily explained by the fact that Yiddish was, particulary after the _Haskala_ (Enlightenment) and the classical period of Abramovich, Peretz and Sholem Aleichem, a working class literature. The more affluent, generally also more assimilated, turned to Polish, Russian or English literature and the more traditional—whether worker or petit-bourgeois—did not read or write belles-lettres.

Trying to understand why Yiddish women writers tended to excel in poetry rather than in prose, I turned again to Virginia Woolf:

> Fiction was, as it still is, the easiest thing for women to write. Nor is it difficult to find the reason. A novel is the least concentrated form of art. A novel can be taken up or put down more easily than a play or poem. . . . And living as she did, in the common sitting room, surrounded by people, a woman was trained to use her mind in obervation and upon the analysis of character. She was trained to be a novelist and not a poet.1

Again, logical though this seems, it bears no relation to Yiddish

literature where women writers were primarily poets. Khave Rosenfarb, a Yiddish poet and novelist living in Montreal, once explained this phenomenon by saying that Jewish women were too busy washing the floor and looking after the children to write novels, but they could dash off a poem in stolen moments between tasks.[2] Doubtless, other people have and will invent theories more elaborate but no more satisfying. Be that as it may, what remains is a medium-sized body of second rank prose written by women.

I am not sure that male and female authors say things differently, although given the different sorts of experiences afforded them by their cultures, they may frequently have something different to say. It is possible that women writers offer a different and more authentic perspective on being female than do male writers, but it is also possible that gifted male writers can portray women with such sensitivity and understanding that did we not know we would assume the writer was a woman. Can we really say that Soreh B. Smith offers a more convincing portrait of a woman in her novel <u>Di froy in keytn</u> (<u>The Woman in Chains</u>) than does Sholem Aleichem in <u>Stempenyu</u>, or to put it in terms more readily understandable to all, can we legitimately argue that Mrs. Gaskell offers a finer portrait of women in her work than does Tolstoy in <u>Anna Karenina</u>? I think not. Perhaps it is generally true that the average person understands his or her sex better than does someone of the opposite sex, as Rosalind Miles says in <u>The Fiction of Sex</u>:

> But the artist is not like common man. He or she is the most protean of creatures, and must rightly command a bisexuality or at least ambivalence of approach to life and art if he is to be capable of bodying out for us forms and themes beyond our comprehension.3

I believe that literature is more about culture and society than it is about gender. The importance of gender is frequently determined by culture. If we read literature largely to gain a perspective on a given culture then discovering what men have to say about women is as revealing as reading women on women. Both can provide valuable, although sometimes different perspectives on that culture. If one reads literature purely for the aesthetic experience then the sex of a writer is certainly irrelevant.

Because I believe that some men can speak as eloquently about women as women themselves, and in Yiddish prose, have done so, alas, at times, even more so, I have chosen to deal with the emergence of the modern woman in Yiddish and Western literature as created by both male and female writers.

The female protagonist is not a modern phenomenon in Jewish or Yiddish literature. Since the biblical account of Adam and Eve in Genesis, female protagonists have often shared center stage with male characters or appropriated it for themselves. Even in less paradisal times, other women such as the matriarchs, the prophetess Deborah, and the saviour Queen Esther managed to gain immortality in a male-dominated literature.

In a much later era, throughout the development of Old and Modern Yiddish literature, from the thirteenth to twentieth century, women continued to be important, both as characters in and creators of that literature. Still, it is not until the late nineteenth century that one can speak of the emergence of the modern woman in Yiddish literature.

In this study I shall discuss whether and how the actions,

thoughts, and fate of the Jewish woman are different from that of non-Jewish heroines in similar fictional situations. While women's dissatisfaction with the status quo, whether in 1888 or 1988 is neither new nor modern, what _is_ modern is both the Jewish and non-Jewish women's recognition of the conflicting forces that seethe within them, and the desire to have more control over their lives. The emerging modern woman, whether portrayed in Yiddish or in other literatures, may express her conflict in a variety of ways. Frequently, these ways are very much the same for Jewish and non-Jewish female characters, but together with these similarities there are differences.

Changing the world is not the goal of most of the characters I shall deal with; theirs is presented as a more personal struggle. Sometimes the woman is aware of and feels affected by currents of change in the world around her; at other times she may not see her conduct as linked to any larger pattern of change. She may express her conflict by yearning for romantic love or by refusing to get married. She may defy parental authority and shock the community by marrying someone of her own choosing who brings neither wealth, nor status, nor learning to the family. She may express her modernity in her ambivalence towards having children, and perhaps even in her total rejection of the maternal role. A woman with a family of her own may express her conflict by divorcing her husband, abandoning her children and asserting her independence—knowingly dooming herself to loneliness and isolation. She may look for emotionally fulfilling work, perhaps against the wishes of her husband, or seek the kind of learning traditionally denied women.

At times, the changes a female character makes are barely noticeable, though they may be deeply felt. She may go back to the life against which she rebelled--yet there is a difference. Having confronted her crisis, she knows that she must either change or reintegrate the parts of her life so that she can live in a way that she considers meaningful. If she cannot do this, she is frustrated and grows enraged against the existing order.

In this study I shall confine myself to works published from 1856 (the publication of Madame Bovary) to the first third of the twentieth century. This was a time of tremendous change in Jewish and non-Jewish society. European society became more fluid and new social forces came to the fore. Industrialization transformed the lives of ordinary people, both broadening the sphere of the woman and creating new forms of enslavement. The Enlightenment wreaked havoc with once firmly entrenched ideas of religion and morality in both Jewish and Christian society. With the decline of traditional religion came the weakening of the community, and individual conscience, not communal standards, became the ultimate arbiter of the individual's behaviour. The new individualism was accompanied by a sense of confusion, alienation and anomie. For women, both Jewish and Christian, these changes brought a new sense of identity. Where before they had seen their lives in terms of duty, they now came to believe that they had rights--among others, the right to choose if and whom they wanted to marry, the right to decide whether or not they wanted children, and the right to choose where and how they spent their lives.

The change from a religious to a secular society, completely transformed Jewish life. Modernity and orthodoxy waged war for the

soul of every Jew, as Jewish self-definition came to have less to do with the study and observance of the tora than with fermenting ideas of nationalism and culture. People were not either religious or secular. The consciousness of even the most free-thinking of Jews was informed by a world of ritual and traditional values. In real life this meant that my Aunt Luba, a Bundist revolutionary, was betrothed by her father and married to the son of his business partner. Similarly, in literature, in Bergelson's Nokh alemen [When All is Said and done], Mirl Hurwitz, the typical alienated individual of the twentieth century, "celebrates" her engagement to a man of her parents' choosing in a synagogue amidst the singing and dancing of Hasidim.

The fascination with women in modern Yiddish literature is not accidental. According to halakha (Jewish Law) men and women have very different roles in life and only the most contrived orthodox apologetics can make a case for the equality of the sexes. Her position apart from men also made her the object of veneration and mystification.

Because the woman was the actual bearer of the race, the guardian of the Jewish home, and in charge of the education of her children, the future of the Jewish people lay in her hands. The fate of the female protagonist in literature became a metaphor for the fate of the Jewish people, and she became the focal point for the conflict between modernity and tradition which is the very essence of modern Yiddish literature.

Furthermore, because many of the Yiddish writers were either maskilim (enlightened), or, later on, political radicals, and had

themselves rebelled against traditional Jewish society, they chose to stress and even exaggerate the ills of traditional Jewish life. Who could better be used to portray the need for reform in the Jewish community than the woman, the least powerful and most restricted member of the community, poorly educated and poorly treated, and doomed to execute the mundane tasks of everyday survival?

Given the great attention devoted to society and religion in analyzing these works, a word about the relationship of literature to the milieu out of which it grows is in order. Literature, particularly the novel and short story, is not created ex-nihilo, but unfolds within the context of a given society. Society in literature, as it is in life, is a community of people whose lives are governed by a set of norms, conventions, institutions, and religious beliefs.[4] "The novel has been the primary agent of the moral imagination of society," says Rosalind Miles in The Fiction of Sex. "Whatever is occurring even peripherally in individual or cultural consciousness at large, we should expect to find in the novel."[5]

However, we should not expect to find in literature a realistic and accurate description of the life of any given era. Although literature does reflect life, it is a selective mirror which can be held at many angles. George Eliot put it well when she said her goal was "to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind."[6]

Society becomes a part of the formal arrangement of the work, assuming a specific function, just as do imagery, the development of and interaction between the characters, the viewpoint of the narrator, the manipulation of people and plot, the arrangement and order of

incidents, and the choice of language. This does not mean that literature does not reflect the social concerns, trends, and anxieties of its day. It frequently does, although each work may attach a different meaning to these phenomena. Literature implies a valuation. A character's actions achieve significance primarily as they are viewed in relation to the norms of that fictional society.

Very similar plot and circumstances in two different works may, because of each author's vision, yield very different results while still reflecting the same societal values. For example, in "Khasene gehat" ("Married") and in Stempenyu, both Peretz and Sholem Aleichem write of societies in which arranged marriage is the norm, and both portray heroines who are unhappily married, but the formal arrangement of each of these works leads to different conclusions.

Society's reaction to a given action or character may determine the emotional impact of the work. For example, in Sholem Aleichem's Tevye, the conversion of Tevye's daughter Khave is viewed as a tragedy, tantamount to death. No matter how the present day liberal, ecumenically inclined reader may bristle at what he or she would consider the narrowness and parochialism of such a response in real life, he or she cannot help but be moved by the intensity and significance of this response in the context of this literary work. The severity of the response is perfectly understandable from a society which truly believes in God and in which Jewishness and a sense of communal responsibility inform almost every aspect of a person's life.

Imagine for a moment, the same plot--a Jewish girl, daughter of a poor man, even a milkman, falls in love with a non-Jew, converts and

runs off with him. Let the only difference be that the story is set, not in the Ukraine at the turn of the twentieth century but in an assimilated Jewish community in Long Island or Westchester County. One can well imagine assimilated Jewish parents responding much as Tevye and Golde did. However, this similar reaction by assimilated Jews would probably cause the reader to rail against the hypocrisy of a Jewish community whose response to conversion seems inspired more by some primitive tribal, even racist tendencies, than by deeply held religious convictions or strong national feelings.

* * *

Let me now talk briefly about method. This is primarily a thematic study using works of Yiddish and European literature. Although the focus of this work is decidedly on Yiddish literature, by placing the works in a comparative context, one can appreciate the particular concerns, responsibilities, attitudes and actions of Jewish women in Yiddish literature.

Marriage was the main event in the lives of most women, both Jewish and non-Jewish, from time immemorial to the early twentieth century. In many of the texts dealt with here, the old values begin to crumble and the "modern" age brings with it a new dissatisfaction with the woman's traditional role of wife and mother. Because of the tremendous changes in women's attitudes towards marriage in this new climate, I have chosen to concentrate on women in marriage and adultery.

Each of the works will be examined individually, with reference

to those aspects which pertain to and illuminate the role and function of women in these works and these literatures with regard to these two themes. They will then be compared and contrasted. Throughout the discussion of both Yiddish and non-Yiddish works, I shall examine the ways in which women struggle with or rebel against their prescribed roles and the extent to which their dreams and expectations are matched or undercut by reality. Because different religions and cultures have different expectations for their members, they may significantly define the heroine's identity. This analysis will always address the ultimate question of how the heroine's religious beliefs and sense of communal responsibility define her attitudes and thoughts.[7] These topics will be analyzed through close reading of texts, emphasizing a study of imagery, symbolism, character analysis, and narrative voice.

In discussing marriage, I shall analyze such motifs as the upbringing of the heroine, the way in which she is married off, her preparation for and attitude toward marriage, her expectations and the expectations of her family and society vis a vis marriage, her relationship with her husband and her adjustment to marriage, her attitude towards and relationship to children (if she has them),and the attitude of the narrator towards these questions.

Because the societies in question sanction marriage as the only legitimate framework through which to perpetuate themselves, in both life and literature, marriage comes to symbolize the harmonious continuity and future of that society. Conversely, the weakening of the institution implies a weakening in the social structure. The degree of a heroine's happiness or discontent with her marriage is

therefore indicative of her relationship to her society. Her attitude towards her wifely duties, patricularly bearing and raising children reflects her attitude toward her community and towards life, and bespeaks the author's vision of the future of that society.

Because of the centrality of marriage in the character's life, adutery--a transgression against the norms of that institution--is the most obvious and radical form of rebellion possible for most female characters. I shall examine the character's motivations for committing adultery, the sort of lover she chooses, and the significance of this adulterous relationship both to her and to society as a whole. On the personal level, adultery may be merely an attempt to find happiness when a marriage doomed to failure from the start is no longer tolerable. As Victor Brombert says in his discussion of Madame Bovary, "it [adultery] holds out the promise of beauty precisely because it is the forbidden happiness and the inaccessible dream." However, in the context of most fictions it takes on another dimension. "To the entire generation reared on Romanticism," Brombert goes on to say, " . . . adultery, because of its officially immoral and asocial status, acquired a symbolic value: it was a sign of unconventionality, rebellion and authenticity."[8]

Not only to the generation reared on Romanticism but in many of the works discussed here, adultery signifies rebellion. Or, it may, at times, also be a sign of passive despair or cynicism towards life and society. It is a comment on the viability of the institution of marriage, and, by extension, the viability of that society. Just as a happy marriage functions as an affirmation of societal harmony so adultery comes to symbolize a rupture within society, which makes the

rules of society seem arbitrary. Hence, in Sholem Aleichem's novel Stempenyu, Rokhele's marriage must work because it is the author's intent to affirm Jewish life, and in Opatoshu's novel Aleyn (Alone), Sorke's adultery and leaving symbolize the fragility of Jewish life.

I have found great similarites in the portrayals of women in the Yiddish and non-Yiddish texts. They all experience longing, boredom, love, desire for fulfillment, and many other similar emotions. They are expected to be lovely and sweet, to adhere to the religion of their community, and to be obedient to their parents, and then later to their husbands. In all of the works I have chosen, the writers portray society's treatment of women critically and ironically. In both literatures, female characters feel constrained by their femaleness. The woman is the lowest member of society and finds marriage oppressive. Family and societal pressures leave little room for personal preference and frequently outweigh the concern for the young woman's happiness. Whether the parental concern for society pushes a daughter into marrying a wealthy stranger twice her age as in Effi Briest or a talmudic scholar who has never spoken to a woman except his mother and sister, the effect on the woman is much the same. Boredom and a sense of purposelessness lead some of the characters to adultery.

What differentiates the Yiddish from the non-Yiddish works is not so much the specific details of the lives of the heroines, nor the style of writing, but the importance of religion and community in the former. Although all of the works were written at a time when the hold of religion was weakening, because of the precariousness of the Jews' minority position in European society, the Jewish works reflect

a much deeper concern for survival and continuity than do the non-Jewish works. On the one hand, persecution and pogroms threatened phyical survival. On the other, Jewish spiritual existence was endangered by a new openness in both Jewish and non-Jewish society which allowed for and even encouraged some assimilation. At the same time, a still pervasive anti-semitism made some Jews see conversion as the only path towards individual advancement. Small wonder then that modern Yiddish literature, itself a product of the conflicting forces of heightened national awareness and far-reaching cultural assimilation, reflects this preoccupation with survival. The Holocaust would later turn what seemed an obsession into a sacred duty.

The Yiddish works are ultimately as much or more about being Jewish than about being female. The femaleness of the character defines the plot, her Jewishness shapes the meaning of the work. The comparative approach accentuates the distinctiveness of the Jewish preoccupation with identity and survival. Although this concern characterizes the Yiddish works in this study, it may be typical of the literature of other minority cultures as well.

I have chosen a number of works which illuminate the issues touched on above. Although chronologically the latest of the works I shall deal with, I shall begin with the Yiddish poet Kadye Molodowsky's "Froyen lider" ("Women's Songs") (1919) because it touches on all of the themes of the dissertation. This cycle of poems reflects the conflicts of a generation of "modern" women seeking new avenues in life and love. Molodowsky portrays the anguish and exhilaration of the modern Jewish woman haunted by the purity of her

pious ancestresses and enticed by the sexual freedom of the twentieth century.

"Khasene gehat" ("Married") (1896) by I.L. Peretz presents an extreme picture of the way of life against which subsequent heroines rebelled. In this short story, Peretz portrays and condemns a system in which poverty, parental pressure, public opinion, lechery and gross insensitivity force a young girl to marry a seventy year old miser. Modernity enters somewhat formulaically in the figure of a very appealing maskilic (enlightened) young suitor whose modern leanings make him unacceptable to the girl's family. Peretz's story is an indictment of a system impervious to change and to individual need in which women are often victimized and destroyed.

Stempenyu by Sholem Aleichem again deals with arranged marriage. Although this work, published in 1881, antedates "Khasene gehat," it presents a somewhat more positive picture of arranged marriage. The girl is less desperate, the spouse less revolting and the competition less suitable. More than any other work discussed here, it portrays the plight of the traditional woman confronted by the modern phenomenon of romantic love. Her behaviour demonstrates, as Sholem Aleichem claims he wants it to, the uniqueness of the Jewish heroine and the Jewish novel. The work is a paradigm of reconciliation in which traditional marriage is enhanced and sustained by the modern elements of passsion and romantic love. To accomplish this, the narrator must create a timeless idyllic shtetl untouched by the forces of modernity which in actuality threaten to transform its very being.

While Rokhele and Leah stand on the brink of modernity, Sholem Aleichem's Tevye der milkhiker (Tevye the Milkman) marks a turning

point in Yiddish literature. Written over the course of fifteen years, the episodes reflect the precarious position of traditional Judaism in a rapidly changing world. Each daughter marries a man whom she herself chooses, very consciously although not intentionally, defying the wishes of her parents and the expectations of society. In Stempenyu the author affirms Jewish life by depicting a timeless society; in Tevye he portrays the vulnerability of Jewish life beset by modernity. The author is ambivalent. Although the daughters' rebellion is often sympathetically and even enticingly portrayed, each step towards modernity is a step towards the inevitable demise of traditional Judaism. Tevye is an allegory in which the tragedy of a father almost totally bereft of his progeny becomes the tragedy of a people with no future.

Aleyn (Alone) by Yoysef Opatoshu again presents the heroine in revolt against arranged marriage. Having witnessed the rapid break-up of traditional Jewish life in Eastern Europe, Opatoshu has his heroine transgress communal values to a degree unthinkable twenty-five years earlier in Stempenyu. Unlike the other heroines discussed here, Sorke rebels, deserts her husband and child, and runs off to America with her lover. In so doing, she breaks not only the moral ties but also her physical ties to the ancient Jewish tradition rooted in the Polish soil. By portraying Sorke's rebellion, necessary as it may have been for her personal well-being, as a supreme betrayal of her family and the entire Jewish nation, the author demonstrates that a literature dedicated to collective survival cannot wholeheartedly endorse freedom of the individual if it threatens that survival.

Nokh alemen (When All is Said and Done) by Dovid Bergelson also

deals with the break-up of a marriage. Although Sorke's adultery and subsequent flight to America in *Aleyn* may appear more radically rebellious than Mirl Hurwitz's listless entanglements, no one could be further from the traditional ideal of the young Jewish woman than Mirl. When we speak of Tevye's daughters or of Sorke, we speak of personal rebellion; when we speak of Mirl Hurwitz we speak of spiritual death. Both Sorke and Mirl rebel against the hasidism of their parents, but Sorke seeks personal happiness while Mirl seeks something to replace the world she has rejected. Her rejection of the Jewish faith leaves her with a sense of the ultimate meaninglessness of life.

These Yiddish texts will be compared to the German novel *Effi Briest* by Fontane, the Norwegian play *A Doll's House* by Ibsen, and *Madame Bovary* by Flaubert. Because the comparison texts are drawn from various literatures, I shall not aim to speak definitively about any of these literatures. Instead I shall regard these works as belonging to the body of Western or Christian literature and shall investigate whether the religion and nationality of the heroines define the basic issues of these works to the extent that they do in the Yiddish works.

Fontane's *Effi Briest* is an excellent work for studying the conflict between the individual and society in a non-Jewish work. Like many of the Yiddish novels, *Effi Briest* deals with a young girl's unhappiness in an arranged marriage in which parental interests take precedence over concern for the girl herself. Driven by boredom and unhappiness, like some of the Yiddish heroines, Effi turns to adultery and is severely punished by society. Despite Fontane's cultivation of

an authorial distance not typical of many of the Yiddish works, his sympathies clearly lie with Effi and not with the society which so hampers and restricts its women and punishes their deviations so cruelly. Whereas in the Yiddish works society often triumphs despite all its faults, and conventions are still rooted in morality and the concern with survival, in Fontane's Prussia, society seems governed by an arbitrary collection of rules and prejudices. Its triumph over the individual is not a manifestation of the spiritual covenant between God and a nation, but rather the continuation of a way of life long since severed from its moral base.

In A Doll's House, the unofficial manifesto of the women's liberation movement, Ibsen writes of a woman's coming to terms with her marriage. The work probes more deeply into the relationship of a couple than does any of the other works. Shocking in its own day in 1879, and timely even today, A Doll's House depicts what Ibsen sees as the unsolveable conflict between individual and social morality. Showing women to be more instinctive and emotional than men, Ibsen is critical of society which requires that women's actions be judged by man's law.

Far more than in the Yiddish works, men are identified with society. As represented by Torvald, society seems not so much a body of people with shared values and concerns as the repository of prejudices and hollow conventions. While Nora's decision to leave her family is accompanied by considerable moral torment and qualms of conscience, in contrast to Yiddish works, her concerns and the concerns of the author are personal and familial rather than societal and religious.

Flaubert's Madame Bovary provides a fascinating comparison to Bergelson's Nokh alemen. Both novels focus on the inner life and are concerned with individual fulfillment. The similarities in the concrete situations of Emma and Mirl—their unhappy marriage, indifference towards children, and their search for happiness through men make the differences between them all the more striking and suggest how much Mirl's plight is related to her being Jewish.

Flaubert explores the degree to which Emma's femininity contributes to her unhappiness. Feeling her mobility and abilities hampered by being a woman, Emma turns her frustrations into illusions. While Bergelson's work is a study in the despair of non-belief, Flaubert's work is a study in illusion and the manipulation of religion. While Nokh alemen deals with the passing away of a religious tradition, Madame Bovary portrays a world where people still adhere to the forms of religion, albeit emptied of their content. It illustrates the danger of placing personal pleasure above all else and seeking in luxuries and carnal pleasures those transcendent feelings which were believed to be the domain of religion.

Notes

[1] Virginia Woolf, Women and Writing (New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980) 46.

[2] I heard the Yiddish poet Khave Rosenfarb say this at a meeting of the Yugntruf—Youth for Yiddish reading circle at which she was the guest speaker. It was sometimes at the beginning of the 1980's.

[3] Rosalind Miles, The Fiction of Sex (New York: Barnes and Noble Books (a division of Harper and Row), 1974) 34-35.

[4] For these ideas I am indebted to Elizabeth Langland, Society in the Novel (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) 9.

[5] Miles, The Fiction of Sex, p. 13.

[6] George Eliot, Adam Bede (New York. Toronto: Rhinehart & Co., Inc., 1948) 178;ch. 17.

[7] Because Jews are a nation whose culture is rooted in its religion and for whom membership in that religion, or at least, non-membership in any other, is the sine qua non of belonging, I shall more often compare the Jewishness of the characters to the Christianity rather than to the nationality of the characters in the non-Yiddish works. If the survival of the Jews emerges time and again as the central concern of the Jewish people and hence of their literature, it is because their religion cast them in the precarious situation of being a national minority.

[8] All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Victor Brombert, The Novels of Flaubert: A Study of Themes and Technique (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966) 83.

Chapter 1

The Role of the Woman in Jewish Life and in Yiddish Literature

Because the Jewishness of the Yiddish heroine determines her self-perceptions, her actions and her notion of her role in Jewish society in particular and of life in general, she is different from the Western heroine, and her struggle is of a different order. To define and contextualize this, it is helpful to look at the situation of the Jews in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

The Eastern European Jewish community of that time was an isolated and physically endangered minority living in the midst of what it perceived as an alien and hostile society. The Jews' awareness of their plight strengthened, and perhaps even perpetuated, their religiosity. Entrance into the mainstream of European and, later, American life was difficult, if not impossible. Living as a Jew was scarcely easier. Through turning inward and focusing on spiritual values, Jews managed to survive as Jews without the structure and benefits of political power and statehood. With its emphasis on _Halakha_ (Jewish Law) and the _mitzvas_ (commandments) rather than on faith alone, Judaism, more than Christianity, determined almost every aspect of the lives of its believers. In prayers three times a day, in blessings before and after private bodily functions, and in the clothes they wore, Jews were constantly reminded of their covenant with God. The immigrant American Jewish writer Mary Antin describes Jewish life in Eastern Europe this way:

> In a community which was isolated from the mass of the people on account of its religion which was governed by special

> civil laws in recognition of that fact, in whose calendar there were two score days of religious observance; whose going and coming, giving and taking, living and dying, to the minutest details of social conduct, to the most intimate particulars of private life, were regulated by sacred laws, there could be no question of personal convictions in religion. One was a jew, leading a righteous life, or one was a Gentile, existing to harrass the Jews.1

Although women were exempt from most of the commandments and received a different and often a more secular education than men, Jewishness was still a powerful force informing most aspects of their lives. The ideal Jewish woman is described and praised in the _Eyshes khayil_ (Woman of Valour) prayer (Proverbs 31) recited throughout the ages by Jewish men to their wives on the Sabbath. She is hardworking and resourceful, loyal and totally devoted to her family and husband. She is kind to the poor and the needy and reveres the Lord. But no matter how good, how wise, and how pious she is, it is not she, but her husband, who is "known in the gates and sits among the elders of the land" (Proverbs 31.23)

While the Jewish woman in Eastern Europe actually ran the household and enjoyed a certain amount of power and respect in the domestic sphere, men, and not women, were still the unquestioned masters of the Jewish home and of Jewish communal life. The two sexes had sharply delineated roles.

Because it was the woman's primary task to attend to the needs of her family, she was exempt from positive, time-bound _mitzvas_ (religious obligations) such as prayer or putting on _tfilin_ (phyllacteries). The logic is clear here. Women nursing babies and looking after children could not be expected to fulfill these _mitzvas_ regularly. Some orthodox Jews explain the woman's exemption from most

mitzvas by saying that women were more innately pious than men and therefore not in need of six hundred and thirteen commandments to keep them virtuous. Women could, of course, pray and attend synagogue if they wanted to, but they could never be called upon to perform any rituals there, nor could they be counted in the minyen (quorum of ten men) necessary for public prayer.

The process of differentiation began at birth. In Eastern Europe the birth of a son was celebrated joyously with a circumcision ceremony and party initiating the son as a member of the covenant. No parallel ceremony was developed to establish a girl as a member of the Jewish people. With no fanfare and generally without the mother's presence, the father declared the girl's name during a regular service in the synagogue. In his memoir Of a World that is No More, I.J. Singer describes the birth of his sister:

> The Hasidim snickered in the house of worship as my father named the new child Sarah. Siring a female child was a shameful act for which they occasionally flogged a young father with their belts. Naturally, the birth wasn't celebrated at our house except for serving egg cookies and whisky to the few men who bothered to drop in. For a girl this was considered sufficient.[2]

While this may have been an extreme case, Singer's description is true, and by no means unique. The Yiddish saying, "Many daughters, many troubles, many sons, many honours" summed up the pervasive attitude.

A Jewish boy could strive to become a scholar, the greatest ideal of Judaism; a girl could not. She could only hope to marry a scholar. Many Yiddish folksongs reflect these attitudes. For example this song expresses the parents' hopes for their son: "Yankele vet lernen toyre./ Toyre vet er lernen,/ Sforim vet er shraybn,/ Un a guter un a

frumer/ /vet er tomid blaybn." (Yankele will study the Torah./ He will study the Torah,/ He will write learned volumes,/ And a good and pious man/ He will always be.)[3]

The following verse of a folksong expresses the greatest hopes parents could have for their daughter. "Sorele's khosn vet zayn a talmid-khokhem,/ a talmid-khokhem mit gute mayles,/ Sorele's khosn vet kenen paskenen shayles." (Sorele's groom will be a wise scholar,/ A wise scholar with fine virtues,/ Sorele's groom will know how to solve problems.)[4]

Boys were sent off to kheyder (school) at the age of three or four to study the tora and continued to study throughout their lives, if they were able. Girls generally had only a few years of schooling. Sometimes they went to a meydl kheyder (girl's school) often conducted by the melamid's (boys' teacher's) wife. Sometimes they studied with a family member or a private teacher. Here they learned how to read and write Yiddish and to read simple prayers and a few Bible stories in loshn-koydesh (the holy tongue/traditional Hebrew). They seldom learned to translate the Hebrew and were never instructed in the Talmud. Thousands of years earlier, Rabbi Eliezer had written in the Talmud, "Whoever teaches his daughter Tora teaches her obscenity,"[5] and in Eastern Europe it was still generally felt that girls should know just enough to perform their limited religious duties, but not enough to turn their interests away from the home or to rival their husbands in learning.

The woman was cloistered and protected, schooled in modesty, and taught that she merited heaven only as her husband's footstool. While boys frequently went to bigger towns or cities to study, girls

remained at home until marriage, receiving the bulk of their "higher education" from their mothers who instructed them in cooking and sewing and the countless rules of running a Jewish household. They observed strict standards of modesty in dress and behaviour; they wore long skirts and long sleeves and when they married they covered their hair so as not lead men astray, and in some communities, they even shaved it. Because the female voice was considered inherently seductive, women were not allowed to sing in front of men.

The woman's subordinate <u>halakhic</u> position may also have given her more cause to rebel, and paradoxically, more freedom. Her soul being not quite as important as her husband's, she was allowed greater knowledge of the outside world. While their husbands consecrated most of their time to learning, many women shared the burden of making a living with their husbands or were the primary bread-winners in the family. Women owned shops, set up stalls in the market place or peddled goods from door to door. Some lent money or ran pawn shops, others plucked goosefeathers and sold the down, some took in sewing and later, with the spread of industrialization, many went to work in shops and factories. In short, they did whatever they could in a limited depressed economy. Because of their role as breadwinners, and the strength required both to run a household and earn a living, they probably enjoyed more power and status in the family than one might suppose from merely considering their formal or limited <u>halakhic</u> status.

Because women often had to deal with the outside world, girls were frequently more educated in secular subjects than were boys. They studied arithmetic and learned to read and write the language

of the country. Not surprisingly, they became the first readers of both secular Yiddish literature and European literature. While this learning was allowed, it was also feared; secular learning and literature could and did lead young women away from Jewishness. The story of Khave in Sholem Aleichem's Tevye the Milkman exemplifies this danger. More worldly than their brothers and husbands, Jewish women were easily "infected" by ideas of the Enlightenment.

The Yiddish language has always been intimately tied to the fate of women in Jewish culture. It is no accident that Yiddish has been called "mame loshn" (mother tongue) for it was, in many ways, specifically, the language of the Jewish woman. Although both men and women spoke Yiddish since its beginnings in Germany in the ninth century, women, because of their position in Jewish society, exerted a greater influence than men on the development of Old Yiddish and early Modern Yiddish literature. There are a surprising number of female writers and the Yiddish literary critic and historian Shmuel Niger contends that Yiddish literature was one of the only literatures in the world whose readership, until the late nineteenth century, was essentially female.[6] Although not solely a literature for women, books were written primarily for women and less educated men. Books carrying inscriptions such as "far vayber un proste mener" (for women and simple men), "far vayber un mansbiln vos zaynen azoy vi vayber, dos heyst zey kenen nit leyenen" (for women and men who are like women, that means they can't read) as well as the less offensive "men and women, boys and girls" bear witness to this readership.

Men were, of course, more literate than women, but the language of their spiritual and intellectual life was Hebrew. The educated man

ought not to do anything as trivial as read fiction in Yiddish or in any other language, for this took away valuable time from his study of the Bible, Gemora, and other holy texts. Nor would the educated man have much use for translations of the Bible, Halakha, (Jewish Law) or moralistic texts, for he should be reading these works in their original loshn-koydesh (holy tongue--a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic).

Original Yiddish prayerbooks and translations from the Hebrew, biblical and biblically related texts, moral literature, and even romances (usually modelled after non-Jewish works) proliferated during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. The tkhine, a genre of prayers primarily for women, was developed. A glance at the table of contents of any collection of tkhines reveals prayers for many occasions in a woman's life; for going to the mikva (ritual bath), for burning the priestly portion of the khala (Sabbath bread) dough, for a bride on her wedding day, for a mother shortly after a safe delivery, for a widow, or for a mother at the grave of a child. While most tfiles (prayers) in the sider (standard prayer book) are said by both men and women, exalt the Creator, and speak of and for the entire Jewish people, the tkhine is more personal and concrete and is more likely to plead with, as well as praise, the Almighty.

The subject matter of the tkhine is a response to the woman's biological condition and her limited religous realm. Even when a woman rises above her biological limitations and, like Queen Esther, saves her people, she is able to do this, not because she is an exceptional woman, but because God is so great that He can work miracles even through a woman. Consider this passage taken from a tkhine for the Feast of Purim:

> And through whom didst Thou accomplish this great and wonderful deliverance? Thou, O God, chosest a feeble woman for thy messenger, for an instrument of redemption of Thy people, that all the world might learn how great Thou art also in little things, . . . how that which seems powerless turns triumphantly mighty in Thy hand, that we may know and take to heart, that, however lowly and feeble a man may be, he is nevertheless commissioned by Thee, to do and accomplish the good unto the benefit and blessing of his fellow-man.7

Women took these prayers very seriously, but men and perhaps even the writers themselves, many of whom were men writing under female pseudonyms, criticized and scorned the tkhines for their limited content and exaggerated emotionality. While providing women with an emotional and spiritual outlet, the tkhines and other women's literature also kept women in their traditional places, reminding them that that they were but sinful and lowly females.

This is true even of the Tsena urena, the most popular work of Old Yiddish literature and probably the Yiddish best-seller of the last four hundred years. Written by Yakov Bar Itzkhak Ashkenazi, and first published in Basel in 1622, it is a translation of the Five Books of Moses turned into a storybook, interwoven with agode (legend) and muser (moralistic writing). Even though Ashkenazi was motivated by a sincere desire to educate women, his choice of agada and musar suggests that he is nonetheless presenting women with a male view of what women ought to know and how they ought to behave. The stories and anecdotes he chooses for the Tsena urena are frequently coloured by the reminder that women are sinful, innately seductive, lighthearted, and meant to be subservient to their husbands. For example, in explaining why each of the Ten Plagues of Egypt lasted seven days, the Tsena urena says, "Every plague lasted seven days which is likened to the menstruation period of a women, when she is

considered unclean for seven days."[8]

There were other holy and moralistic books geared towards a female audience, some even written or translated by women. For example, Gele, a twelve year old girl from Halle, Germany, wrote a _muser_ book called _Mavor yabok_ in which she appeals to women to protect their modesty. Khane of Amsterdam, the widow of Reb Itzkhak Ashkenazi, author of the _Tsena urena_, wrote and published sermons. Rivka Tiktiner translated _muser sforim_ (moralistic books) and wrote her own book _Mineket Rivka_, which was published in Prague in 1609, about sixty years after her death. Although these women distinguished themselves by their learning, they continued to preach the traditional female morality and piety demanded by God and the Jewish community.

Two women, Gluckel of Hameln and Serkele, the former real, and the latter, the fictional heroine of Dr. Shlomo Ettinger's _Haskala_ (Enlightenment) drama of the same name, appear to have broken out of the mould, adding a new dimension to the image of women in pre-modern Yiddish literature. As well known as any male figures of the literature of their times, they were strong women who had the freedom and ability to do a man's job and to play the dominant role in the family.

The _Memoirs of Gluckel of Hameln_ written by Gluckel herself are among the most distinguished works of Old Yiddish literature. Gluckel was born in Hamburg, Germany in 1646. She began writing her memoirs when she was forty and continued almost to her death at age seventy-eight. Well-educated and financially comfortable, Gluckel integrated the roles of wife, mother, and career woman with a skill seldom seen even among today's ambitious women. She married at twelve and, true to

the first mitzva (commandment), was "fruitful and multiplied" and bore fourteen children. Almost an equal business partner with her husband, she drew up contracts, signed documents, and negotiated deals. After his death, she was fully in charge. In a time when travel was dangerous for all, and particularly for women, Gluckel crossed Western Europe on business trips, travelling through Germany, Holland, Denmark, France, and Sweden.

Although Gluckel's independence and competence would seem to make her the prototype of the modern woman, she is not really one herself. She may pave the way, but her life is not plagued by that loss of faith and inner turmoil which characterize many modern protagonists. Even in the worst times, she believes, "We must ever keep a measure in our grief when, God help us! the evil days are come, and knowing that His judgment is just, glorify the true and righteous judge."[9]

After Gluckel, the best-known female figure in pre-modern Yiddish literature is Serkele, the anti-heroine of Ettinger's drama Serkele (1825-30). Although Serkele, like Gluckel, is a businesswoman and the real head of the household, her control of the family and of the family pursestrings is, in Ettinger's eyes, the mark, not of a liberated woman, but of a backward society where, because men are weak and ineffectual, women assume the male role.

The maskilim believed that Jews should behave like middle class Europeans; men should support the family and women should be witty, charming, and decorative. Serkele exhibits none of these "modern" traits. Though she acts the part of the frail and virtuous damsel, she is, in fact, a shrew and a thief who has lost not only her "natural" gentleness and femininity, but also her honesty and integrity. She is

the embodiment of all that is outmoded and negative.

The maskilim (enlighteners), like their Zionist descendants, deplored the Jewish economy which they saw as backward and parasitical, and advocated a "normal" economy. Unlike today's nostalgic readers, they saw little charm in occupations such as ritual slaughterer, bath house attendant, psalm sayer, dreydl-maker, or matza-roller, usually tied to orthodox observance and, in some cases, to superstition, by which Jews eked out a miserable existence. They believed Jews should engage in constructive economic pursuits which would put them in control of their own economy. Even as late as 1896, in the post-Haskala story "Khasene gehat," which I shall discuss later, Peretz's cataloguing of Leah's mother's "jobs" is an implicit criticism of the Jewish economy.

> She had perhaps ten jobs. She was a peddler in the marketplace, baked cakes, and helped out at circumcisions and weddings. . . she was a ritual bathhouse attendant, a grave-measurer, a prayer-leader in the women's synagogue, and she bought provisions for rich householders.10

Maskilic writers sought to lead Jews away from the ills of traditional life and into the modern world. While still practicing Judaism themselves, maskilim (enlighteners) believed that Jews should have a good secular education and a fluent command of the language of the country. Virulently anti-Hasidic, they pleaded for a rational approach to religion, and sought to educate Jews away from the rebe-worship, clericalism, mysticism, and medieval fanaticism that they believed plagued Jewish life.

Often highly programmatic in their writing and generally uninterested in psychological depth, they defined good and evil characters by dress, occupation, and distance from the rebe. Women do

appear in their writing: In Y.L. Gordon's poem "Al kotso shel yud (Over the Dot of the Letter Yud), they are victims of orthodox fanaticism, in S.Y. Abramovich's Limdu heytev (Learn Well), they are, like Rokhele, the willing students and lovers of irresistible maskilim, and in Ettinger's Serkele, like Serkele, they are the products and perpetrators of a vile economic system. However, women are seldom the central focus of Haskala writing. Male writers almost never tried to portray the emotional life of women, and not surprisingly, histories of Haskala literature are devoid of female writers.[11]

The woman can only emerge as a modern character after the Haskala, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the focus in literature shifts from society to the individual and his or her emotional life. The female presence with its proverbial openness and psychological awareness affords the writer the possibility of probing emotional depths not generally spoken of or explored in male characters of the Haskala or even after.

Towards the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Jewish woman was becoming more able to step outside her rigidly defined Jewish world and enter, at least partially, into the life of the non-Jewish world around her. The emerging modern Jewish woman is no longer defined totally by her Jewishness. Each step into the outside world, a world where she may do as she pleases and not as she must, takes her a step away from the circumscribed Jewish world. Because she has already been molded by a lifetime of Jewishness, her life becomes a perpetual balancing of the values, influences, and possibliites offered by two worlds.

The *Haskala* caused Jews to redefine themselves and their relationship to the world. The motto of the *Haskalah*, "Be a Jew in the home and a person on the street" implied that there was some contradiction between the two. Until then, when Jews said *yid* (Jew) they meant "person." If they meant non-Jew, they would say so. Now there existed the possibility that Jews could act simply as "people" and could compartmentalize their lives so that Judaism no longer governed their entire existence.

Modern Yiddish literature, to which we now turn, not only describes, but is, in fact, the result of the conflict between the traditional and the modern which so shaped the consciousness of the nineteenth and twentieth century Yiddish heroine. Barely one hundred years old, flowering from 1864 to 1939, it is the literature of a generation caught between orthodoxy and assimilation. Orthodox Jews disdained and continue to disdain secular Yiddish literature as the pastime of idlers and blasphemers. It could only flourish when Jews were not yet fully assimilated into the general culture but no longer consecrated all their literary energies into studying religious texts.

The suspicions of the religious community were well-founded, for Yiddish was the language through which Jews entered the outside world and Yiddish literature reflected this new orientation. While the decision to write in a Jewish language affirmed the writers' ties to Jewishness, by the mere act of writing fiction, they paradoxically also severed their ties to traditional Judaism. It is not surprising then, that Yiddish, the language developed over a thousand years of Jewish exile, offers so many portrayals of the emerging modern woman. Searching to find a balance between two worlds, the language and the heroines created in it struggled with modernity.

A brief overview of the range of modern Yiddish literature from its beginnings in 1864 with the appearance of S.Y. Abramovich's Dos kleyne mentshele (The Little Man)[12] to the present, reveals many female characters and writers, the latter primarily poets. Writers such as Kadye Molodowsky, Anna Margolin, Celia Dropkin, Rokhl Korn, and Malke Khofetz-Tuzman made major contributions to modern Yiddish poetry. Female protagonists such as Tevye's daughters in Tevye der milkhiker (Tevye the Milkman) or Rokhele in Stempenyu, both by Sholem Aleichem; many of Peretz's heroines, the revolutionary women in Sholem Asch's Dray shtet (Three Cities) and in Dovid Ignatow's In keslgrub (In the Whirlpool); the disillusioned bourgeoise Mirl Hurwitz in Dovid Bergelson's Nokh alemen (After Everything)[13]; the free-thinking and solitary women in the short stories of Yenta Serdatsky are characters as compelling as one will find in any literature. The women in I.B. Singer's work alone are subject enough for a book.

Not all of the female characters in literature, and not all the literary women since 1864, are modern simply because they appear in so-called "modern" times. Modernity, as I understand it, is a concept denoting a frame of mind, an attitude, and a way of reacting to the reality in which one lives, both on the part of the characters and the author. The same year may give birth to a free-thinking revolutionary such as Emma Goldman or to a stringently orthodox woman who accepts her lot without question.

In defining the modern in his anthology The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts, Irving Howe writes that a writer's modernity consists of a revolt against the prevalent style of the culture and a rage against the official order. The traditional values of decorum

both in the general ethical sense and the strictly literary sense are overturned. Everything must now be explored to its outer and inner limits, but more, there are to be no limits. The modern world has lost its belief in a collective destiny. Hence the hero finds it hard to be certain that he possesses--or that anyone can possess--the kind of power that might transform human existence.[14]

I define the women, both writers and characters, in this study as modern or as standing on the brink of modernity, if they dare to question and/or revolt against the circumscribed roles of wife and mother to which traditional society has relegated them, and have ceased to link their destiny to a greater one prescribed by God or society. Because belief no longer dictates all their actions and the community is no longer the unquestioned arbiter of their faith, modern heroines will frequently consult their own will before consulting the will of the community. This struggle between the communal and private spheres is charactersitic of modernity and certainly of the women I shall deal with in this study.

I turn now to women characters and writers in Yiddish literature from 1888 to the end of the first third of the twentieth century and to women in Western literature of the mid to late nineteenth century. I have chosen 1888 because it is the publication date of Sholem Aleichem's novel Stempenyu, the first Yiddish work to deal with a woman in conflict with her traditional role. Although Yiddish literature has given rise to prominent female writers and characters since the 1930's, I shall end my study then because assimilation and World War 11 bring about the end of the flowering of Yiddish literature.

I shall begin, however, not with Stempenyu but with a cycle of poems by Kadye Molodowsky called "Froyen lider" (Women's Songs), because, with the conciseness and passion possible only in poetry, this work touches upon so many of the issues which defined the lives of Jewish women, in literature and in life, during, before, and after this period.

Notes

1 Mary Antin, The Promised Land (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1912) 122.

2 I.J. Singer, Of a World That is No More, trans. Joseph Singer (New York: Vanguard Press, 1970) 141-42.

3 Ruth Rubin, Voices of a People (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979) 31.

4 Rubin 32-33.

5 Talmud, Mishnah Sotah 120a.

6 This and the following information on Old Yiddish literature for women was taken from Shmuel Niger, Di yidishe literatur un di lezern [Yiddish Literature and the Female Reader] Vilna: Vilner farlag, 1919).

7 Hours of Devotion: A Book of Prayers and Meditations for the Use of the Daughters of Israel (New York: L. Frank Printer and Publisher, 1875) 73-74.

8 Norman C. Gore, Tseena U-Reena: A Jewish Commentary on the Book of Exodus (New York: Vantage Press, 1965) 60.

9 Gluckel Of Hameln, The Memoirs of Gluckel of Hameln, trans. Marvin Lowenthal (New York: Schocken, 1977) 89.

10 I.L. Peretz, "Khasene gehat" [Married], Di verk fun Y.L. Perets [The Works of I.L. Peretz] New York: Farlag Idish, 1920) 2: 186. If I feel that the English translation can capture the nuances of the Yiddish, I shall omit the Yiddish text, but where I feel something significant would be lost by omitting it, I shall give the Yiddish original as well.

11 Perhaps the Haskala was not greatly concerned with women, but it seems strange to me that women were not voicing their concerns somewhere. Although not as educated in Jewish learning as men, women were more likely to read secular literature than men. Does it not stand to reason that at least a few women were influenced by their reading and turned their hand to writing? After all, doing anything as focused on the self as writing one's memoirs was certainly unusual for men and women in the seventeenth century and yet it is the memoir of a woman, Gluckel of Hameln, that remains the most well-known memoir and literary document of that time. Very possibly, sources may be discovered, if they have not been destroyed, as women, following the present trend, continue to reclaim their past and rescue their "her"story from oblivion.

12
The literal translation of the title Dos kleyne mentshele is "The Little Man," however, it is translated as "The Parasite" in the existing English translation by G. Stillman.

13
The literaral translation of Nokh alemen is "After Everything," however it is translated as "When All is Said and Done" in the existing translation by Bernard Martin. I shall refer to it by that name when I use the English title.

14
Irving Howe, The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts (New York: Horizon Press, 1967) 13, 15, 18, 31, 34.

Chapter 2

Kadye Molodowsky's "Froyen lider" ("Women's Songs")

Secularization of Jewish society in big cities and small towns on both sides of the Atlantic at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century brought rapid changes in the position of and possibilities for Jewish women. Where before their sphere of influence extended mainly within the family, women now became active in political parties, joining the ranks of the *istn*, as *sotzialistn*, *tsionistn*, *comunistn*, or *anarchistn*, to name but several of the radical alternatives of the day. From the proletariat rose dozens of Yiddish women poets and prose writers, who wrote of the triumphs and sorrows of the Jewish woman in an open, progressive world. In their fiction, both poetry and prose, we read for the first time of women attending evening courses, engaging in revolutionary activity, championing free love, choosing not to marry or have children, and, more unheard of yet, abandoning their husbands and children to pursue their own goals.

While the new freedom was exhilarating it was also frightening. Some women found that free love meant no love, and that breaking with family and community meant dooming oneself to a loneliness which could never be alleviated by relationships based on anything as whimsical as personal or political affinity. Even when freethinkers celebrated their freedom from religion with *Yom-kiper* balls, their brazen desecration of the holiest day of the Jewish year, *davke* (none other than), *af tselokhes* (out of spite), merely pointed to the extent to

which religious doctrine and ritual still dominated their consciousness.

Some chose assimilation, particularly in America, and some--a group which included most of those men and women who wrote in Yiddish--chose to forge a new identity which would be both Jewish and modern. They meant to do away with what they considered to be the irrelevant, barbarous, and oppressive aspects of Judaism while still retaining the more universal concern with social justice and personal morality, culled from the Jewish tradition. Yiddish writers believed that they could capture the essence of Jewishness while disregarding at least some of its forms. Yiddish became the instrument through which to express a world of Jewish values torn from their religious source.

The poet Kadye Molodowsky, called "The First Lady of Yiddish Literature" by the critic Dr. K. Mukdoyni, (pseudonym of Alexander Kappel) exemplified this tension between the religious and the _fray_ (free, non-religious) both in her life and in her work. Born in 1894 to a traditional family in Kartuz-Bereze and educated by her father as if she were a boy, which while not traditional was not unheard of, particularly when there was a very strong bond between father and daughter, she left her home for the great city of Warsaw after the revolution of 1917. Kadye was highly intelligent and unusually educated for a woman, so much so that her colleagues called her "_der menersher kop_" (the masculine head). In his _Lexikon_, Molodowsky's writer colleague Melekh Ravitch writes:

> Kadye iz a gebildete un khotch mir veysn es iberrasht es undz ale mol af s'nay; a sakh algemeyne bildung un nit veyniker Yidish un loshn-koydesh vi a fartsaytiker bas-harov.[1]

> Kadye iz educated and although we know it, it never ceases to amaze us; a lot of general education and no less knowledge of Yiddish and the Holy Tongue than a rabbi's daughter of yesteryear.

In Warsaw Molodowsky joined in the general revolutionary fervour. As a teacher in the radical Yiddish schools of Warsaw, she brought both yidishkayt and progress to the children of the working classes. As a poet, she sang of children, of the poor, and of women.

Perhaps more than any single work by or about Jewish women, Kadye's "Froyen lider" ("Women's Songs") captures the conflicts and struggles of the emerging modern Jewish woman. In this cycle of six poems, Kadye, as she was, and still is, affectionately called in Yiddish literary circles, portrays both the exhilaration and anguish of the being a woman in her generation. Born into a religious way of life but confronted with the infinite freedom of modernity, the "I" of the poem wavers between revolt against and veneration for her tradition and those who lived by it. Beginning with a vision of her female ancestors and her desire to revolt against them, she then writes of her first love (poem 2), sexual guilt and aloneness (poem 3), marriage (poem 4), giving birth, (poem 5), and ends (poem 6) by coming full circle and invoking an image of her mother. Revolt has changed to acceptance and even reverence.

The work begins with her conflict. Although the "I" of the poem considers herself a modern woman, she is visited and even haunted by images of her female ancestors. Wanting to guide her in their footsteps, the grandmothers boast of their tsnies (female modesty) and the loytere blut (pure blood) they've carried over generations in the "kosher cellars" of their "hearts." The latter is a reference to the

Jewish laws of family purity which prohibit a woman from having sexual contact during menstruation. The poet's repetition of the word "kosher" in the phrase "fun ayere koshere betn antloyfn" (to escape from your kosher beds)[2] shows her contempt for the piety and purity her ancestresses value.

The spokeswoman for the ancestresses is the aguna (grass widow). The most tragic of Jewish women, her fate exemplifies the harshness and insensitivity of the halakhic system. Not knowing whether her husband is dead or alive, the aguna is not allowed to remarry unless witnesses declare her husband dead. If no such witnesses are found, she remains officially a married woman, and must remain alone forever. As her "cheeks like two rosy apples" suggest, the aguna has not tasted the fruits of the tree of knowledge, and is required by halakha (Jewish law) to remain sexually unfulfilled for the rest of her life. Despite her proud piety, her life is an eternal succession of "eynzame nekht" (lonely nights) in which she waits for a husband who never appears.

The poet's attitude towards her ancestresses is fraught with ambivalence. Although she feels compassion for them, she also feels trapped by them. She wants to escape her grandmothers and the loneliness, sexual deprivation, and repression which are their legacy, but she cannot; these women are a part of her. Like a dark shadowy force, they pervade her unconscious and her darker private moments. "Nor ir geyt mir nokh, vu di gas iz nor tunkl, vu s'falt nor a shotn" (But wherever the street grows dark you pursue me—/ Wherever a shadow falls). She finds her thoughts and her unconscious feelings bound by their words like "silken cords" around her head. Even so,

the image of the zaydene fedem (silken threads) suggests the beauty and fragility of this connection.

In choosing not to follow in their footsteps, the poet relinquishes both the negative elements and the holiness that has spread its aura around their lives. "Iz mayn lebn an oysgeflikt blat fun a seyfer" (My life is a page ripped out of a holy book) she says, suggesting that although she was born into that holiness she herself is no longer imbued with it. The poet's reference to her life as part of a book is a natural metaphor for a writer, while the word seyfer (holy book) stresses her origins in a holy tradition. But she is not a pious tkhine (women's prayer) writer, she is a modern poet and her relationship to that tradition is truncated; her life/the "page," is ripped from the book. Because her life has been predetermined by her past she may not feel totally the author of her life and hence "part of the first line is missing."

In the second poem, Kadye writes of first love and a newly-found sexual freedom. Feeling she must confess her infidelity to the man "vos hot der ershter mir mayn froyen-freyd gebrakht" (who first brought me my women's joy) she finds that freedom is not without pain and guilt.

Despite the poet's rejection of traditional Judaism, biblical and religious allusions underline much of the text. The image of her lover seizing her by the braid stresses the male's aggressiveness and power over her. His pulling her uncovered hair, the symbol of her unchecked seductiveness, is an indictment of her wantonness. It may also be an allusion to the biblical ceremony of the sota (unfaithful wife).[3] In this ceremony, the hair of the woman accused of

unfaithfulness was uncovered as a symbol of her degradation. To determine whether she was guilty or innocent, she wa forced to drink bitter waters. In alluding to the stoning at Sodom, the poet implicates herself as a sinner, unworthy of protection by the angels of God. Although she raises her hands in imitation of her mother blessing the Sabbath candles, her fingers appear like ten sins, emphasizing her transgression of the Ten Commandments and the contrast between her mother's piety and her own sinfulness.

The third poem tells of loneliness and homelessness. Although not stated explicitly, it seems that the poet,—perhaps because of her infidelity,— cannot go home. She spends the night lying on the stairs with a stone step as her pillow. Again, biblical references underline the text creating ironic comparisons. The stone pillow is an allusion to the stone Jacob uses as a pillow on his way to Haran. While Jacob lies at the gateway to heaven, the poet _shart zikh on dr'erd_ (shuffling along on the ground) is unable to ascend to the third floor. God's promise to Jacob that his seed shall spread all over the earth ironically emphasizes the poet's solitariness and desperation. Cast out by her lover, she is alone, with no vision or hope, and with _fargliverte glider_ (frozen, lifeless limbs) that mock the promise of bringing forth future generation.

In the fourth poem Kadye moves from the loneliness of singleness to marriage. Past and present blend together as the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebeccah, Rachel, and Leah appear before different kinds of brides, each helping them in her own distinctive fashion. Sarah who gave food to the angels when they visited her and Abraham in Genesis 18 here fulfills the _mitzva_ (good deed) of feeding poor brides.

Because Sarah had mercilessly thrown Abraham's concubine or second wife Hagar out of the house, much as if she were but a "woman of the street," she atones for it by providing specifically for poor brides who are gasnmeydlekh (women of the streets) and dinstmeydlekh (servant girls).

Rebecca, the daughter of Abraham's brother Bethuel, was chosen by Abraham as Isaac's bride because of her yikhus (family background). Here she displays the same generosity and compassion towards the "kales oreme fun a meyikhesdikn shtam" (poor brides of good family background) as she did towards Abraham's Eliezer in the Bible. The camels laden with white linen, the rings and the golden bracelet are allusions to Rebecca's meeting with Eliezer at the well (Genesis 24) in which she gives him and his camels water to drink, and he returns her kindness with gifts of rings and bracelets and raiment.

Rachel, who once conceived with difficulty, here empathizes with barren women. To comfort them she offers them the hope that "God might at any hour open their closed womb." The heylungs bleter (medicinal leaves) she brings them are an allusion to the mandrakes she herself tried unsuccessfully to obtain so that Jacob her husband might lie with her.

And finally, Mother Leah, the saddest and least loved of all the Matriarchs comes to lonely unloved women, covering her red tear-filled eyes with her "pale hands."

Where before Kadye showed the link between the modern woman and her immediate foremothers, she now uses Biblical allusions to link the generations of women from the beginning of Jewish time. Having attained immortality, the matriarchs are able to act in history by

stepping out of the past to right their wrongdoings and to offer solace and support to modern women living out the forever unchanging drama of womanhood.

In the fifth poem the poet talks of birth. Here images of nature harmonize with and symbolize the human event. It is spring, a time of birth. The grass pushing up from under a stone parallels the child's pushing its way out of the womb to life. The lightning flashes which "shnaydn uf mit zilberne khalofim/ di shvartse erd" (pierce with silver slaughtering knives/ the black earth) are a phallic reference.

Images of life and death permeate this section, stressing the eternal sameness of the woman's plight. Whether she delivers lying on the earth near a well, or in a modern white hospital bed, the expectant mother does not know if she smiles at her "nokh nisht-geboyrn kind" (unborn child) or at death. The word "khalofim" which means specifically "slaughtering" knives emphasizes the danger of conception. Similarly, the skull of a dead horse covering a bed of fresh moss shows the intertwining of death and life.

In contrast to the first poem where the women of her family came to her in dreams, against her will, in the culminating poem the poet consciously summons forth thoughts of her mother.

Once again the sorrows and the beauty of this kind of life blend together poignantly. The image of her mother's mouth like a shrivelled plum echoes back to the apple-cheeked grandmother, and captures the sadness and sexual deprivation of her life. But the anger of the first poem is gone; where the poet once despised the modesty and piety of her ancestresses, she now reveres her mother's faith. She herself is like a page torn from a holy book, but her

mother is a part of that holy book, her modestly covered arms--vessels of holiness, gotsforkhtike shrift in vayse gvilim" (reverent script on white parchment). Revering the faith which ennobled and beautified the lives of her foremothers, the poet longs for a sense of holiness in her life. Unable to embrace this faith wholeheartedly, she must revolt--not against God but against Judaism's rigid interpretation of His laws. She, as much as her mother, needs a God to whom she may pour out her heart in her search for solace and hope.

In her poetic journey the poet moves from revolt to recognition. Much as she has wanted to escape her foremothers, she finds that they are indelibly imprinted on her psyche. To escape them would be to deny who she is and where she came from. In attempting to do so, she realizes, she had perhaps gained some freedom but had lost the simple faith which sanctified the lives of Jewish women over thousands of years.

Despite external changes the poet sees how similar the lives of women are in all generations. Women have always experienced love and loneliness, the pangs of birth, and the sorrow of losing a child. The moments of great joy and sorrow remain unvarying. She, in her brown silk dress with her throat immodestly bared, is, she realizes, not very different from her mother "ayngehilt" (enveloped) in her modest attire. And so she, like her mother, sheds tears and utters a prayer to God "vi a karger eyntsik tropndiker regn" (like a spare single-dropped rain). While her mother waited for an answer, she is not so sure that anyone is listening. . .

Notes

[1] Melekh Ravitch, Mayn lexikon [My Lexicon] Montreal: A committee, 1945) 123.

[2] The original Yiddish is quoted from Kadye Molodowsky's poem "Froyen lider" ("Women's Songs") as published in E. Korman, Yidishe dikhterins antologie [Anthology of Yiddish Poetesses] (Chicago: L.M. Shteyn Publishers, 1928) 190-95. Translations of the first and fifth poems are by Adrienne Rich in Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry (New York, Chicago, San Francisco: Holt. Rhinehart and Winston, 1969) 184-85. All other translations are my own.

[3] The sotah ceremony had something of the witchhunt in it. If the woman became ill and her belly distended, she was declared guilty. Yet it is doubtful that anyone would not react this way to these waters. See Numbers 5.11-31.

Chapter 3

Marriage

Heroines in most literatures are expected to marry. This expectation was even stronger for the Yiddish heroine since it was stronger in Jewish than in non-Jewish life. A word about marriage in traditional Eastern European society would be helpful here to acquaint the reader with the milieu out of which many of the works discussed here spring. In those days, as even in very religious Jewish communities today, not to marry was unthinkable. Marriages were not left to the devices of young men and women but were arranged by their parents or by an official *shadkhn* (matchmaker). Matchmaking was such a great *mitzva* (good deed) that popular lore established God as the first matchmaker; legend has it that after He created the world, He occupied Himself with making matches. Here, in this world, the Jewish community regarded matchmaking so seriously that it took great pains to marry off even the poor and the mentally and physically disabled.

In many ways, marriage was a business transaction, complete with a broker, the *shadkhn*, a contract, the *ksube*, and a financial settlement, the *nadn* (dowry). Both the bride's and the groom's sides sought to gain either *yikhus* (family status) or money by the arrangement. *Yikhus* was determined first by learning and then by wealth so that a scholar, rich or poor, or someone descended from a family of scholars, was considered a good catch.

In making the match, the feelings of the bride and groom were

rarely taken into account. Romance, when it did develop, usually followed rather than preceded the wedding. A young man or woman could refuse to marry, but family and societal pressure usually worked against this. In rare cases, the couple had the luxury of more than one meeting, and sometimes they corresponded in the interval between the engagement and the wedding. In his novel Stempenyu, Sholem Aleichem satirizes such correspondence in his description of the letter-writing rituals conducted by Rokhele and Moyshe-Mendl

> . . . Emes, in dem ibershraybekhts--vos darf men do leykenen?--hot Motl Shprayz gehat a groysn kheylik, den azoy vi dem khosn's brivlekh zaynen geven geshribn in dray shprakh: hebrayish, rusikh, un daytch, derum hot Motl Shprayz gemuzt zen, di kale zol oykh epes nit farshemt vern. Un bikhdey tsu bavayzn basheymperlekh az fun Motl Shprayz's kheyder geyen nit aroys kin meydlekh glat azoy, vi bay andere shraybers, hot er zikh geflayst, az in der kale's brivlekh zol zayn tsugezetst nokh frantseyzish oykh, dos heyst frantseyzishe oysyes, in velkhe Motl Shprayz iz geven gor a groyser boki.1

> . . . Admittedly, Motl Shprayz [the writing teacher] (why should we deny it?) played a large part in the correspondence. For since the groom's letters were in three languages--Hebrew, Russian, and German--Motl Shprayz had to make sure the bride was not put to shame. And in order to demonstrate quite plainly that any graduate of Motl's school had something on the ball (which couldn't be said of other scribes), Motl saw to it that the bride's letters contained a fourth language, French or rather French characters, in which Motl was utterly proficient.2

Sholem Aleichem's description may be ironic and exaggerated, but it does reflect the conventions of the time. To impress the fiancé, one (or one's teacher) wrote, not in straightforward Yiddish, which was deemed too "low," but rather, in a combination of Hebrew, Russian, or German, sometimes interspersed with a smattering of French for elegance. Formulaic expressions, and not the writer's true feelings, constituted the bulk of these letters. Even if the bride and groom

dispensed with letter-writing conventions, they were probably writing to a virtual stranger, and to an idealized fantasy of the stranger, at that.

Although neither party had much freedom in deciding whom to marry, the constraints were usually greater for the woman. An unmarried girl, even as young as eighteen, was considered an embarrassment, while an available man, at any age, was a treasure. A poor girl with no dowry could expect a life of spinsterhood, penniless and alone. The immigrant writer Mary Antin poignantly describes the urgency of marrying off a girl:

> . . . a woman's only work was motherhood. To be left an old maid became, accordingly, the greatest misfortune that could threaten a girl; and to ward off that calamity the girl and her family, to the most distant relatives, would strain every nerve, whether by contributing to her dowry, or hiding her defects from the marriage broker, or praying and fasting that God might send her a husband.3

Even when money was not a problem, the girl was hastily married off so that she could fulfill her destiny as a hard-working wife and mother. What options did she have? As a Yiddish proverb goes, "There are no Jewish convents." Having children was not a matter of choice but a mitzva (commandment); the more children a woman had, the better she fulfilled the biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply.

Although it is never the aim of the creative artist merely to present a picture of life as it is for the sake of historical accuracy (historians can do that), his or her works will frequently draw upon the reality of the day. Yiddish literature offers countless descriptions of marriage which reflect the conditions discussed above.

At times, marriage is idealized as part of a quickly vanishing

well-ordered uncomplicated universe. At other times it is the target of criticism of progressive writers who portray it as the backward oppresive institution of a moribund society. In works about the emerging modern woman, portrayals of arranged marriage tend to be (although are not always) negative. Defying the traditions of what was supposed to be the most important role of her life, is the most obvious and significant form of rebellion given to most female protagonists.

Let us move now from historical generalization to literary texts to see how writers used the stuff of life to shape their creative vision and, at times, advance their ideological ends. I shall begin with Leah, the young girl in I.L. Peretz's story "Khasene gehat" ("Married") because she is a transitional figure; lured by the modern world while trapped in the old. Although this is certainly not one of Peretz's greatest stories--the characters are too stereotypical, the plot too predictable, the maskilic message too unambiguous--it is, nevertheless, a psychologically insightful and moving work. Leah's story exemplifies arranged marriage at its worst. A poor girl from a religious family, she is forced to hide her affection for an "enlightened" young man and to marry the seventy year old miser Reb Zaynvele.

By telling the story of how she came to marry Reb Zaynvele, five years after her marriage, Leah combines the clarity of hindsight with her present sorrowful knowledge gleaned from experience.

Her description of her childhood shows the lot of a girl child to be more difficult than that of a boy, even within the supposedly loving sphere of the family. Embittered by poverty and overwork,

Leah's mother took her frustrations out on her, hitting her, pulling her hair, and criticizing her help. Although Leah forgives her, she can't help noticing that she suffers while her brother are spared.

Her mother also blames much of her unhappiness on her husband. This resentment, whether justified or irrational, emphasizes the way in which misery colours the life and attitude of the poor woman. Imagining that her husband has an easier more carefree existence, Leah's mother would gaze out the window, sigh, and think:

> Es art im epes? Er zitst zikh dortn in vald, vi a khrabie, shmekt frishe luft, ligt zikh afn groz, frest zoyer-milkh, efsher nokh smetene, ikh veys? Un do, darn mir di kishkes. (188)4
>
> What does he care? He sits in the forest like a duke, breathes fresh air, lies around on the grass, gorges himself on sour milk or maybe even sour cream, how do I know? And here, my insides are shrivelling up.

In Leah's mother's view, she and her husband inhabit the very different spheres of do (here) and dortn (there). "Here" is the narrow world of the woman enclosed behind the windows, a world of hard work, household drudgery, and subservience to rich women. "There" is the world of woods, grass, fresh air, and freedom in which she imagines her husband lives.

Because an unmarried daughter holds the possibility of improving the family's lot through a "successful" marriage, Leah's parents, arrange for her to marry her father's employer, the wealthy Reb Zaynvele. Peretz reveals such an arranged marriage to be the most pernicious of practices possessing the power to blind well-meaning but desperate people to the needs of their daughters. Conveniently forgetting that Reb Zaynvele, a stingy employer, who has had three wives, is also likely to be a cruel husband, Leah's father presents

Reb Zaynvele as a good match and even pities him his bad luck with wives.

In dreaming of future prosperity, Leah's parents forget that according to Jewish folk belief, a man who has buried three wives is a katlan (murderer). Reb Zaynvele is not to be pitied but suspected. Any fears Leah's parents do have are assuaged by Reb Zaynvele's age, for as Leah's mother says in an attempt at easing her own conscience, "How long can he live?" (204).

Even her concern that, "Me volt gedarft aleyn oysredn, berakhel bitkha haktana, vorem zeyer a guter mentsh iz er nit. . ." (We should have explicitly stated, 'We're talking about your younger daughter Rachel,' because he isn't a very good man. . .) (204), coming as it does after the match has been made, it is but another instance of their thoughtlessness.

The reference to "Rachel, your younger daughter" is an allusion to the biblical story of Rachel and Leah. Leah's parents worry that Reb Zaynvele may try to fool them as Laban, the father of Rachel and Leah, fooled Jacob. Because her parents stand to gain by the match, the Leah of "Khasene gehat," like her biblical namesake, is married off to a man who doesn't love her. Even though the Peretz story has no Rachel and no overt deception, the allusion to Rachel reminds us that, just as in biblical times, an innocent young woman is the victim of an ill-conceived arranged marriage.

The engagement is presented to Leah as a fait accompli, stressing again the young girl's powerlessness in determining the single most important event in her life. Traditional Jewish life offers her no transition, no adolescence in which to explore her awakening desires

and her emotional turbulence. The author emphasizes the unnaturalness of early marriage by showing how Leah goes from playing jacks one day to being a kale-moyd (bride-to-be) the next. Describing what we know today to be growing pains, Leah refers to the time right after the death of Reb Zaynvele's wife and before her engagement, as a "vunderlekh umruike tsayt" (amazingly restless time) (194).

These abrupt emotional upheavals are paralleled by changes in Leah's life. Leah's world becomes smaller than ever. Her mother, aware of the vulnerability of a nubile young girl, no longer lets her out alone. Without gaining the independence of adulthood, Leah loses the freedom of childhood.

When Leah does leave the house, she sneaks out to walk alone beside the river. The author creates a contrast between the house inside and nature outside. The peaceful, free, and spacious outdoors offers her an escape from the crowded, emotionally and physically suffocating house, pervaded by sickness and death. It also symbolizes a world of options not possible within the confines of the house.

Consistent with this, Leah hears the royfe-yung (doctor's assistant) singing Yiddish songs, while outside sitting on the river bank. Here, the male voice, not the female, is the seductive force. The royfe-yung's identity as a stranger and an orphan imbues him with a melancholy romanticism. For Leah, the Yiddish songs he sings when, as she remarks, "others would have sung zmires (Sabbath tunes) (196) and his very being bespeak the possibility of a world of freedom and new ideas where young men and women may fall in love.

Although she delights in the company of the royfe-yung, Leah is held back by the knowledge that in the eyes of her parents, he is a

heretic and no better than a gentile. Her conflicting feelings are played out in the scene in which the _royfe-yung_ offers her a piece of carob, evoking the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Subconsciously aware of its fatal lure, Leah refuses it—a symbolic rejection of the knowledge of a world beyond her.

The announcement that she has been betrothed brutally hurls Leah back into her own world. When she hears the news, she faints. She does so again several times before her marriage and for the last time, at her wedding, when she first sees her _bashertn_ (predestined mate). Fainting is a sort of temporary death, signifying a desire to retreat from a consciousness too painful to bear.

Unable to retreat permanently, Leah is plagued by visions of death. The boundaries betwen marriage and death become so obscured for her that she imagines her wedding procession as a death march and her husband as a corpse.

The reaction of everyone else to her marriage again points out the insensitivity and blindness both of society and its victims. Everyone congratulates Leah on her good match. Her chum Rivka, soon to be offered up on the sacrificial marriage altar herself, is ecstatic. She talks to Leah about married life as if it were one extended good time in which she and Leah will do all sorts of pleasant things together, like drink chicory and be pregnant. In this fantasy world, significantly, Rivka's husband never appears and Leah's husband dies soon, leaving her a young widow!

Leah has no fantasies. She is plagued by her conscience, which she describes as a battle betwen the angels of good and evil. Her perception of these angels bears witness to the way in which societal

pressure can cause a person to doubt her very instincts. The "good angel," tells Leah to marry Reb Zaynvele while the "bad angel," tells her to refuse the marriage. Leah is repelled, but more than that, she is frightened lest she share the fate of his other wives.

Even so, she feels she has no choice other than to marry Reb Zaynvele. Her poverty and her religious upbringing do not allow her to be with the royfe-yung and make the break with tradition he has made. She feels she must subordinate her personal happiness to the will of others. Lured by the modern world, she is held back, literally and psychologically, by the constraints of the old.

Notes

[1] Mary Antin, _The Promised Land_ (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1912) 35.

[2] Sholem Aleichem, _Stempenyu_, in _Ale verk fun Sholem Aleichem_ [The Complete Works of Sholem Aleichem], (New York: Folksfond, 1919) vol. 2: 165.

[3] Sholem Aleichem, _Stempenyu_, _The Shtetl_, trans. and ed. Joachim Neugroschel, (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1979) 313-14.

[4] All references to the story "_Khasene gehat_" ["Married"] refer to I.L. Peretz, _Di verk fun Y.L. Perets_ [The Works of I.L. Peretz], (New York: Farlag Idish, 1920) vol 2: 186-211.

Chapter 4

Stempenyu

While Leah, the young woman in "Khasene gehat" is trapped by tradition and dares not think about her unhappiness, Rokhele, the heroine of Sholem Aleichem's novel Stempenyu does dare. Although she is defined by the narrator as a "gute yidishe tokhter" (good daughter of Israel) possessing all the "Jewish honesty" and piety these words suggest, she comes perilously closes to losing her Jewish virtue.

The upbringing and betrothal of Rokhele the Beautiful are typical of those of countless gute yidishe tekhter. The only girl in a family of male children, Rokhele is brought up in a traditional Jewish household. Wanting to have "a child less in the house," her parents send her to kheyder (traditional school for boys) with her brothers. This is perhaps not so typical but it demonstrates a not uncommon lack of concern for the education of girls. Perhaps her early education with boys helps develop in her a dangerously strong will and a desire for freedom.

At first, like most brides-to-be, Rokhele is thrilled by her coming marriage; Moyshe-Mendl, her fiancé, is rumoured to be a great catch. In enumerating the qualities that make him so, the author pokes fun at the values of his society. Rokele's family holds equally in esteem the fact that Moyshe-Mendl is from a good family, a scholar, and--has a beautiful handwriting. In short, he is a gem of a husband!

While these are not unappealing qualities in a bridegroom, the parents' criteria do not take the groom's character or the couple's need to get to know each other before the marriage into account.

Rokhele and Moyshe-Mendl see each other only once during their engagement, "On top of that, only for a couple of hours, and on top of that, in a whole crowd of people, and on top of that, with the groom-to-be in one room and the bride-to-be in another room."[1] The narrator's ironic attitude towards traditional courtship is again evident in his description of Rokhele and Moyshe-Mendl's correspondence during their engagement as "shpiln in ksovim" (playing at letter writing) (165; ch. 10).[2]

Given this courtship, it is not surprising that Rokhele and Moyshe-Mendl are in for a shock after the wedding. The narrator stresses the separateness of their two worlds. Moyshe-Mendl grew up in a man's world studying Bible and Talmud and was taught to feel superior to all women, indeed to anyone not versed in the same texts as he, and Rokhele grew up in a woman's world in which she acquired only a passing familiarity with these texts. While Moyshe-Mendl's life still extends beyond the home into the market place and the House of Study, Rokhele's life is now totally defined by her marriage. Engaging in absolutely nothing productive, she suffers from the same sense of boredom and purposelessness that novels such as Effi Briest and Madame Bovary take to be the primary cause of adultery. Gazing out at the bustling market place, Rokhele realizes how empty and useless she feels:

> . . . mit ir bloy-zaydn malbush, himl-kolir, un mit di perelekh, brazlietn, oyringlekh, fingerlekh--un zi filt az zi iz epes gor vild-fremd, mit dem dozikn bild, mit der gantser natur, epes nit ahin, nit aher, nit mark-yidene, nit grafine--glat a yidish kind, a yidishe tokhter, poter fun alts. Ot hot zi zikh a man, est zikh kest bay di shver-un-shviger, tut nit kin hant in kaltn vaser, un der man iz oder in beys-medresh, oder in mark. (156-157; ch. 9)

> . . . with her sky-blue dress, with the pearls, with the bracelets, eardrops, rings--and she felt alien to the surroundings, to the whole of nature. She felt betwixt and between, neither a market vendor nor a countess--simply a Jewish woman, a daughter of Israel, that was all. She had a husband, she lived with her in-laws never doing a lick of work and her husband was either in synagogue or at the market. (308)

It is an image of herself which dismays Rokhele. It was traditional for a Jewish family to invest much of its wealth in jewels which adorned the shterntikhl (headband)[3] worn by the wife. Decked out in "di gantse yidishe tsirung, der gantser yidisher mayontek (all the Jewish jewelry, the whole Jewish fortune) (151; ch. 8), Rokhele feels she is nothing but a status symbol, reminding the world of her husband's wealth and social standing.

Precisely this social standing makes her a lonely woman with no independent identity. The word "poter" meaning "free" or "rid of" suggests, both that she has no occupation, and that her station in life dictates that she disdain having one. The "zikh" known as the opgeshpanter zikh (relaxed reflexive) in the phrases "ot hot zi zikh a man" (she has a husband) "est zikh kest bay shver-un-shviger" (lived with her in-laws), lends an ironic tone to the description and suggests that Rokhele holds neither her marital status nor her parasitical living situation in high esteem. Powerless and alienated, she wants an identity other than wife, daughter-in-law, and child of that greater family known as the Jewish people. Her in-laws give her everything she could desire--except the freedom to discover what she wants.

Jewish society can see no reason for Rokhele to be unhappy with Moyshe-Mendl. It is incapable of understanding that for all his

booklearning, and perhaps even because of it, he does not know how to get along with women. He holds himself, "vaytlekh fun ir un epes azoy vi hekher fun ir, epes nit ir glaykhn, vi der shteyger iz fun a yidishn yungermanchik, a takhshit; er ken zikh nit aroplozn niderik tsum vayb, (169; ch. 10) (He kept far away from her and acted kind of superior to her, not like her equal, as is the custom of a young Jewish man, a gem. He can't go down to his wife's level, it doesn't seem right to him,) (317).

As the words yungermanchik and takhshit suggest, the narrator is clearly sympathetic to Rokhele and disapproving of the self-important Moyshe-Mendl. The diminutive suffix "chik" in yungermanchik is almost always deflating and the word takhshit (jewel, gem) when referring to a person, can only be ironic.

Even when Rokhele and Moyshe-Mendl try to get to know each other, they are comically but poignantly unsuccessful:

> Vos iz, Moyshe-Mendl?
> Vos, "Vos iz?"
> Vos kukstu?
> Ver kukt?
> Du kukst.
> Ikh kuk?
> Ver den kukt? (171; ch. 11)
>
> What is it, Moyshe-Mendl?
> What do you mean, "What is it?"
> Why are you staring?
> Who's staring?
> You're staring.
> I'm staring?
> Who then is staring? (p. 317)

Because Moyshe-Mendl is such a disappointment to her, Rokhele soon finds him ridiculous and revolting; his mere physical presence disgusts her. As she and Stempenyu watch Moyshe-Mendl dancing at a wedding in a drunken frenzy, Rokhele is embarrassed, and struck by how

much her husband falls short of the dashing Stempenyu whose charm and sexuality are flowing unmistakeably towards her.

The image of Moyshe-Mendl, intoxicated and sleeping that same night, is one of those rare powerful descriptions that captures in a stroke the essence of Rokhele's feelings towards her marriage and her husband, ". . . dos moyl ofn, di oygn farglotst, der haldz farrisn, un a knop, a sharfer knop, shtekt aroys funem gorgl, az es iz a miese zakh tsu kukn" (150; ch. 7) (. . . his mouth open, his eyes gaping, his neck twisted, and his Adam's apple, a sharp knob, jutting out of his throat--he was hideous to look at) (303). Rokhele's involuntary but inevitable contrasting of Stempenyu and Moyshe-Mendl sounds the death knell to romance.

Not surprisingly, the strangeness and the pressures of married life which cause Moyshe-Mendl to lose the boyish ways which made him such an attractive khosn (fiancé), also rob young wives of their girlish charms. Almost without transition, when she marries, a girl becomes a vaybl (diminutive of wife) or yidene (married Jewish woman). The latter word particularly, connotes more than just a married woman. It connotes someone psychologically middle-aged, unattractive, gossipy, and shrewish. As the antithesis of the yidishe tokhter, the yidene has none of her beauty, sweetness, and purity. As a romantic heroine, she is an impossibility. Although Rokhele is also described as a "poshet yidish vaybl on oyberkeplekh, on shpitslekh" (157) (A simple Jewish wife, devoid of tricks and dodges) (308), she is the antithesis of the typical vaybl as represented by Stempenyu's wife Freydl or Moyshe-Mendl's mother Dvoshe-Malke. In fact, it was the aim of the narrator, as he tells Mendele Moykher Sforim in his prefatory letter, to create three protagonists representing three types, and to

distinguish between:

> . . .di yidishe tokhter Rokhele di sheyne mit ir yidisher erlekhkayt un dos yidishe vaybl Freydl mit ir soykherishn gayst un mit ir tsitern ibern kerbl--yeder mit zayn bazunder veltl. (125)

> . . . the Daughter of Israel Rokhele the Beautiful with her Jewish honesty, and the Jewish wife Freydl with her mercantile spirit and her trembling over a dollar--each with his (or her) own sperate world.

The transition from yidishe tokhter to vaybl takes as long as the marriage ceremony. Given Rokhele's marriage, it comes as no surprise that she is attracted to the klezmer (musician) Stemepnyu. He is the embodiment of nineteenth century romanticism. His music is all emotion, and with it, he transports people into other realms, releasing passions they scarcely knew they had.

> Hearts filled, overflowed, tears came to the eyes. . . . And beautiful Rokhele. . . couldn't understand what was happening. Something pulled at her heart, something caressed her, but, what it was--she didn't understand. (Shtetl, 298; ch. 5)

A real Don Juan, Stempenyu breaks the hearts of young women in every town he plays in. Although he lives on the margins of society, society's disapproval is mixed with envy and admiration. To women destined to live out their lives in one shtetl, Stempenyu, the artist, traveller, and the reputed darling of noble ladies, represents a world of magic and adventure. Women, knowing his reputation as a "love 'em and leave 'em" man, do not avoid him, but rather, fall in love with him, only to have their hearts broken.

Sholem Aleichem sets up parallels between Rokhele and Stempenyu. Stempenyu's talent, charm, and disregard for conventional morality set him apart from his community, just as Rokhele's alienation, virtues,

and musical talent set her apart from hers. The two are drawn together by their shared differentness.

Rokhele's singing is filled with the same yearning and poignancy that compel Stempenyu's most soulful music. It is part of the inequality between the sexes that Rokhele's voice, kol isha (the voice of a woman) is taken seriously only as an instrument of seduction and is therefore silenced, but Stempenyu's talent is admired and sought after. Sholem Aleichem portrays it as lamentable that the freedom to sing Rokhele had as a child is curtailed when she becomes engaged. Although Rokhele's parents realize that she has a koyakh (power) which, as the narrator points out, we would call "talent," they can still offer her no higher praise than the regretful, "A mansbilsher kop af ir; a marokhe vos zi iz geboyrn gevorn a nekeyve (She has a man's head; too bad she was born a female) (174; ch. 12). But since Rokhele is not a man, even were her voice the finest in the world, the people around her would never regard her singing as anything more than "tereleyken" (twittering) and "brimblen" (chirping), (174) not to be done in public--terms which indict both them and the culture that prescribes such judgment.

Modesty also dictates that Rokhele, like all Jewish women, cut her hair and cover her head. Frequent references to hair and headcoverings underline their importance and also establish another link between Rokhele and Stempenyu.

When Rokhele, forgetting herself, sings aloud, she is often depicted with her head uncovered and her tresses flowing. Her bare head suggests that, at least for the moment, she has cast off her wifely role and is expressing feelings that a married woman ought not

express.

During that fateful tryst on Monastery Street, Rokhele wraps herself in her kerchief, clinging tightly to it, as if in so doing, she could somehow cling to her virtue.

The very first scene in the book shows Rokhele and Stempenyu at a pre-wedding veiling ceremony. In his soulful playing, Stempenyu, who is very much the dominated one in his marriage, identifies with the bride who is soon to lose her tresses, and captures the tragedy of her lot in his music.

Other hair metaphors emphasize Stempenyu's ientification with women. Chapter 15 in which he marries Freydl is titled "Stempneyu farshleyert zikh umgerikht" which literally means, "Stempenyu is veiled unexpectedly," and the following chapter is titled "Shimshon hagiber bay Delilan afn shoys" meaning "Samson the Mighty on Delilah's lap."

Comparisons to veiled brides and to Samson, who lost his strength when he lost his hair, suggest that even though Stempenyu continues to play Don Juan, he has, in fact, been tamed by his Delilah, Freydl. Ironically, the domestic situation which draws Stempenyu and Rokhele together, also keeps them apart. Stempenyu is trapped by a castrating Delilah precisely because he is a Don Juan and a spineless charlatan. Rokhele the Beautiful deserves better.

Given Stempenyu's history, we may conjecture that had he won Rokhele, he would soon have felt hemmed in by the same constraints which caused him to desert his other conquests. He offers romance but not real love and when romance leaves, he leaves. While we may believe that he is sincere in saying, "Zi [Rokhele] tut mir hartsedik bang," (I really miss her [Rokhele]) (246; ch. 26), we must also note

that his romance with Rokhele was never more than a fantasy. It is probably also the first time that he is the abandoned and not the abandoner and his wounded pride is as great as his broken heart. Never had he expected rejection by, as he calls her, a "poshet yidish vaybl" (plain Jewish housewife).

Indeed, in matters of love, Rokhele has no more experience than a "simple Jewish housewife." Her sole source of knowledge regarding love and romance is the tragic story of her friend Khaye-Etl the Orphan. Brought up by a mean aunt and uncle, Khaye-Etl falls in love with their son Benjamin. Although Benjamin swears that he will marry her, he lacks the courage to defy his father's wishes and lets himself be married off to another. Khaye-Etl is married to a "khniok, a kelev shebiklovim" (a narrow-minded religious fanatic, a dog among dogs) (159; ch. 9) and dies soon after of a broken heart.

Rokhele keeps Khaye-Etl's story in mind during her clandestine meeting with Stempenyu on Monastery Street. This meeting is an encounter, not so much between the two would-be lovers as between the gute yidishe tokhter (good Daughter of Israel) and the bal-aveyrenitse (sinner) sides of Rokhele's personality. The narrator informs the reader that the heroine will not be engaging in any of the "tchikave pikante stsenes" (225-26; ch. 22) (piquant and titillating scenes) (355) so common in the hekhst interesante romanen (highly interesting novels) of Shomer, and other practitioners of that ever popular genre of shund romanen (trashy romantic novels). He insists that, " . . . undzer Rokhele iz gekumen aher nit kholile vi a bal-aveyrenitse, nit vi an oysgelasene vos loyft zikh kushn in der finster mit ir libendn

for any sinful purpose, God forbid, she hasn't come here like a debauched woman hungry to kiss her lover in the darkness, heaven forfend) (355).

The Christian name of the street--Monastery Street--on which Rokhele and Stempenyu meet, ironically hints that this is an appropriate place for a Jewish woman to abandon her virtue. Indeed the two would-be lovers converse "mekoyakh epes gornit kin yidishe zakhn" (230-31; ch. 23) (about things that were anything but Jewish) (359) and Rokhele suddenly feels "as if she had grown wings, and were free as a bird and could fly" (231). Everything suggests that she is ready to fly in the face of convention, declare her love to Stempenyu, run off with him, and "live happily ever after."

But Rokhele is haunted by Khaye-Etl's ill-fated romance. Ironically, she sees this story as proof of the evils of romantic love when, in fact, the lesson to be learned is, not that romantic love is dangerous, but, rather, that the thwarting of love may be dangerous. Guided by her good Jewish morals, and instinctively suspicious of Stempenyu, she says no to him, thereby shattering all our expectations of "titillating and piquant scenes."

It is significant that although Sholem Aleichem seems sympathetic to the "lovers" until this point, he cannot allow Stempenyu and Rokhele to run off together. Having come to signify the break-up of traditional values, romantic love may not triumph if the values of a "yidisher roman" (Jewish novel) are still to be affirmed. Instead Rokhele rushes home, looks her husband in the eye, and in that glance, "Their eyes met and a tiny fire kindled in them, the kind of fire you see when people fall happily in love for the first time, when the

heart and not the tongue does the talking. . . " (The Shtetl, 364; ch. 24). And so, implausible as it may seem, Rokhele and Moyshe-Mendl live happily ever after.

Although Rokhele comes perilously close to losing her "Jewish virtue" and becoming like a heroine in one of those "highly interesting novels," she does not and cannot. The ending, which seems so contrived, points to one of Sholem Aleichem's essential premises vis à vis the Yiddish novel: the heroine of a Jewish novel may struggle with tradition, but she will ultimately stay within it.

Lest the reader doubt his intentions, the author prefaces his novel with a letter to Mendele Moykher Sforim (pseudonym of S.Y. Abramovich) "the grandfather of Yiddish literature" discussing the role of the Jewish novel and Jewish novelist:

> . . . Ikh hob ongehoybn tsu farshteyn af vifl a yidisher roman darf zayn andersh fun di andere romanen, makhmes dos yidishe lebn bekhlal un di umshtendn, bay velkhe der yid kon lib hobn, zaynen gornit glaykh, vi bay andere felker. Haynt oysèr dem hot dokh dos yidishe folk zayn eygenem gayst mit bazundere minhogim un regilesn vos zaynen gor farendert vi bay andere umes. Ot di natsional simonim undzere, vos blaybn tomid ekht yidish, muzn zikh aroysvayzn in a yidishn roman, oyb er iz nor beemes genumen funem lebn. . . . dos hob ikh gevolt aroysvayzn durkh der yidisher tokhter, Rokhele di sheyne. (123-24)

> . . . I began to understand how much different a Jewish novel ought to be from other novels, because Jewish life in general and the circumstances in which a Jew can be in love are not at all similar to those among other nations. Moreover, the Jewish people has its own character, its own Jewish spirit with its own customs and rules which are very different from those of other nations. These national traits of ours which always remain genuinely Jewish must appear in a Jewish novel if it is truly taken from life. . . This is what I wanted to demonstrate with the Daughter of Israel, Rokhele the Beautiful.

This letter is a complex document which must be taken both seriously and skeptically. The mere writing of the letter, literary

game though it may be, suggests that Sholem Aleichem feels the need to explain and even defend, what, in his eyes, was a modern and revolutionary book. Although love, passion, and adultery were certainly known to Mendele and his generation of Haskala writers, their primary concerns were the social and political evils of contemporary Jewish life. Sholem Aleichem was very much aware that until Stempenyu, romantic themes could only be found in shund (trashy) romances. He knew that with Stempenyu, he was infusing a spirit of romanticism and an interest in the individual into a literature which had been focused on rationalism and social reform. Indeed, once the writer leaves the communal sphere, where can he go but to the sphere of love and personal relationships? And once he has arrived there, adultery is so much more interesting a subject than a good marriage.

Sholem Aleichem sets himself the paradoxical task of portraying Jewish life faithfully and maintaining the "differentness" of the Jewish novel he quotes Mendele as insisting upon, while also exploring new "unJewish" territory. As we have seen, the very "Jewish" ending proves that ultimately Sholem Aleichem wants to portray the "Jewish spirit and character" in his novel while the rather ordinary ways in which Jews fall in love in Stempenyu suggest that he also wants to be subtly subversive. Clearly, Rokhele comes perilously close to losing her Jewish virtue precisely because traditional Jewish expectations are constricting--even for a yidishe tokhter.

Her resistance is not, however, merely the reaffirmation of traditional Jewish values it appears to be. In Stempenyu, the narrator subverts the very values he is supposedly protecting. Rokhele's experience of temptation now illuminates her life. Her encounter with

Stempenyu leads her back to her husband, but as a changed woman. Stempenyu releases the "unJewish" emotions Rokhele never knew she possessed, and these emotions ultimately pose a threat to traditional Jewish life.

Like Emma Bovary, Rokhele yearns for meaning, beauty, and love. Unlike Emma, she does not let her self-indulgence and disastrous sense of romance prevent her from finding the love that is right under her nose. She comes to realize that Moyshe-Mendl can love her with a constancy and caring which the Rudolphs and Stempenyus can never match.

Unlike Effi Briest or Anna Karenina, Rokhele does not end up as a victim of society and its fading but still restrictive morals. Sholem Aleichem's _yidishe tokhter_ is a much stronger woman. Paradoxically, it is the values which Rokhele derives from a sometimes oppressive tradition and society which give her the strength to rise above her illusions and her society, shape her own destiny, and still remain within that society.

After Rokhele's encounter with Stempenyu, her marriage changes dramatically. Not for her nor for Moyshe-Mendl the passionless marriage that turns young women into _yidenes_. In the big city of Yehupetz they thrive on their freedom and newly discovered love. Rokhele finds her place in the family and in the Jewish community as a wife, mother, and a businesswoman and feels elated by the joy of purposeful activity.

This almost fairy-tale ending, which demands that Rokhele and Moyshe-Mendl break away from their families, bridge the culturally sanctioned gap between husband and wife, and imbue even a highly

respectable marriage with romantic passion, is modern and revolutionary. Mazepevke could scarcely condemn the young couple, nor was it used to such households. Triumphing within tradition, Rokhele still remains a Daughter of Israel and a married woman, but brings new understanding and passion to these roles.

Stempenyu is, as Sholem Aleichem says in his letter to Mendele, his first Yiddish novel, and as such, it suffers from the flaws of an early attempt. Determined to write a "Jewish novel," Sholem Aleichem subordinates plot, character depth, and the reader's credibility to this goal. The intrusive narrator is amusing but also annoying in his not so subtle attempts to manipulate the reader into accepting his contrived product. Even so, the work bears the stamp of the great Sholem Aleichem. Comical and delightful to read, suspenseful and dramatic at times, it is full of humour, warmth, gentle and not so gentle irony. Despite his sometimes superficial and even stereotypical portrayal of character, his attitude towards his characters and his subject matter is complex. His description of the Jews of Mazepevke is frequently critical. Even the main characters, with the exception of Rokhele who is always sympathetic, are as flawed as they are attractive. Stempenyu is a charmer and womanizer and yet, knowing this, we are as taken in by his charm as the innocent young damsels of Mazepevke, and are as ready to sympathize with his defeat as we would be if he were truly deserving of her whom he had lost.

Although Moyshe-Mendl is the stereotype of the old world husband, something of a nebish (pathetic fellow) and a batlen (unworldly idler), he is endearing in his shortcomings. Sholem Aleichem is able to move us from scorn and contempt to understanding and compassion for

this man who is as fragile and good-hearted as he is inept, and who is clumsily groping to get out of the role society has given him. In describing the Jews of Mazepevke, Sholem Aleichem exposes their foibles and their shortcomings, their vanities and petty snobberies, their small-town mentality and the generally stifling atmosphere of *shtetl* life. Despite his ironic portrayal of almost everyone in the novel, miraculously, the overall picture that emerges is positive. Behind all the these negative attributes, there lies a cohesiveness, a warmth and a set of enduring values that convince the reader that this society and its values must be preserved at all costs.

Notes

[1] All translations of Stempenyu are my own unless otherwise indicated. Those that are not, are taken from Stempenyu, trans. and ed. Joachim Neugroschel in The Shtetl (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1979) and will be indicated by page number in parentheses.

[2] All references to the original text are taken from Sholem Aleichem, Stempenyu, in Ale verk fun Sholem Aleichem, (New York: Folksfond, 1919) vol 2.

[3] For a treatment of the significance of the shterntikhl (head covering) in Jewish life, see Yisroyel Aksenfeld's Haskala drama, Dos shterntikhl (1861).

Chapter 5

Tevye and His Women

Sholem Aleichem's Tevye der milkhiker (Tevye the Milkman) is the story of Tevye, an Eastern European Job, who, continually tried by God, questions His ways but keeps his faith. Although the tales dealing with Tevye's daughters are the most interesting, Tevye, and not his daughters, always remains the protagonist of the work. The antagonist is, so to say, the changing times.

Sholem Aleichem wrote Tevye over a period of twenty-one years, from 1895-1916, and he gives the date of publication before each episode. Historical events such as the 1905 Revolution in Russia, its unhappy aftermath, the Constitution, the Russo-Japanese War, pogroms, and the Beylis Affair all resonate in the text. This attention to dates and historical events is significant, because in Tevye, Sholem Aleichem tests faith against modernity. Tevye, half-tragic, half-comic hero, can be seen as the traditional God-fearing Jew struggling to maintain his faith in a new world which threatens the cohesiveness of Jewish life.

Tevye reacts to the changing times as they force themselves upon him through his daughters. His involvement in their lives plunges him into situations which disturb his belief in the order and justice of God and His universe. His daughters Tseytl, Hodl, and Khave place their personal desires above those of their parents and society; the dictates of God and His Tora mean little to them. Unlike their father and his generation, they do not view the non-Jewish world with fear, but find it alluring and irresistible. Faith becomes harder in a

world where Marx and Gorky replace the Tsena urena, and where being born Jewish is no longer enough to ensure that children will remain Jewish.

Although the loose episodic structure of the work suggests that Sholem Aleichem may not have had an overall plan when he began writing the Tevye stories, a structure does emerge by the end. The focus moves from the personal, to the familial, and then to the national. The first chapter, "Dos groyse gevins" ("Tevye Strikes it Rich") bearing the epigram "Mekimey meyafar dal, meyashpot yarim evyon" (He [God] raises up the poor out of the earth and lifts the needy from the ash heap), taken from the 113th Psalm introduces the theme of faith. The book opens on a happy note; Tevye, a poor man, is given the opportunity to do a good deed and is handsomely rewarded. The rest of the book chronicles Tevye's declining fortunes as troubles of ever-broadening scope engulf him, and he suffers as a man, a father, and a Jew. First, he loses most of his money by allowing his wife's cousin Menakhem-Mendl to invest it for him. This financial disaster is followed by the daughter sequence in which Tevye suffers through the loves and marriages of each of his daughters. A pogrom then strikes him and his remaining family and they are exiled from the village of Anatevka, concluding the story on a note of national disaster.

In and of itself, this plot of ruined business deals, elopement, suicide, and unhappy marriage sounds like the stuff of melodrama. Why is it, then, that this book is one of the great works of Yiddish and western literature? I believe it is because few books are simultaneously as absolutely serious and as genuinely humourous as is Tevye.

It is perhaps already cliché to use the term "laughter through tears" to describe Sholem Aleichem's writing, but I will, because this phrase so aptly describes the genius of *Tevye*. Precisely because the situation is so serious, laughter when it does come, is so sweet and intense. We are not constantly wringing a wet handkerchief, but rather, always somewhere on the verge of a laugh or a cry and maybe both together.

The book is more than just the story of one family with too many daughters, tested and tried, we might feel, unfairly and unrealistically, but it is the drama of the Jewish people--portrayed certainly no more grimly than in reality. Elopement, conversion, and suicide are but metaphors for the fate of a people. A pogrom is not just a one time occurrence conveniently placed in the plot at the worst possible time in a long train of disasters, it is a real threat which hung menacingly over the Eastern European Jewish community. This is not melodrama, it is tragedy in the broader sense, and alas--history as well.

Tevye's wit, humour, and incisive perception shape the book. Sentence upon sentence is laden with the bittersweet irony of a people fighting for survival with faith and a sense of humour as their only weapons. Consider this sentence, so typical of Tevye: "*Ikh bin geven mit gots hilf a biterer oreman*" (21; ch. 1)[1] "I was, with God's help, a miserable pauper."[2] Undercutting his own affirmation of his faith in God, Tevye blames Him for his miserable lot in life. His characteristic irony simultaneously stresses and underplays his problems. Although the work derives its substance from its seriousness, it is only its humour that allows Tevye and the reader to

bear the pain.

One may well ask why Sholem Aleichem chose to give Tevye seven daughters and no sons--again, a half comic half desperate situation. A partial answer may be found in the old Yiddish proverb which Tevye quotes, "Az me hot tekhter fargeyt der gelekhter" (Daughters to look after is no cause for laughter) (36; ch. 1). Seven daughters and no son provide a stock comic situation. On one level, what could be worse for the poor man than to be "blessed" with seven daughters each needing a dowry? The number "seven" is formulaic and recurs frequently in folktales. On a more serious level, not having a kadish (son)[3] to carry on the family name and tradition (in a way that, it was assumed, only a son could) poses an implicit threat to Jewish survival. Tevye's lack of a son is particularly poignant when he must hire a kadish to say the prayer for the dead over Golde.

The father-daughter dynamic also produces a sexual tension which could obviously not be achieved with sons, so that, in a sense, Tevye's story is very much a male fantasy. The story of each of the daughters revolves around a man, and Tevye is indirectly responsible for most of these matches, or, at least, does little to deter an unsuitable match. Though he claims to find them inappropriate, he is fond of both Perchik and Aronchik and literally brings them home. He does not, as he might have done, forbid Khave's friendship with Khvedke the gentile. One has the sense that had Tevye been born a generation later, he would, like his duaghters, have been drawn to the secular world. Although he is a traditional Jew, he is not a fanatic and is remarkably open to non-religious people as his attraction to men like Perchik and Aronchik demonstrates. He is more concerned with

making an honest living, being a good father to his children, and looking into a holy book for his relaxation and pleasure than with adoring a rebbe, engaging in sectarian battles and arguing the fine points of Talmudic discourse. Faith and skepticism vie constantly within him.

Tevye's tolerance and even affection for the men his daughters love is not surprising since he feels himself very much akin to his children. Indeed, he sees them as reflections of himself. Even though their world is alien to him, he prides himself on being their friend and confidant. We know Tevye's daughters only though his rather cursory descriptions of them, and he tells us, as most fathers would, that they are beautiful, clever, and just like their dad. Throughout the book, they are only quoted directly when speaking with him.

This one-sided portrayal coupled with the rather predictable situations arising in a household of seven single females suggests that plot and character would, by themselves, constitute a rather uninspiring fiction. The daughters provide the vehicle for a Jobian study with allegorical elements of trial and faith in God which is the real focus of the work. Perhaps on some level, Tevye's daughters function as extensions of him, taking those steps away from God and the tradition that his skepticism might have enjoyed but his piety never permitted. This explains why he tolerates and even encourages suitors like Perchik and Aronchik whom, as a religious Jew, he should have rebuffed.

Like Job, he cries out to God in pain while blessing Him. Like Job, he too questions God, criticizes and challenges Him, hoping for

some answer, some key to understanding His mysteries, and like Job, he never receives one. Yet he believes. Unlike Job, he seasons his appeals to God with humour, irony, and a sense of the absurd.

In all of this, Tevye stands very much at the center, listening to his daughters, pouring out his heart to Sholem Aleichem, and questioning God. Although Tevye and his personal struggle are always central, his daughters and not he, are the actors in the plot. Tevye reacts to their actions, he does not determine them. If Tevye's faith is to be tested, it is important that he, like Job, be convinced that he is not the cause of or deserving of his suffering, but rather, that he feel justified in asking God why the innocent suffer.

Though Sholem Aleichem is more concerned with the symbolic role of each of the daughters than with character portrayal, some of the daughters do emerge as independent characters. The daughter sequence demonstrates how these particular women choose between or integrate traditional Jewish life with an ever-changing modernity.

If one compares their lives to that of their mother, one immediately sees the amazing changes in situation of and attitudes towards women that took place over a very short time. Tevye relates to his daughters very differently than he does to Golde. He never consciously appreciates Golde, and indeed, never expects the same beauty and intelligence in her as he does in them. While the daughters function as extensions of Tevye, Golde is his opposite. From Golde the daughters inherit a devotion to their men, but their choices are tempered by Tevye's disregard for the practical.

Following the traditional division of male and female with man as the philosopher and woman as the pragmatist, Tevye the dreamer and thinker, is counterbalanced and restrained by Golde, the doer and

pragmatist. When Tevye tries to take refuge from reality in a posek (biblical verse) or medresh (Talmudic passage), Golde has little use for his erudition and reminds him that "Tekhter dervaksene zaynen aleyn a guter medresh" (Grown daughters are a fine instructive passage, too) (95; ch. 4). She has a hard life as the mother of seven daughters and the wife of a poor man. Unlike Tevye who has had some education, she can take no comfort in studying Tora or even in misquoting it. The steady stream of curses and criticism she heaps on Tevye, which he dismisses as the nonsense of a "silly woman," are her only release.

The difference betwen Tevye and Golde is poignantly dramatized in Golde's death scene. As she lies dying, Tevye, wanting to philosophize, calls God and His justice into question. Golde does not want to ponder these things and dies, the quintessential wife, with these words on her lips, "Ikh shtarb avek Tevye, ver vet dir kokhn vetchere" (I'm dying Tevye, who will cook dinner for you?) (165; ch. 7). The poignancy of her question and the intensity of Tevye's bereavement bear witness to the beauty of Golde's wifely devotion. After her death, Tevye speaks with love and respect of what he believes were her virtues and her shortcomings, "Geven a yidene a proste, on khokhmes, on eyberkeplekh, nor a groyse tsadeykes" (She was a simple woman, with nothing tricky about her, but very good and pious) (164; ch. 7).

The daughters are another matter. The story of Tsaytl, the oldest daughter who refuses to wed the wealthy butcher Leyzer-Wolf and insists on marrying her childhood sweetheart, the poor tailor Motl

Kamzoil, is appropriately called "Hayntike kinder" ("Today's Children"). "Today's children" see love as the key factor in a marriage. This new set of priorities, implying as it does, that the individual recognizes no imperative more binding in choosing a mate than his or her own will, signals the breakup of traditional society. Understandably, Tevye feels that both the world and "today's children" are not what they once were.

Even the older generation is beginning to succumb to the new currents. Leyzer-Wolf, himself a man old enough to be Tsaytl's father, decides to dispense with "shadkhonim, rukhes un sheydim" (matchmakers, spirits, and devils) (72; ch. 3), as he puts it, and choose his own bride. Despite this decision, his bid for Tsaytl's hand recalls the worst kind of flesh trade. The comic scene in which Tevye understands him to be interested in his milkcow and not his daughter, is not merely funny. It is an ugly reminder that women may be discussed in the same terms as cattle, and like them, be bought and sold. It is no accident that the aspiring groom is also a butcher.

While a shidekh (match) with Leyzer-Wolf would be a step up socially, Tevye feels that no riches can compensate for Leyzer-Wolf's ignorance and nouveau-riche boorishness. Although Tevye is secretly relieved when Tsaytl refuses to marry Leyzer-Wolf, his response to learning about their secret betrothal demonstrates his discomfort with the new mores:

> Eyn zakh hot mir nor fardrosn un hob dos nisht gekont farshteyn bishum oyfn: vos heyst, ZEY ALEYN HOBN ZIKH GEGEBN DOS VORT? Vos iz dos far a velt gevorn? A bokher bagegnt zikh mit a meydl un zogt tsu ir: LOMIR ZIKH GEBN DOS VORT, AZ MIR ZOLN ZIKH NEMEN. . . epes glat hefgker-tsibeles. (89-90; ch. 3)

> There was just one thing that bothered me and that I couldn't understnad at all: what did it mean, THEY GAVE EACH OTHER THEIR WORD? What kind of world has it becomes? A boy meets a girl and says to her, "LET'S GIVE EACH OTHER OUR WORD THAT WE'LL GET MARRIED. . . is there no order left in the world?

This disregard for parental authority coincided with a new fluidity in the class structure. Because the Jewish community yielded to the sense of a common fate when it was attacked--after all, the non-Jewish world did not distinguish between rich and poor Jews--Tevye's world was not nearly as class delineated as the world around it. Nevertheless, there were rich and poor, workers and entrepreneurs, and all knew their place. Even people as low on the social scale as Tevye and Golde believed they had the right to feel superior to people of lower status. Although Motl the tailor may have been as good a provider as Tevye, his occupation rendered him socially inferior--even to the poorest milkman. Golde voices this interesting class bias:

> Fun vanen hot zikh tsu undz genumen a shnayder? In undzer mishpokhe zaynen faran melamdim, klezmorim, shamosim, kvures-yidn, un glat azoy oreme layt, nor nit, kholile, kin shnayders un nisht kin shusters. (91-92; ch. 3)
>
> How does a tailor come to us? In our family there are teachers, cantors, beadles, gravediggers, and plain ordinary paupers, but not, God forbid, any tailors or shoemakers.

Tsaytl's departure from tradition goes no further than choosing her own husband and, in so doing, crossing rather hazy class lines. She remains close to her family and to the Jewish way of life. Her sister Hodl, however, steps beyond into a very different world.

Of all of Tevye's daughters, Hodl is the most vividly drawn. Beautiful, brilliant, idealistic, and strong-willed, she is also utterly devoted to the man she loves, and imbued with a passion worthy

of revolutionary times. As old customs and social structures are being swept away, society seems, for a brief moment, about to be turned upside down. Tevye comments on this chaos in describing the politics of Perchik, Hodl's teacher and lover, "_A nogid kumt oys_. . . _iz opgefregt; un a kaptsn iz, farkert, a gantser tsimes. Un ver shmuest a bal-melokhe--der iz gor dos eybershte funem shteysl_" (A rich man has lost his value, and a poor man, on the other hand, is a big deal, and as for the artisan, well, he's really the cream of the crop) (105; ch. 4).

The changes seem to be having their effect on Tevye too. When the ubiquitous Ephraim the Matchmaker happens along with one of his matches made in heaven and tells Tevye to "bring Hodl" to Boiberik, Tevye replies "What do you mean bring her? You bring a horse to the market or a cow to be sold" (105; ch. 4). His outrage suggests that he has changed greatly from the Tevye who, only a short while before, could not tell whether the "she" under discussion was his daughter or his cow.

Even so, when Hodl and Perchik announce their intention to marry, Tevye again finds himself on the fatherly offensive. Given this topsy-turvy world, where authority, whether royal or parental is weakening, it is not surprising that the young people do not ask Tevye for his permission but rather for his congratulations.

Although we may assume that Hodl and Perchik do not deny or give up their Jewishness, for surely if they had, Sholem Aleichem would not have spared Tevye the anguish of this knowledge, we may assume, that they, like most Jewish revolutionaries, live secular lives.

The third daughter Khave, like her sister Hodl, thirsts for

knowledge of the outside world. The name Khave is perhaps an allusion to the biblical Khave (Eve) who sins by eating from the tree of knowledge and is punished by exile from her home in the Garden of Eden. Significantly, Khave's friendship with Khvedke the gentile begins by their exchanging books. Tempted at first by the forbidden fruit of non-Jewish knowledge, Khave eats and loses her virtue and innocence. She too is exiled from her original home to a world ultimately much harsher.

Khvedke, an aspiring writer, the "second Gorky" as Khave tells Tevye, represents to her the world of art and the imagination. Gorky, a name unfamiliar to Tevye until that point, becomes the symbol of the conflict between the two generations. While for Khave, Gorky is "_der ershter mentsh af der velt_" (the number one person in the world), (124; ch. 5) to Tevye, he is just another _goy_ (non-Jew). He finds the art, culture, and new ideas he represents alien; and even were he to know who Gorky was, his parochialism would blind him to such achievement.

Ignorant as Tevye is about Gorky, he instinctively knows that Gorky is _treyf_ (not kosher), and that for Khave, the distance between literature and apostasy is short. "_Zi rayst zikh in an ander velt_" (She is struggling to get into another world) (126; ch. 5), the priest who converts her tells Tevye. Khave's romantic involvement with a non-Jew and her interest in secular literature are both manifestations of this pull. In revering Gorky, Khave worships the false god of literature. He is false because the writer imposes his own order on, and thereby questions, the order of the universe.

Tevye's fears are borne out; Khave marries Khvedke and converts

to Christianity. Because Khave's conversion also underscores Tevye's struggle with God, her story is more powerful than any of the other episodes. The Yiddish literary critic J.I. Trunck comments on what he considers the premature climax in "Khave."

> Mit Khaven hot do Sholem Aleichem gevolt farendikn dem Tevye epos. Er hot es oykh badarft azoy ton. Inem Khave monolog dergreykht di tragishe antviklung fun Tevye's shikzal dem hekhstn kulminatsie-punkt.4
>
> With Khave, Sholem Aleichem wanted to finish the Tevye epos. He also should have finished it. In the Khave monologue, the tragic development of Tevye's fate reaches its highest culmination point.
> 5

Trunck may be right. After "Khave," Sholem Aleichem is left with the problem of how to create situations as dramatically compelling about the remaining daughters. Up to and including the Khave episode, Tevye and his daughters were propelled towards modernity at breakneck speed. Khave takes the ultimate step out of the Jewish world. Clearly Sholem Aleichem could not continue in the same direction after "Khave," for there was nowhere left to go. Later episodes dealing with Shprintse and Beylke, of necessity, portray more traditional and less dramatically compelling situations.

In part, this retreat is a factor of the times. The 1905 revolution was followed by a period of political reaction coupled with severe repressions of the Jews which Tevye refers to in an ironic mix of Hebrew and Yiddish as "yemey hakonstitutsie" (the days of the constitution). Coming to maturity during this time, Shprintse and Beylke do not seek to overturn worlds or to erase the boundaries between oppressor and oppressed or between Jew and non-Jew. Those battles have been fought and lost.

The Shprintse episode reverses the direction of the work.

Although she moves away from Jewish values, Shprintse does not move towards modernity and new modes of self-definition, but rather, towards death. He story is neither particularly modern nor particularly Jewish. She and the rich playboy Aronchik fall in love, but Aronchik's family, unwilling to accept a poor daughter-in-law, forbids the match. Aronchik does not resist, and Shprintse, broken-hearted, drowns herself in the river.

As Sholem Aleichem commented to the historian Shimòn Dubnow concerning Stempenyu, a daughter of Israel does not drown herself over a lover, and yet—Shprintse does. How are we to understand this suicide? Unlike her sisters, Shprintse is not guided by any ideals which would ennoble her life or her death. Her suicide may not be seen as the one act in which a woman, doomed to passivity by her sex, decides to shape her own destiny in the only way available to her. It is, rather, the desperate act of a broken-hearted woman.

Traditional Judaism views romantic love as potentially dangerous to both the individual and to Jewish life because it places personal gratification above the needs and desires of family and community. Judaism considers suicide a sin against both man and God, because the suicide violates the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" while also usurping God's role as the ultimate judge of who shall live and who shall die. In Tevye's world one can neither choose one's mate nor the hour and means of one's death.

The story of Beylke, the youngest daughter, continues the reversal of the action. Beylke reacts to the earlier chaos and upheaval by returning to tradition. While her sisters act with integrity and passion, Beylke consents to being married off by a

matchmaker to the wealthy and boorish Podutser. Beautiful and submissive, she becomes his plaything, aware that in so doing, she kills something inside herself.

Although Beylke never does explain why she marries Podutser, the author suggests several motives. Having learned from the experience of her sisters, she may think it more prudent to resign herself to a marriage of convenience than of love. Like anyone who has lived through a failed revolution, Beylke feels powerless to affect significant change. She may also believe that if her life is to have any meaning she must at least help those closest to her, and so she chooses to do what she thinks will help her father. If this is the case, she has made a grave mistake; even Tevye counsels her against the marriage. Invoking the example of Hodl who is penniless but in love and happy, Tevye tries to impress upon Beylke that happiness has nothing to do with money. Beylke's protest at the mention of Hodl shows the extent to which she has rejected Hodl's modernity and reverted to traditional mores:

> Tsu Hodlen, zolstu mikh nit glaykhn. Hodl iz geven in aza tsayt ven di gantse velt hot zikh gevigt, gehaltn ot-ot bay iberkern zikh, hot men zikh gezorgt far der velt, un zikh hot men fargesn. Un itst az di velt iz a velt, zorgt zikh yeder far zikh un di velt hot men fargesn. (173; ch. 7)
>
> Don't compare me to Hodl. Hodl lived at a time when the whole world was rocking, was just about to be overturned, so everyone worried about the world and forgot about himself. But now that the world is a world again, everybody worries about himself and has forgotten about the world.

Beylke's decision causes both Tevye and herself to suffer. He feels, "Vi ikh volt epes gemakht a shlekht gesheft" (As if I had somehow made a bad deal) (178; ch. 7). The word "gesheft" (deal, business) underlines Tevye's pain at seeing Beylke bought and sold on

the marriage market like so much merchandise.

Not only is Tevye saddened by the marriage, he is humiliated by his son-in-law. Worried that someone may discover that his wife is the daughter of a milkman and not a millionaire, Podutser asks Tevye to disappear (with his financial help) to America or Palestine or anywhere. In being forced to deny his identity, Tevye must now endure humiliation more intense than any he has had to bear before.

The idea of Palestine actually appeals to Tevye, but his plans are interrupted by the death of Tsaytl's husband Motl Kamzoil. It is also symbolically fitting that he never reaches the Holy Land. Palestine intrudes a solution resonant either with messianic redemption or with the realization of the Zionist dream, and both are alien to the essence of Tevye the golus-yid (diaspora Jew). For the Jobian Tevye there can be no ultimate refuge, no place that symbolizes an answer to Jewish problems. The pogrom and exile to a new home--somewhere in the diaspora-- which Tevye and his daughters must suffer, end the book, appropriately, not with redemption, but with expulsion. Although the work reaches its emotional climax with "Khave," when seen as the story of Tevye's trial by and confrontation with God, the Tevye oeuvre comes to its logical culmination with this expulsion.

Tevye's last words, "Undzer alter got lebt" (Our ancient God lives) are both resigned to and critical of God. This is the same old God who tested him as a father and a golus-yid (diaspora Jew). The two are inextricably linked for Tevye's anguish as a Jew is rooted in the anguish of being a father of daughters. The expulsion is a physical manifestation of a spiritual reality. It underlines the tenuousness of Jewish existence, which, on an allegorical level, is

suggested by his having seven daughters and no sons.

The paths the daughters take render the continuation of Jewish survival even more tenuous. In casting off parental authority, assimilating, seeking worldly knowledge, converting, committing suicide, and even in returning to a hollow traditionalism, Tevye's daughters embody the Jewish plight in a time of trial and transition.

Notes

[1] All references to the original Yiddish text are taken from Sholem Aleichem, Tevye der milkhiker [Tevye the Milkman], Musterverk fun der yidisher literatur, Vol. 27 (Buenos Aires: Yivo, 1966).

[2] All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

[3] The term kadish is used to mean "son" in Yiddish because sons and not daughters have the responsibility of saying the kadish (prayer for the dead) for their parents. It was, therefore, up to the son to keep the memory of the parents alive. Furthermore, in Judaism, since the man "takes" a wife and the woman is "given" in marriage, it is more likely that women accomodate to the world of their husbands than vice versa. Certainly this is true of Tevye's daughters.

[4] J.I. Trunck, Tevye un Menakhem-Mendl in yidishn velt goyrl [Tevye and Menakhem-Mendl in Jewish Fate] (New York: Cyco, 1944) 170.

[5] Why exactly Sholem Aleichem planned the work so as to reach such an early climax, or, if in fact, he had an overall plan from the outset, is unclear. The twenty-one year period from 1895-1916 over which he wrote the Tevye stories, plus the too early climax, plus the fact that he mentions seven daughters but only names and writes about five, suggest to me that he did not. This does not mean that the work does not have a discernible structure. On can, if one wishes, see in the rapid progression towards modernity in the Tsaytl, Hodl, and Khave episodes, followed by the reaction to modernity in the Shprintse, and particularly the Beylke episode, a plan of rising action, climax, and denouement. This, however, may be as much the outcome of necessity as of design.

Chapter 6

Aleyn

Yoysef Opatoshu's *Aleyn* (*Alone*) or *Roman fun a vald meydl* (*Novel of a Forest maiden*), as it was called in its early serialized form in the magazine *Tsukunft* (*Future*) in 1912, is the story of Sorke, a young woman who breaks away from a Hasidic family. Her father Mordekhay, the protagonist of two earlier works of Opatoshu's trilogy which includes *In poylishe velder* (*In Polish Woods*), *1863*, and *Aleyn* is a *Kotsker khosid* (a follower of the rebbe of Kotsk, leader of one of the last great dynasties of Polish Hasidim) who leaves the fold and takes part in the Polish uprising of 1863. Disillusioned with revolutionary activity, he returns penitently to a pious solitary life as a *vald shrayber* (accountant and clerk for a forest and lumber industry) and as the husband of a woman his parents choose for him. His wife drowns herself--we assume because she is unhappy in her marriage--and Mordekhay is left to raise their baby Sorke who was rescued from the arms of the drowning mother.

As the book's epigraph, "*In vildn vald aleyn*," taken from a Yiddish folk song, suggests, Sorke grows up, as an only child, free and unrestrained, "alone in the wild forest." Like the girl in the song who entices men into the woods, she is able to attract any man she pleases.

By making his protagonist a *vald meydl* (forest maiden), Opatoshu emphasizes the difficulty of the transition from girlhood to womanhood which requires more modest and restrained conduct.

Marriage disrupts Sorke's freedom. Despite her apparently free upbringing, she does not marry a man of her choosing, but allows herself to be betrothed to her cousin Borukh, a fine young orthodox man whom she finds completely repulsive. Equally loathsome to her is the daughter she and Borukh have. Finally, she leaves her husband and baby and runs off to America with the revolutionary Kronenberg.

Aleyn is certainly not the greatest of the works discussed here. Sorke's unhappy arranged marriage to a young Hasid, her attraction to a "modern" man who is also a revolutionary, and her breaking from her marriage and the community are the stock events of much Yiddish fiction. The effects of her behaviour on her father and its symbolic impact on the community, albeit movingly rendered, seem as if they were put there expressly to illustrate the inseparability of the individual and the community in Yiddish literature. Not only does the community perceive of itself as profoundly affected by the actions of the individual, the fate of the individual symbolizes the fate of the entire community.

Many of the characters are types rather than clearly individuated characters. Borukh is the stereotypical yeshiva-bokher, Kronenberg--the dashing revolutionary, Miss Morosovskin--the unfulfilled single "career" woman, Brayne the maid--the voice of tradition and homey folk wisdom, and the non-Jews Marianna and Vatsek--an example of the tenuousness of the "unJewish" institution of love matches. Yet it is perhaps this formulaic quality that causes Aleyn to illustrate the issues of this dissertation so strikingly. Precisely because of their complexity and ambiguity, greater works seldom fit as obligingly into a theoretical straight-jacket.

The work focuses primarily on the two main characters, Sorke and her father Mordekhay, deriving much of its strength from Opatoshu's ambivalent portrayal of Sorke. Opatoshu's use of dreams and visions lends richness to his portrayal of her emotional life. Part victim, part femme fatale, Sorke is an intriguing emotionally complex protagonist. While Opatoshu is somewhat sympathetic to her struggle to lead the life she chooses, he also shows the cost of this freedom to herself and others.

Unusual and delightful in this book is the attention given to nature. Lush descriptions of the outdoors, particularly the blossoming of the forest coupled by and underlining Sorke's awareness of her blossoming sexuality are, at this point, rather remarkable in Yiddish literature, both in terms of subject matter and explicitness.

Only Sorke seems a part of and akin to the rich vibrant world of the forest. Even Mordekhay who makes his living from the forest is never in harmony with those surroundings. His choice of loneliness and isolation after his failed marriage and failed revolutionary activity, lends a palpably sombre and intense tone to the book. The visits from the Kotsker Hasidim, clothed in black and singing mournful dirges, render the Jewish world more macabre and intensify the stark contrast between the two poles of Sorke's life.

Aleyn is a book about these worlds and the impossibility of reconciling them. Almost totally without humour, it offers instead moral seriousness and emotional intensity, a solemn, sometimes poetic portrait of a life vanishing before the sorrowful eyes of those that live it.

As the title of the book would suggest, Mordekhay finds his

return to religous life painfully ironic. Sorke's behaviour is, however, hardly surprising to him. The rebellious spirit which he tried to quell when he gave up his true love Rokhl and returned to Hasidism is reborn in his daughter.

Although Opatoshu paints Mordekhay's spiritual odyssey in the trilogy from a Hasid to a revolutionary back to a Hasid with compassion, respect, and understanding, he disappoves when Mordekhay consciously blinds himself to his daughter's needs. Although Mordekhay knows from his own tragic love story that the orthodox custom of arranged marriages is not always preferable to love matches, he is so bound by tradition that he arranges Sorke's marriage for her, admitting sadly to himself that he was not much different from his father.

Had he been more sensitive he might have noticed from the very start that a union between Sorke and Borukh was hardly *bashert* (predestined). Borukh, "*a dar bokherl fun a yor fertsn mit an oysgeveykt ponim*"[1] (a skinny fourteen year old boy with a shrivelled face) (24; ch.2)[2] is very much the reserved awkward *yeshiva-bokher*. Sorke's superiority in both wrestling and horse-back riding, two very physical and sexually suggestive activites, foreshadow their later sexual incompatibility.

If early encounters with Borukh seem inauspicious, the engagement ceremony is even more so. Because the day itself coincides with the *yortsayt* (anniversary of the death) of the *Kotsker rebe*, the two events are observed together. The *yortsayt* lends a macabre quality to the supposedly joyful event.

Surveying herself in the mirror before the ceremony, Sorke notes

that in her black crepe dress she looks more like a young widow than a bride-to-be. The engagement ritual is performed by none other than the shoykhet (ritual slaughterer) causing Sorke to feel very much a helpless victim at the hands of an impersonal slaughterer. Rather than sing to the bride and groom, the Hasidim mourn the death of the rebe and the decline of the Hasidic way of life. If Sorke is any indication of the state of Hasidism among the younger generation, this is certainly true. She associates it with all that is reactionary, confining, and deadening to the intellect and soul.

Sorke, although pressured, is not forced into the marriage. The general attitude of the traditional Jewish community is voiced by Breyne the housekeeper who tells her many times that she is free to do as she pleases. At the same time, she stresses that any girl ought to be grateful for a catch like Borukh.

If anyone were to challenge the necessity of marriage, it would be Miss Morosovskin, Sorke's tutor and a prototype of the modern single woman. Instead, she too cautions against remaining single, for she believes that the unmarried woman, no matter how wealthy or clever, is still but a lonely superfluous person. She also does not support Sorke's passionate insistence as a child that "if a girl can't get the man she wants, she ought not marry" (55; ch. 5).

Despite Sorke's outspokenness as a girl, as she grows older, she does not directly resist the life that is being thrust upon her. Her natural rebelliousness is mixed with passivity. In part, she inherits this passivity from her mother, who, unable to endure her reality, chose suicide.

Though, or perhaps, because Sorke can scarcely remember her

mother, she mythologizes her. In her imagination, she merges her drowned mother with Wanda, the legendary queen of the Vistula. According to Polish legend, Wanda wanted the beautiful Yadwiga to wed her son Tadeusz but instead Yadwiga chose Count Pototski. Angered, Wanda decided to take revenge on their child, and when he grew up she sent the beautiful Jewess Shulamis to him. Smitten by love, the young Pototski converted to Judaism and was burned by the church. His spirit lived on, however, searching night after night for his beloved Shulamis.

Sorke frequently sits musing on the river bank, imagining herself as Shulamis. In her fantasy, she sees her mother, who chose death over lovelessness, winking her approval at her from the water. Whether she is swimming, skating, or daydreaming about Wanda the water queen, Sorke's affinity with the water is both an expression of longing for her mother and for the gentle easing into total passivity which drew her mother to the river.

Like her mother, Sorke also loses her strength to resist and her will to live when she is betrothed to a man whom she does not love. She keeps her relationship with the student Vladek a secret even though, in so doing, she seals her fate with Borukh. She acts this way, "not because she lacked courage, but she simply did not want anyone to know that she was seeing Vladek every day, as if the whole excitement lay in the fact that the members of the household among whom she was the most important, did not know" (107; ch. 9).

Opatoshu's attitude to Sorke is ambiguous and complex. In the above passage, he portrays her as a spoiled only child. After all, the point is made several times that she is free not to marry Borukh,

but she does marry him, choosing resentful passivity over confrontation. On the other hand, although she is often unfair and even cruel to Borukh, one must consider the pain and anger she feels being married to a man whom she finds repulsive. Sorke's seemingly defiant and sometimes selfish behaviour is her way of expressing her frustration at her overwhelming powerlessness. The joint celebration of her engagement and the rebe's yortsayt suggests that, were she to exercise her will, she would oppose not only her family but the whole community of kotsker khsidim, and by extension, the weight of countless years of Jewish tradition.

Sometimes, instead of direct opposition, Sorke responds to her unhappiness by numbing herself emotionally. Her trance-like behaviour at her own wedding is an example of this:

> Sorke hot zikh gelozt arumdreyen zibn mol arum dem khosn, geblibn shteyn a glaykhgiltike, gekukt yedn in di oygn, gefolgt vos me hot ir geheysn un az di mume Gitl hot ir farshtelt di oygn mit a tikhl hot zi zikh farroytlt un gehat dos gefil vi me volt zi far alemen in di oygn genumen oyston a nakete. (132; ch. 10)

> Sorke let herself be led around the groom seven times, she remained standing indifferently, looked everyone in the eye, obeyed what she was told, and when her Aunt Gitl covered her eyes with a kerchief she blushed and had the feeling that she was being stripped naked, before everyone's eyes.

In this circling ritual the bride makes invisible walls around the groom which symbolize their private world and emphasize their separation from the rest of society.[3] For Sorke, who experiences the wedding as an invasion of her privacy, the ceremony is ironic. Her desire to be left alone directly contradicts the ways of her culture. In a culture in which the mother-in-law examines the sheets after the wedding night, as does Sorke's, to make certain that the marriage has

been consummated, the idea of privacy is almost non-existent.

Only by taking refuge in an imaginary world of romance can Sorke escape from what she perceives to be her fate as a Jewish woman. Romantic love, Breyne the Housekeeper, the voice of traditional Jewish society tells her, is for the goyim (non-Jews), and not the stuff of which solid marriages are made.

While the marriage of Vatzek and Marianna, the Polish peasants who work for Mordekhay, bears out Breyne's notions about domestic discord among the gentiles, the tragic fate of Sorke's mother serves as the author's reminder that, despite the Jewish attitude, love, even for Jews, may be a matter of life and death.

Not surprisingly, Sorke seeks romance outside the Jewish world.[4] She fantasizes non-Jewish lovers who are like the heroes in the Polish books she reads. In addition to imagining herself a Shulamis whisked off to some far away country by her Pototski, she is fascinated by the legend of Esterke, a young Jewish woman who was loved by the Polish King Kazimir. In life, Sorke does not stray quite as far as she does in fantasy. Marrying a gentile might have been too radical a step for the daughter of a khosid at the turn of the century--even if she is rebellious. In literature such a union might seemed contrived strictly for its shock value since, at that time, it happened seldom if at all. Besides, men like Sorke's suitors Vladek the student, an assimilated Jew as his name suggests, and Kronenberg the revolutionary are sufficiently removed from traditional Judaism to offer a striking and appealing option to a yeshiva bokher like Borukh.

In contrast, Sorke does not see marrying Borukh as romantic. She elevates their otherwise unsatisfactory union to an act of heroism

and Jewish martyrdom when, while walking along the Vistula, she imagines herself and Borukh as an engaged couple who drowned themselves in the river to escape conversion at the hands of the hetman Chmelnitski hundreds of years before.

Sorke's fantasies are self-deluding. She is very far from sacrificing herself for the sake of the Jews. The clearest indication of Sorke's indifference to her role as part of the Jewish people is her attitude towards having children. She becomes pregnant, as the title of that chapter says "On der muter's viln" ("Against the Mother's Will"), and feels a revulsion towards her unborn baby. Like her mother who comes out of her inertia only when she tries to kill herself and her child, Sorke breaks her passivity only in trying to destroy new life.

Sorke's misery and sense of entrapment increase once the baby is born:

> Zi iz gezesn mitn kind oysgekukt imetsn durkhn fenster, gegleybt az ir iz bashert optsukumen af der velt, az zi vet shoyn azoy patern ir lebn in di shtile, groyse tsimern, tomid faynt hobn Borukhn un kindlen vi ale yidishe tekhter. (195; ch. 13)
>
> She sat with her child and looked at someone out the window, believed that she was destined to suffer in this world, that she would waste her life in these quiet vast rooms, and would always hate Borukh and would breed like all Jewish women.

Not only does Sorke feel she has no control over a life which is already bashert (predestined), but, as the word "kindlen" (to bear children), which is in the mode of terms like "kelblen" (to calf) and "ketslen" (to have kittens) suggests, she feels herself reduced to animal level by the reproductive process.

Sorke's hatred of her baby is linked to her unwillingness to

accept her role as wife, mother, and member of the Jewish community. Although she never expresses the conflict she feels between the Judaism of her Hasidic father and her desire to assimilate, her thoughts and actions speak for themselves. In abandoning her baby and running off to America with Kronenberg, she leaves behind more than her immediate family; she forsakes the legacy of countless generations which lie buried in the soil of Opatoshu's famous Polish woods. The move to the New World symbolizes a break with her past and the start of a new life.

Appropriately, the story ends, not with Sorke, but with her fahter Mordekhay surveying the family's rapidly thinning forest:

> . . . Mordekhay iz gegangen tsum vald, gezen vi er vert shiterer fun yor tsu yor un s'hot im epes bang geton. Im hot zikh gedakht az er iz der letster in der mishpokhe, iz a fartsvaygter boym, zitst ergets tif in vald un vos mer men hakt di beymer, alts mer dekn zikh zayne vortslen op un er vet ayndarn. . . Iz zayn eyntsike tokhter avek. . . . in veytog hot er zikh tsugekukt vi di alte yidishe keyt geflokhtn fun got, der toyre un yisroyel rostet un tsefalt. (207-208; ch. 14)

> . . . Mordekhay went to the forest, saw that it was getting sparser from year to year and felt a pang of sorrow. It seemed to him that he was the last member of the family, that he was a tree with many branches, sitting somewhere deep in the forest and the more the trees were chopped down, the more the roots were uncovered, the more it would shrivel. . . . So his only daughter had gone away. . . . With pain he watched the ancient Jewish chain made up of God, the Torah, and Israel rust and fall apart.

The history of this one family is but a microcosm of the history of Eastern European Jews at the turn of this century. In leaving for America, Sorke not only breaks the family chain but also the ancient chain of "God, tora, and Israel." The title Aleyn applies both to Sorke and to Mordekhay and his generation. Indeed, the last words of the book, "I am the last in the family," (209; ch. 14) spoken by

Mordekhay as he walks through the cemetery, emphasize his anguish over being part of an heirless generation.

The cemetery setting, symbol of the ongoing connection between the living and the dead, makes his realization all the more poignant. Mordekhay knows that not only will Jewish life not continue here, but that the snatches of earthly immortality that are achieved when the living visit the dead, will be denied to him after his death, and to all his ancestors who lie buried in the Polish soil. Not only has Sorke cut herself off from the living but from all the generations that have come before.

For Sorke who may either suffocate within society or leave, leaving is inevitable. In so doing, she may have scored a victory for both herself and for womankind, but Opatoshu leaves the reader with the sense that that which will be lost, must also be mourned.

Notes

[1] All references to the text are taken from Yoysef Opatoshu, Aleyn [Alone] (New York: Farlag naye tsayt, 1918).

[2] All translations of the Aleyn text are my own.

[3] This explanation of the circling ceremony is taken from Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage (San Francisco: Harper and Rowe, 1980) 214.

[4] I do not want to give the impression that Judaism is against romantic love—it certainly is not. In The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage, Lamm says, "Judaism considers romantic love and affection in marriage to be very desirable, if it is one of a cluster of values that bring man and woman into the marital partnership, and can reasonably serve to sustain the union. . . .

. . . In fact, Judaism holds that romantic love, in the proper framework, adds a dimension to life that can come from no other source. But romantic love becomes a very foolish idol shen it supplants all other values" (13-14).

Breyne's no nonsense approach to marriage may seem to contradict this, but it is important to note that although Lamm says romantic love is permissable and even desirable, nowhere does he say that it is necessary. Both Breyne and Lamm would agree that it is not the sine qua non of marriage. While Breyne would probably not discount love were it accompanied by other values such as a compatible family background and a shared way of life, Lamm would not advocate marriage on the basis of romantic love unaccompanied by that "cluster of values" to which he refers.

Chapter 7

Effi Briest

Effi Briest, (1894), a classic of German literature by Theodore Fontane, is the story of the lovely young daughter of a Junker family, who, like many heroines of Yiddish literature, marries while still a child. Without being consulted, Effi is betrothed by her parents at age sixteen and a half to her mother's former suitor, the thirty-eight year old Baron Geert von Instettin.

I have chosen Effi Briest as a comparative text because it raises many of the same issues about marriage as do the Yiddish works. The novel explores the effects of an arranged marriage on a young woman within the European context. Characterized by the heroine's boredom and the inability of the partners to communicate, Effi's marriage may be easily compared to that of many of the Yiddish heroines. The moral temptation she faces provides a vehicle, as it does for the Yiddish protagonists, by which to judge her character and the effect of her moral upbringing and the inculcation of society's values on her behaviour. The reaction of her husband, parents, and the greater community to her transgression may be measured against the attitudes of similar parties in the Yiddish novels, providing in both cases, an illuminating glimpse into the values, needs, and self-definition of these societies. Like many of the Yiddish heroines, Effi Briest is a young woman in conflict with the values of a fossilized society. The struggle of these women serves as an indication of the author's sense of the future of his society and the strength of and possibilities for women in that society.

The story of Effi is said to have been inspired by an anecdote Fontane heard from Emma Lessing, the wife of C.N. Lessing, the proprietor of the _Vossiche Zeitung_.[1] In the anecdote, a young girl is called away from playing with her girlfriends to meet her fiancé. Her friends beckon to her to "Come on" but she doesn't heed their call and leaves them forever for the mysterious stranger. Fontane is said to have remarked that it was the poignancy of the words "Come on" that inspired him to write the novel. These words, which appear in Fontane's work, spoken by Effi's friends amidst their girlish tittering, capture the drama of the moment in which the not-quite seventeen year old Effi leaves childhood behind and enters the adult world.

Fontane is interested in how individuals function within their social milieu and the extent to which they may freely act according to their wills. In _Effi Briest_ he portrays a young woman trapped in an utterly conventional marriage, and examines how her actions and ultimate fate are determined by the society in which she lives.

Many aspects point to the conventionality of the marriage. The match is arranged by the bride's parents without her consent and is a marriage of convenience, not love; the bride and groom have only met each other once before their engagement. The Briests see in Instettin a chance for Effi to advance socially, while Instettin recognizes that a charming young wife of the right class could only be an asset to him in his career.

Effi's immediate acceptance, despite the utterly predictable outcome of such a marriage, shows the extent to which even romantic young women brought up in such an environment come to understand that

title and wealth must override all other considerations. Effi's expectations and romatic dreams are both created and constrained by the conservative and rigidly stratified society of which she is a part.

The examples and opinions of her parents make Effi aware that love is not essential to marriage and that romantic dreams, of which she has many, rarely come true. From her father she learns that "love is just a lot of claptrap."[2] (36; ch. 4) In addition, she has before her the example of her mother who gave up marrying the then-young Instettin whom she loved for the older, more-established Briest.

Although Effi seems to accomodate to reality easily, she pays a high price. She learns early to check her dreams and to repress the less conventional, more whimsical aspects of her personality. Her mother's lecture on the inappropriateness of including something as exotic as a Japanese bedroom screen in her trousseau is a case in point. Fontane, unlike Sholem Aleichem in <u>Stempenyu</u>,[3] almost never plays the role of the intrusive narrator, yet despite his muted presence, the reader may intuit his feelings through his portrayals of the characters' thoughts and actions and through his careful ordering of detail.

Effi's disregard for the romance she has always dreamed of, her indifferent response to wedding preparations, her half-hearted correspondence with her bridegroom, and, finally, her mother's concern that something is wrong, all suggest Fontane's growing foreboding concerning her impending marriage. Subtle foreshadowings of her own fate as a faithless wife pervade the text. For example, in Chapter One, Effi compares the sinking of a bag of gooseberry skins to the

drowning of faithless wives. The writer watches with sadness and apprehension as, with each step into wifehood and womanhood, Effi relinquishes something of her innocence, vivacity, and emotional vigour.

The book opens with Effi and her mother embroidering--one of the few amusements appropriate to women of their class. Tiring quickly of her needlework, Effi interrupts it to do gymnastics. This scene introduces the theme of instinct versus form which will recur throughout the book. Being a woman, Fontane seems to be saying, is a continual battle between one's natural energy and the staid and proper bearing expected, and indeed, required of her.

Even more disquieting is Instettin's prior love of Effi's mother. While our post-Freudian awareness causes us to look with suspicion on a man marrying the daughter of the woman he loves, Frau Briest seems pleased. "She hadn't been able to marry Instettin, but now it was her daughter's turn instead and that was, on the whole, just as good or perhaps even better." (25; ch. 3) After all, Effi could profit by marrying Instettin, _she_ could not have.

The typical nineteenth century heroine, Jewish or non-Jewish, is expected to fulfill parental expectations when marrying, but in marrying her mother's old lover, Effi is faced with more than just the usual parental expectations. Frau Briest turns Effi into an extension of herself and places on her the burden of living out her own unrealized dreams and fantasies. Indeed, Instettin and Frau Briest who both share a slavish veneration for "society" and its conventions seem much better suited to each other than do Instettin and the impetuous Effi.

Married life forces Effi into unfamiliar physical, geographic, and emotional territory. Her emotional state is mirrored in her discontent with her immediate physical surroundings. Cut off from everyone and everything she loves, she feels herself a stranger to the district of Kessin, to her new house, and to her husband. Inactivity, submissiveness, boredom, and loneliness characterize her new grown-up life.

Her undue attachment to Hohen-Cremmen, her childhood home, is a further indication of how unprepared she is to step into the adult role thrust upon her. Most disturbing to Effi is her fear, nourished by Instettin's teasing, that their house is haunted by a Chinese man. Effi links this ghost to a Chinese man who actually lived in Kessin and was a friend of Captain Thomsen, the former owner of the house. Local lore had it that the Chinese man and the captain's daughter disappeared mysteriously on the granddaughter's wedding night. A fortnight later the Chinese man died equally as mysteriously. With its hints of adultery, culminating in death, this tale foreshadows Effi's tragic end. Her fixation on the house is a projection of her own insecurities and fears.

The paper dolls Effi cuts out to pass the time serve as a silent reminder of how Instettin and society would like women to be; pretty, beautifully dressed, but empty and two-dimensional, and without wills of their own.

There are indications that the conformity and repression demanded by society take their toll on Instettin as well. He believes that he must adhere to principle and social forms where love and compassion would have yielded greater happiness. Consequently, energy is

subverted into nervousness, and love into narrow-mindedness and bigotry. His rigidity masks a more restless, irrational, and contemplative side which surfaces at times in his unexpected fascination with ghosts and the supernatural.

Not surprisingly, Instettin is hardly a man to inspire great passion in a woman and his relations with Effi are strained. Like many women, Effi hopes that a child will help her marriage by bringing her "some life and something to distract" her (95; ch. 12), but motherhood does not help her gain respect and equality in Instettin's eyes. By viewing the baby as a "precious toy" for Effi, he exacerbates her feelings of inadequacy and insecurity.

Significantly, Annie, who is later to reject her mother emotionally, a rejection Effi finds much harder to bear than rejection by her husband, is the agent of discovery of the fateful letters which set in motion the chain of events leading to Effi's tragic fate.

Disaster first arrives in the person of Major Crampas. Given Effi's lacklustre marriage, her boredom, and her admittedly weak character, it is not surprising that she happens into an affair with the mustache-twirling ladies' man Crampas. From the moment he enters the book, signs and events lead steadily to the affair. Crampas's reputation as a Don Juan precedes him. His left hand, shattered in a duel, hints at past imprudences while foreshadowing his death by duel with Instettin. Not coincidentally, the play he directs for the local dramatic society and in which Effi acts, is called _Ein Shritte vom Wege_ (A Step off the Path).

Although Instettin cautions Effi that Crampas is "an unscrupulous man" with "certain views on young women,"(152; ch. 20) his warning

merely arouses Effi's curiosity. By allowing her to go horseback riding with Crampas and actually sending Crampas to check on Effi's sleigh which leads to their first kiss, it seems as if Instettin subconsciously leads Effi into her lover's arms.

Significantly, Fontane offers no description of the affair, or any indication of Effi's and Crampas's feelings for each other. While we would hardly expect a nineteenth century author to go into graphic detail, this total and deliberate omission suggests that the particulars are incidental to Effi's need to have an affair with someone.

Although she claims not to have been in love with Crampas, she saves his letters. Her carelessness is understandable because the letters are the only tangible witnesses to the one adventure which shook her from her confining domestic routine and brought some excitement to her life. Despite Effi's belief that she dreads discovery more than anything else, her behaviour suggests an unconscious desire to be discovered. Discovery would both free her from her marriage and provide an opportunity for the punishment and repentance she feels she deserves and needs.

Effi's lack of moral conflict during the affair is striking—even to herself. Despite Effi's minimal moral deliberations, Fontane is scarcely critical of her. Effi's transgression, the text suggests, may be more a function of her youth, Instettin's coldness, and the added burden of marrying her mother's lover than of a deeply flawed character. The painful irony of her mother's wondering after Effi's death, "Whether we're not perhaps to blame? . . . whether she wasn't perhaps too young?" (267; ch. 36) suggests the truth of Frau Briest's

belated insightfulness.

To the extent that Fontane is critical, his criticism is aimed at Prussian society and not at Effi. Unlike Sholem Aleichem, Fontane chooses not to affirm his society and its institutions but to point out its shortcomings. Effi is born into the Junker nobility, a class for which Fontane had affection but little respect. In one of his letters he writes,

> This country gentry, and I must almost say without exception, is not concerned with truth, knowledge, general human progress, but merely with its own profit, its own position and the satisfaction of its conceit.[4]

Fontane paints a society in which the excesses of the virtues of orderliness, restraint, and respect for position and authority lead to narrow-mindedness, a lack of passion and imagination, and a want of moral fibre. In the Prussia of Effi Briest "characters love without hope, marry without devotion, kill without hatred, and die without urgency."[5]

Significantly, the last words of the book, "That's too big a subject" (267; ch. 36), a phrase repeated far too often by Effi's father, capture the essence of a society that has neither the vision nor the courage to look beyond its comfortable horizons and confront the issues that might threaten its complacent self-image.

Having more vitality and passion than can be satisfied in her very proper marriage, Effi strays. Although she seems by nature more open and passionate than her society, she too is shaped by it. Hers is a romance nourished more by boredom than by love. Her transgression lacks the force of rebellion and is but a grievous and almost inevitable mistake in her search for personal happiness. Neither

heroine nor rebel, Effi ends her life a victim of her own behaviour.

While Fontane exposes the pettiness and backwardness of many of the practices of his society, he is also aware of the tremendous destructive powers that these moribund customs may still have. The duel is a case in point. By the mid-nineteenth century, a fatal duel was considered murder in most European countries, including Germany. However, in Germany, the duel was still tolerated and even admired, and offenders were sentenced lightly, if at all. Because only aristocracy was satisfaktionsfahig, that is to say, qualified and entitled to fight a duel, dueling was a mark of social distincton. To abstain from a duel was to leave oneself open to accusations of cowardice.[6]

Subordinating the law and human life to the values of his class and his concern for his image, and the "stain on my [his] honour" (216; ch. 27), Instettin chooses to duel.

Trying to justify his decision, Instettin calls the notion of "society" to his defence.

> We're not isolated persons, we belong to a whole society and we have constantly to consider that society, we're completely dependent on it. If it were possible to live in isolation, then I could let it pass. . . . we don't necessarily have to rid the world of someone who robbed us of our happiness. . . . But with people living all together, something has evolved that now exists and we've become accustomed to judge everything, ourselves and others, according to its rules. . . . that something which forms society is not concerned with charm or love, or even with how long ago a thing took place. I've no choice, I must do it. (215; ch. 27)

Instettin's admittedly passionless revenge on a man who neither loved nor was loved by his wife, points to the tragedy of Fontane's society. Cloaking his feelings in what appears to be some profound

truth about the nature of man and society, he is, in fact, merely offering the characteristic sanctification of conformity one would expect from a man who has always placed social advancement above personal relationships. In having an affair, Effi attempts, albeit more subconsciously than consciously, to break out of the old dead structure. Ironically, her lover, still bound to that structure, responds to the challenge to duel. She and Crampas die, ultimately vanquished by a code of a society they, for a brief while, defied.

Significantly, those people who dare show sympathy for Effi, such as Gieshubler, Dr. Rummschattel, and Roswitha, are not members of the upper class. Fontane allows only Roswitha the independence of will to condemn Instettin's actions outspokenly. In choosing Roswitha, a Catholic and a mere servant, as the voice of compassion, Fontane suggests that one must look outside the Protestant establishment to find a heart free from the insidious influence of convention.

Nothing could argue Fontane's position more eloquently than the crafting of the duel scene. In their very formal attire, Instettin and Crampas, fighting a gentleman's duel over an event in an obscure and distant past, stand out in ridiculous incongruity against the dunes and the free and natural sea. The "blood red" carnations and everlasting flowers on the ridges around the dunes hint ironically at the transitoriness of human life and the fleeting significance of what is taking place. The absolute seriousness of the stakes for both parties does not render the event any more meaningful.

Instettin's shallow and mechanical sanctioning of conformity, the cruel and gratuitous estrangement of mother and child, Effi's beauty

and dignity in her last days, and her parents' doubts, all powerfully argue Fontane's condemnation of Instettin's behaviour. If Instettin has acted, as he argues, on behalf of society, one wonders how society has benefited. Here, as elsewhere, Fontane suggests that a society which discounts the feelings of the individuals who comprise it, in slavish adherence to convention, with no gain to itself, is doomed.

Summoned by the message on the telegram from her father which reads, "Come, Effi," she returns home. These two words, hearken back to a time years earlier when her friends had called to her, "Come on, Effi." Now an adult, rejected by respectable society, ineligible for such useful occupations as domestic science or kindergarden teaching, Effi's return to her childhood home symbolizes her attempt to reenter the now impossible world of childhood innocence. Dressing in her old schoolgirl clothes, she spends her time "looking at nature with silent delight" (253; ch. 34). This simple almost angel-like existence is not, however, the natural life of an adult woman; it is a closing in of life's possibilities which must ultimately lead to death.

Effi's request that her tombstone be inscribed with her maiden name "Effi Briest" is a further rejection of the adult life which rejected her. Although she claims that she has not brought "any honour" (266; ch. 36) to the name of Instettin, her insistence on her old name also suggests that she has maintained her sense of self despite society's strictures In requesting her unadorned last name, "Briest," rather than her title "von Briest," Effi exhibits a modesty and humility not at all incongruous with her dignity.

As in many of the Yiddish works discussed here, the extent to which the heroine is able to achieve happiness by adapting to marital conventions is an indication of the author's response to the values of his or her culture.

Effi, like many of the Yiddish heroines, is married off by her parents in traditional fashion. Unlike Rokhele in Sholem Aleichem's Stempenyu, she hopes but does not expect to find love in marriage. Perhaps Rokhele dreams more of marital bliss than does Effi because the qualities of scholarliness and gentleness which determine yikhus (status) in the Jewish community hold the promise of good character more than does the emphasis on wealth and title which determines status in Effi's world.

Even though the marriages of the householders of Mazepevke in Stempenyu seem far from blissful, the Mazepevkites, and by extension, Jewish society, still cling to the ideal, sometimes contrary to all personal experience, of love in marriage,—an idea more religious than romantic in origin. After all, if God sits in heaven and makes matches, how could it be otherwise?

Although a romantic by nature, Effi never considers refusing to marry Instettin, and seems to have made her peace with society's idea of marriage. Tevye's daughters, on the other hand, have not. Tevye's Tsaytl rejects the rich butcher Leyzer-Wolf for the poor tailor Motl even though marrying a tailor was considered worse than marrying a pauper. Because the differences between classes were not nearly so extreme, Jewish society could afford to be much less class-conscious than Fontane's Prussia, and was much more tolerant of an occasional rebellion.

Both Effi and Rokhele in Stempenyu are victims of arranged marriages. Both heroines must leave home and join their husbands in a new town. Both are unhappy in their marriages and feel that they fulfill no useful function in society. Young, innocent, pure, and bored, neither is immune to the wiles of practiced seducers, yet Rokhele resists and Effi does not. Effi's moral lapse leads her to end her life at her parents' home in Hohen-Cremmen while Rokhele's marriage blossoms in the big city Yehupetz. While Effi's return home and subsequent death symbolize her inability to live an independent adult life, Rokhele's move to Yehupetz represents a broadening of her experience.

Why is it that Rokhele is able to resist seduction and find happiness through the accepted channel of marriage while Effi is not? The answer is, very simply, that Sholem Aleichem wants his heroine to resist and Fontane does not. Their respective decisions are based on the image of women and of society that they each want to present. Aware that the society he writes about is soon to be ripped apart by the forces of assimilation, Sholem Aleichem nevertheless sets Stempenyu in an eternal past. He intrudes no dates, no allusions to political events, and no maskilim to threaten the apparent placidity of shtetl life, and chooses as his heroine one of that quickly vanishing breed, a virtuous Daughter of Israel.

The question of how Sholem Aleichem can present such an idyllic picture in light of the rapid and obvious disintegration of traditional Jewish life, still remains. Even though the ending may be subtly subversive, it is also contrived and unlikely, and hence, very decidedly a failure. Why then did Sholem Aleichem impose it on his

work?

In a letter to the Jewish historian Shimon Dubnow, entitled, "A briv tsu a gutn fraynd" (A Letter to a Good Friend) Sholem Aleichem comments on why Rokhele must affirm her role of wife and mother:

> Ver es hot zikh rekht tsugekukt tsu Rokhelen, in mayn ershtn roman, . . . der vet mir moyde zayn az andersh hot zikh yener roman nisht gekont un nisht getort oyslozn: Rokhele iz koydem kol a yidishe tokhter, un vi a yidishe tokhter hot zi zikh bald arumgekukt, az zi iz an eyshes-ish, a farbundene mit ir man af tomid. . . Zay zikher, mayn liber fraynd, az Rokhele, zi meg oysgeyn nokh Stempenyus trit, vet zi blaybn a yidishe tokhter, a yidish vaybl, vos iz inem man's reshus: zi vet zen tsu fargesn vi vayt meglekh in di ale narishkaytn un vet blaybn an ibergegebn vayb tsu ir man un a getraye muter tsu ire kinder. . . 7

> Whoever has looked closely at Rokhele in my first novel will confess to me that the novel could not and should not have finished differently: Rokhele is first and foremost a Daughter of Israel, and as a Daughter of Israel she immediately looked around and saw that she was a married woman, bound to her husband forever. . . You may be sure, my dear friend, that even if Rokhele were fainting for the chance to be near Stempenyu, she would remain, a Daughter of Israel, a Jewish wife, who is under her husband's jurisdiction: as much as posible she will try to forget this foolishness and will remain a faithful wife to her husband and a devoted mother to her children.

In reference to the endings of both Stempenyu and another novel Yosele Solovey, Sholem Aleichem goes on to say that a Daughter of Israel will not drown nor hang nor poison herself.

This is not mere literary posturing. Sholem Aleichem's letter as well as his prefatory letter to Mendele are proof that he was grappling very seriously with the problem of defining the Jewish novel and the Jewish heroine. Granted, Sholem Aleichem's distinctively "Jewish characters" often behave very much as any non-Jewish characters might. Rokhele's boredom, her alienation, her repugnance towards her husband, and her rushing to meet Stempenyu in the

darkness, hardly seem to bespeak a novel of a people with "its own unique spirit and customs and habits," as the author insists in his letter to Mendele. She longs for the same love and passion, for the same magic in life as does any woman, Jewish or non-Jewish.

Yet Sholem Aleichem does not have his heroine die of misery like Effi Briest or commit suicide like Emma Bovary or Anna Karenina. Ultimately, Rokhele behaves in what the author considers to be a specifically Jewish way. According to Sholem Aleichem, a Jewish novel must end happily, affirming Jewish values and preserving the sense of Jewish collective identity at a time when these things were being threatened by anti-semitism and the questionable blessing of Western individualism. Only in the timeless idyllic world which he creates is the happy ending possible.

An unhappy ending would, he believed, be too disquieting to Jewish society. In the face of insistent challenges to its traditional values *shtetl* society sought to maintain its identity through a self-imposed purity. Because the Jewish community was, of necessity, more concerned with survival than were other more secure communities, it viewed any violation of its values as a betrayal in favour of an alien world. The tensions between the values of the "highly interesting novels" and the "Jewish novel" bear witness to just how threatening a "non-Jewish" thing such as an affair can be.

A maverick in a cultural tradition which saw fiction as a vehicle for the spreading of dangerous and disruptive ideas, and which in his time had just begun to give validity to belles-lettres, Sholem Aleichem, like other pioneers of modern Yiddish literature, struggled with justifying his writing to a reticent public. In his work, he

tried to preserve a set of values which he, for the most part, could no longer live by, for consciously or unconsciously, he knew that departure from tradition (and, indeed, even his own secular way of life) would ultimately spell the disintegration of the Jewish community. In the Introduction to _A Treasury of Yiddish Stories_, Howe and Greenberg explain the spirit of nationalism, collective responsibility, and moral weightiness which permeated Yiddish literature, even as its writers rejected orthodoxy for themselves and sought to enter the modern world--as modern Jews:

> In the historical interim during which the hold of religion had begun to decline and the idea of nationality had not yet reached its full power, Yiddish literature became a central means of collective expression for the East European Jews, fulfilling some of the functions of both religion and the idea of nationality. In the absence of a free and coherent national life it had to provide the materials for a sense of national identity; and even as, in honesty, it reported the realities of the _shtetl_ and the Pale, it had also to nurture and exalt their collective aspirations. . . . one can say that the Yiddish writers came before their audience, as did the Russian writers of the nineteenth century, with an instinctive conviction that their purpose was something other than merely to entertain and amuse. . . . both share the assumption that the one subject truly worthy of a serious writer is the problem of collective destiny, the fate of a people.
>
> Literature had to be _justified_, it had to be assigned a moral sanction--which is not to say that the Yiddish pioneers, either the writers or the critics, meant that it had to be moralistic. But what, they seemed to be asking themselves, is the distinct use and end of Yiddish literature? . . . Simply to survive, simply to face the next morning, Yiddish literature had to cling to the theme of historical idealism. Beyond hope and despair lies the desperate _idea_ of hope, and this is what sustained Yiddish writing.[8]

The traditional values of the _shtetl_—stifling as they sometimes are—derive from, and are still linked to, very real moral and national concerns. The traditions of Instettin's Prussia seem detached from any vital morality and serve only to foster a rigid

social hierarchy. Whereas in Mazepevke, tradition is a matter of life and death, in Fontane's Prussia, convention is so far removed from real life issues and from moral purpose that it becomes an empty form. Religion also offers no support. While something in Rokhele's Jewishness prevents her from transgressing, Effi derives little guidance or solace from religion, and considers herself a weak Christian. Her fascination with her servant Roswitha's Catholicism hints at the inadequacy of her own religion. With its exotic rituals, confessions, and built-in avenues for forgiveness and penance, Catholicism may, she feels, embody some deeper truth and have greater efficacy for its devotees than her own Lutheranism.

Despite his own secular beliefs, the Yiddish writer Opatoshu displays the profound ambivalence towards religion so characteristic of the modern Jewish writer. In Aleyn and in the two other works of the trilogy, he presents Hasidism as an alluring, if somewhat confining force. Mordekhay finds that the magnetism and spirituality of this movement, even in the declining Kotzker court, cannot be rivaled by anything in the secular world. A sense of sadness and even tragedy pervades the final scene as Mordekhay contemplates the end of his family and the ancient Jewish chain.

When Sholem Aleichem has his women stray from the behaviour expected of them, as he does in Tevye, he too does so against a background of the imminent demise of Jewish tradition and community. The story of each daughter points to the inevitable outcome of Judaism's contact with the outside world: assimilation, conversion, suicide, and persecution. What is at stake is not just, as Instettin feared in Effi Briest, a set of principles, but the existence of the

people who lived by these principles. Hence the poignancy of the final scene in Tevye in which Tevye, a father of seven children, is left with only one widowed daughter. Tevye remains, as he himself, says, a tree with withered branches. In a world as fragile as Sholem Aleichem's, spiritual desertion is synonymous with death.

In Aleyn Opatoshu also deals with spiritual desertion. Significantly, Aleyn was written thirty-five years after Stempenyu, and Sorke, like Tevye's daughters, had been deeply affected by the weakening of traditional Jewish life during the interim. Unlike Sholem Aleichem's Rokhele, Sorke does not reject adultery and win the whole-hearted approval of her author. She derives no moral strength from her Jewish upbringing, and sees Jewishness, rather, as an external force which imposes itself on her, dulling her spirit and hindering her freedom.

Sorke's adultery with a Jewish revolutionary and her move to America symbolize an almost total break with Jewish tradition. Opatoshu seems far more ambivalent towards his heroine in Aleyn than Peretz or Sholem Aleichem are to their heroines in "Married" and Stempenyu, or than Fontane is to Effi. Although Sorke also feels trapped in her marriage, her treatment of Borukh, the images of her deserted baby and her lonely father at the end leave one with the impression that Opatoshu has little sympathy for her actions.

On the other hand, what is implied by the text but never directly stated by the author, probably because of his ambivalence, is how powerless Sorke feels and actually is. Opatoshu depicts the oppressiveness of the Jewish way of life, particularly vis à vis women, very vividly; the drastic and unnatural transition from

girlhood to womanhood, the lack of individual freedom, the community's scant concern over personal happiness, and its intolerance towards those who deviate or differ.

Fontane is much less ambivalent and, like Sholem Aleichem, also lavishes a great deal of affection on his heroine. In a letter to Frau Anna Witte, he writes, "So here is Effi. Bestow on her the love which as a person she deserves."[9] Despite his love for her, Fontane's vision of the relationship between the individual and society can not let her survive within it.

Effi's death, coupled with the survival of Instettin and her parents, suggests the defeat of the individual by society. Writing of nineteenth century Prussia, Fontane does not concern himself with collective survival, which he takes for granted, but rather with the survival of the individual within that society. Rejecting the historical idealism of a Sholem Aleichem, Fontane takes up the posture of a gentle critic of, what he believes to be, an obsolete social order. How long, he asks implicitly, can this society continue to collide with the individual and hear his/her pain without responding to his/her needs.

For Fontane and Sholem Aleichem, compassion and forgiveness are the tests of the humanity of their respective societies. Both Effi and Tevye's daughter Khave seriously transgress the rules of their societies, and although their transgressions are of a different order, both are of sufficient gravity to warrant parental rejection. How different the Briest's renunciation of Effi is from Tevye's rejection of Khave after her conversion and marriage to the non-Jew Khvedke!

Even though Effi's parents claim to love her and probably do,

they initially repudiate her. In a letter in which her concern for 'honour' and 'society' show her to be very much like her old beau Instettin, Frau Briest writes:

> We can't offer you any asylum in Hohen-Cremmen, there can be no refuge in our house, because that would mean cutting ourselves off from everyone we know and this we are emphatically not inclined to do. Not because we are particularly worldly and would look upon it as completely unbearable to have to say good-bye to so-called "society". No, that's not the reason, but simply because we want to make our position plain and show the whole world that we condemn--I'm afraid I must use this word--your actions--the actions of our only daughter, the daughter whom we loved so dearly. (232; ch. 31)

Although Frau Briest invokes "the laws of both God and man" (251; ch. 34) to defend her position, her concern over God seems secondary to her concern about society. Her fear that their "lives will be changed from now on" by taking Effi back, (p. 251) rings ironically. Had not losing a daughter already produced that effect? Never are the Briests moved to challenge either the society or the God that demands such behaviour.

Tevye may question God's fairness and compassion, but his relationship with God is the basis of his decision to reject his daughter. Although he does speak of the <u>bizoyen</u> (shame) as well as the pain of losing a daughter, unlike the Briests, he never voices concern over society's response or rejection. He feels rather the shame of not having fulfilled his obligations to the Jewish community and to God. He considered it his duty as a Jew to raise Jewish children; but as the father of a convert, he cannot help feeling that he has failed.

Because the Jewish community felt both spiritually and physically threatened by the loss of every Jewish soul, the reaction to converts was extreme and unrelenting.[10] The Khave story is the ultimate

demonstration that rebellion for the Jewish woman is of a different order than it is for the non-Jew. The Jewish community finds Khave's conversion so threatening that it can neither forgive her nor acknowledge her existence. Equating spiritual rebellion with physical death, it responds, not by excommunication, but by mourning. The scene in which Tevye decides to sit _shiva_ for Khave and says to Golde, "Get up, my wife, take off your shoes, let us mourn her, as God has commanded. The Lord hath given, the Lord hath taken away" (134; ch. 5) is fraught with moral and emotional anguish. Tevye's omission of the subsequent line of the passage from _Job_, "Blessed be the name of the Lord," suggests that he does not accept God's actions without bitterness.

Although Tevye's behaviour towards his daughter is traditional, his feelings are not. While he mourns his sinning child he also recognizes that this is not _Tora misinay_ (a decree given by God at Sinai). In his heart of hearts, Tevye, like Job, questions the kind of God that would inflict such pain on one of His Chosen People.

Tevye's moral dilemma is captured in one of his characteristic mistranslations. When he drives past Khave ignoring her plea to stop, he wonders whether he is not "_asur lerakheym_" (forbidden to have pity), but mistranslates the phrase as "not worthy to walk upon the earth" (139; ch. 5), an indirect way of saying "not worthy of pity." Believing that Khave's deed has placed her beyond the pale of forgiveness, he nevertheless questions his own humanity in not forgiving her. While Frau Briest seems confident that God, were he to offer His opinion, would accede to the societal norm, Tevye's chanting of the _Ashamnu_ (a prayer listing all our sins) from the High

Holiday service, implies his doubt as to whether even a wronged God would demand such behaviour from a father.

When Khave returns several years later during a pogrom, begging to be taken back, Tevye is again faced with the dilemma of whether or not to forgive her. Khave's behaviour demonstrates that her feeling of belonging to the Jewish people transcends even her conversion. Her older sister Tsaytl clarifies this in her plea to Tevye to soften his heart towards her:

> Az zi iz gevoyr gevorn, me shikt undz aroys, hot zi gezogt tsu zikh aleyn, az do shikt men aroys undz alemen, zi oykh, heyst es. Dort vu mir, azoy hot mir Khave aleyn gezogt, dort iz zi. Undzer goles, dos iz ir goles. (216; ch. 8)

> When she found out that we were being expelled, she said to herself that we're all being sent out, that means her too. Wherever we are, that's what Khave herself said, she's there too. Our exile is her exile.

After this confrontation, Tevye confides in Sholem Aleichem, and poses this rhetorical question to him,

> Neyn, loz zikh aykh dakhtn, lemoshl, elehey, ir zayt af Tevye's ort un zogt mir beheyn sheli, gor ofntlekh,, vi far an emesn gutn fraynd: vi azoy volt ir zikh noyeg geven? (218; ch. 8)

> No, just imagine, for example, that you were in Tevye's place, and tell me, on my honour, truthfully, as you would tell a good friend, what would you have done?"

The answer is clear, for does it not say in God's Tora, as Tevye points out, Kerakheym av al bonim" (as a father has compassion on his children). Because for once the Holy Writings serve his needs without his intervention, Tevye does not mistranslate. Although Sholem Aleichem does not answer directly, he clearly approves of Tevye's welcoming Khave back. The poignancy of Tevye's anguish suggests that our author also has doubts about a yidishkayt

(Jewishness) which seems irreconcilable with mentshlekhkayt (humanity). Sholem Aleichem appears to have designed the scene expressly to provide Tevye with the opportunity to reconcile the fragmented parts of Jew and father battling within him.

For the Yiddish writer rebellion and reconciliation were constants. Their very vocation as Yiddish writers bore witness to the collision of the outside world with their commitment to Jewish values. They knew that reconciliation was not always possible in literature or in life. Hoping that Jews could retain their Jewishness while breathing the supposed freedom and progress of the outside world, they sought to retain the moral and spiritual essence of Judaism while abandoning the rituals and commandments prescribed by the tradition as the avenues to this essence.

A writer like Sholem Aleichem knew, that the Haskala maxim, "To be a Jew in the home and a man on the street" was a logical impossibility which conveniently ignored the essence of Judaism. In a total system such as Judaism, where eliminating even one commandment might ultimately bring about the total collapse of the structure, a melding of two worlds would prove problematic, if not downright impossible.

The writer's choices were either a total condemnation of the backwardness of Jewish life as we see in Peretz's "Married," an idealization of shtetl life set in a timeless Jewish past where modernity intrudes in a subversive and highly limited way as in Sholem Aleichem's Stempenyu, or, finally, an entrance into modernity at breakneck speed spelling disaster for Judaism, as demonstrated twenty years later in Tevye.

For Jewish and non-Jewish heroines, accepting modernity meant

deviating from, or rebelling against, the norms of their society. For the Jewish people, who had always existed as an island amidst other cultures, however, it meant more than accepting new values; it meant a confrontation with this other culture and becoming something other than they were. To the younger generation feeling shackled by an infinity of commandments and the weight of thousands of years of Jewish history, modern European society, for the first time somewhat open to Jews, beckoned seductively. To the older generation, assimilation was heresy, a betrayal in favour of a hostile anti-semitic culture. To a people for whom religion, nationality, and community were inextricably linked, assimilation was triply threatening; loosening the ties to any of these areas weakened the whole.

For the non-Jewish woman, a change in religion did not bring about a change in nationality, and rebellion or (as in the case of Effi) deviation, did not cause a split between what one was on the street and what one was at home. While being a weak or even renegade Christian was certainly not "good for the Christians," it, in no way, threatened the survival of one's national group. When society changed, it evolved into something different, but not alien and other. Although the traditional world of the Jewish woman is more constricting and the implications of rebellion grave, when she does rebel, she has more freedom as an individual, for she can, as do some of Tevye's daughters, assimilate into the larger culture. Perhaps Effi must die because she has exhausted the possibilities of her society; she can neither change society nor find a place within or outside of it. . .

Notes

[1] Henry Garland, The Berlin Novels of Theodore Fontane (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) 170.

[2] All quotations from Effi Briest are taken from Theodore Fontane, Effi Briest, trans. Douglas Parmée (New York Penguin Books, 1981).

[3] This difference in narrative style may perhaps be accounted for by the fact that Fontane wrote within an established tradition which needed no justification or explanation, as opposed to Sholem Aleichem who was self-conscious about writing his first Jewish novel (and, he implies, the first Yiddish novel worthy of the name).

[4] Theodore Fontane, Briefe an Friedlander February 28, 1892, p. 173 as quoted in Roy Pascal, The German Novel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956) 202.

[5] Theodore L. Lowe, "The Problems of love and Marriage in the Novels of Theodore Fontane" (Ph.D. dissertation, Microfilm, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, 1955) 186.

[6] This information on the significance of the duel in German society was taken from Henry Garland, The Berlin Novels of Theodore Fontane, 187.

[7] Sholem Aleichem, "A briv tsu a gutn fraynd" [A Letter to a Good Friend] Yidishe Folksbibliotek, 2 (Kiev, 1889) 304-314.

[8] Eliezer Greenberg and Irving Howe, eds., A Treasury of Yiddish Stories (New York: Schocken Books, 1974) 30-31.

[9] Theodore Fontane, Dichter uber ihre Dichtungen, 1973 p. 451, as quoted in Henry Garland, The Berlin Novels of Theodore Fontane (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) 206.

[10] Jews generally felt that "a meshumed iz erger fun a goy" (a convert is worse than a non-Jew). Not only had the convert betrayed his/her people, but not infrequently, experience taught that the convert would become an anti-semite and would try to bring harm to his/her old community.

Chapter 8

A Doll's House

Intensely modern in its depiction of a woman's radical emotional metamorphosis and the subsequent break-up of her marriage, Ibsen's A Doll's House will be timely as long as women struggle to find their place within marriage.

Because Ibsen wrote movingly of society's exploitation of women and was one of the first playwrights, as Eva Le Gallienne says in her introduction to her translation of his plays, to present women as "rounded human beings capable at once of courage and cowardice, tenderness and cruelty, honesty and deceit, self-sacrifice and merciless rapacity,"[1] the women's movement has wanted to claim Ibsen as its own from the moment Nora first walked out on Torvald. Ibsen responded to this claim at a speech he gave in Christiania on May 26, 1898 at a dinner given for him by the Norwegian society for the Woman's Cause on the occasion of his seventieth birthday:

> I thank you for drinking my health, but I must decline the honour of having consciously worked for the Women's Cause. I am not even clear what the Women's Cause really is. For me it is but an affair of humanity. . . . Not all I have written has proceeded from a conscious tendency. I have been more the poet and less the social philosopher than has been generally believed. . . . It is most certainly desirable to solve the women's question, among others, but that was not my whole intention. My task was the description of man. . . . The women will solve the question of mankind, but they must do so as mothers. Herein lies the greatest task of women. 2

Doubtless, statements like these prompted Ibsen's contemporary, feminist Camilla Coltell, to attack him for his "shockingly old-fashioned views regarding women's place in society."[3] It may be that the play has become a classic precisely because Ibsen does not concern

himself with "the women's question" in the narrow political sense. While the struggle for equal rights for women may be won or lost by legislation--overnight, as it were, and then pass out of fashion, the intimate workings of the shared life of a man and a women will continue to intrigue people long after the law books say we are all equal.

The play deals with and introduces into literature many of the same themes we find in the works of Yiddish and Western literature discussed in this and other chapters of the dissertation. _A Doll's House_, _Effi Briest_ and _Stempenyu_ all portray a marriage in crisis. In most of the Yiddish works, and in _Effi Briest_ as well, the marriages are prearranged by the family causing much of the female protagonists' discontent. In _A Doll's House_ Nora and Torvald seem to have chosen each other, but the plight of Nora's friend Kristina Lind pressed into a disagreeable marriage to support her destitute family still argues against the old system. Whether largely because of boredom as it is for Effi and Rokhele, or because of the role she must play which ultimately disgusts her, as it does Nora, all the female protagonists find little real love and communication in their marriages or purpose to their lives.

Perhaps, most important, all the works deal with the woman in conflict with society over the extent of her freedom to determine her own life. In this chapter, I shall explore whether society is a positive source of values, moral strength, and support for Nora or a negative force inhibiting her freedom and development.

Of all the works discussed here dealing with marriage, only in _A Doll's House_ is the heroine not interested in another man. This

allows Ibsen to focus exclusively on the relationship of the couple. When Nora leaves, we understand that it can only be to establish her autonomy. Her reevaluation of her marriage is a direct reflection of her feelings for Torvald and about their relationship.

The doll image, either implicit or explicit, in both the Yiddish and Western texts, serves to highlight the protagonists' sense of emotional deadness. Rokhele gazes idly at the market place, feeling gepentet (fettered) by her well-meaning in-laws; Tevye's Beylke, dressed in finery and jewels bemoans the fact that "Ikh bin nit ikh" (I am not I). In Bergelson's Nokh alemen, to be discussed in the following chapter, Mirl identifies with the woman clutching the wax doll to her breast in the tale of the Dead City and also calls herself a "veiled doll." The paper dolls Effi Briest cuts out to pass the time serve as a silent reminder of how men want women to be. Nora refers to herself as both her father's "doll-child" and then later, Torvald's "doll-wife." Their marriage is very much like a game of house in which they play with each other and their doll children rather than treat each other as adults.

In all cases, these images stress the female protagonists' sense that they are being dehumanized by marriage. Their main duty in life now seems to be to dress up, be pretty and please their husbands who never treat them as equals, whether because of the religious upbringing of a Moyshe-Mendl or a Borukh; the emotional coldness of an Instettin; or the loving but patronizing attitude of a Torvald.

In addition to Nora's references to herself as a doll, Torvald calls her "little bird," "squirrel," and "chipmunk." Allusions to nature in the other works discussed here are positive, though in A

Doll's House they are not. For example, in Aleyn Sorke's marriage unnaturally and disastrously cuts short her happy and free girlhood as a forest maiden. Rokhele's meeting with Stempenyu on Monastery Street, makes her suddenly feel "as if she had grown wings and were free as a bird and could fly."[4] In "Married" Leah's escape from the pressures of family life is the river, and here she meets the doctor's apprentice. But in A Doll's House instead of stressing Nora's freedom, the animal names ironically suggest that Nora has been caged by her husband. More a pet than a wife to Torvald, she has been reduced to the animal level of doing "tricks" to please her master.

Who is responsible for this state of affairs? A first reading or viewing of A Doll's House, will probably find one supportive of Nora and critical of Torvald who seems, at best, a well-meaning but totally inappropriate mate for his changed wife. Torvald loses stature not because he does not say he is guilty of the forgery, which would, as he points out, have brought them both to ruin, but rather because his spontaneous reaction is self-righteous and even abusive. Had his behaviour been inspired by a more noble and loving heart, it might have been partially excused by his not knowing that Nora had forged a signature to save his life. Should he not have trusted rather than immediately condemned her whom he claimed to love so much?

On the other hand, Nora is at least partially responsible for the way in which she is treated. If Torvald has pampered and infantilized her, she has consented to it. If this is, as she says, the first time that they "man and wife--have had a serious talk together"[5] (3.225) one wonders what ever prevented her from bringing this about

earlier.

Nora's upbringing by her father and her personality before her decision to leave make one wonder whether she can really have changed. Can we trust that her sudden and unlikely transformation is real, or, are we to assume that she never was the flighty character that she appeared to be?

While Torvald does not seem ripe for a similar overnight metamorphosis, his admission that "there truly is a gulf between us

sensitivity. If Torvald is guilty of having loved in Nora only his image of the little doll-wife, she too is guilty of having loved, not the real Helmer but her fantasy of him. Her belief that Torvald loves her so much "he wouldn't hesitate to give his life for me [her]" (2.194), and Torvald's wish that she be threatened by some danger so he could risk everything for her, soon prove ironic when Torvald, given the chance, recoils from the challenge. It is largely because of her illusions that Torvald's failure to perform the "miracle" comes as such an irreparable blow and evokes such a drastic response in her.

Nora's dramatic exit is problematic: how are we to understand it and how are we to intuit the playwright's intent? Is this the heroic act of a newly mature woman or the characteristically histrionic act of someone who, as she admits herself, has play acted all her life, and is doing so now--the only difference being that for the first time she has created her role for herself?

Nora's realizations about Torvald, coupled with her newly discovered yearnings for respect and autonomy, make change an unquestionable necessity. More ambiguous is the direction these

changes should take. Nora's assessment that she is not fit to bring up the children seems somewhat facile and melodramatic, invalidating as it does, all of her past in the light of sudden knowledge and presumed self-awareness.

Although Nora seeks freedom from her husband and children, it is not at all clear that such independence is an unmitigated blessing. If Kristina Lind is to represent the childless "career" woman, it is a role hardly glorified by Ibsen. While Ibsen could never have predicted the rise of the phenomenon of the "working woman," the childless woman or even the single woman by choice, Kristina's confession to Nora, "That's the worst of my sort of life--it makes you so bitter. There's no one to work for, yet you can never relax. You must live, so you become self-centered."(1.158) rings familiar even today.

Regardless of how one views Nora's exit, it is possible only because she has acquired insight. Insight brings with it the desire to change, but the desire must be accompanied by the freedom to do so. Nora has that freedom although she must pay a high price for it.

In A Doll's House Ibsen explores the extent to which individual freedom is possible and the extent to which it is inhibited by determinism, whether it be the biological determinism experienced by a Dr. Rank doomed to death by a degenerative disease inherited from a syphilitic father or the social determinism accepted by a Helmer.

While the nineteenth century woman seemed by definition biologically determined and limited by her femaleness, Dr. Rank's condition highlights Nora's relative freedom. The spectre of his death also acts as a deterrent to Nora's plans of suicide. She

realizes that she alone is in control of her life and able to determine the morality of her actions. Torvald's belief that her character has been inherited from her shiftless father proves ironic in light of her actual highly moral, if not totally legal, dealings with money.

Through Torvald Ibsen raises the question of social determinism. Theoretically, Torvald is free to defy convention and socially determined concepts of honour, but, believing that he must behave in a socially acceptable way, he does not exercise this freedom. He wants and has an utterly conventional marriage. Although their ages are never stated, Torvald certainly treats Nora as if she were much younger than he. He sees it as his role to teach her what he believes she ought to know and to shelter and protect her from the world.

Like Instettin in Effi Briest, he conceives of himself as a man of honour. Just like Instettin, Torvald places his honour above his love of his wife and family. His statement that, "No man would sacrifice his honour for the one he loves" (3.230) seems but an unconvincing rationalization of his reprehensibly self-centered reaction to their dilemma as does his real reason for dismissing Krogstad. His desire to "hush it [the forgery] up at all costs" and to "seem to go on just as before" (3.221) despite his assessment of Nora as a "wretched woman. . . a liar, a hypocrite--even worse--a criminal!" (3.220-21) shows him to exceed even Instettin in his concern with appearances.

Again, as in Effi Briest, the code by which the husband lives is divorced from any true morality. These men have the freedom to act differently but are unable to because of their social myopia.

Certainly, the Yiddish characters are not free of false values and petty snobberies. Even as simple a man as Tevye feels himself too good to have a tailor for a son-in-law--but he relents. To his credit, he objects as much to the rich Leyzer-Wolf because of his ignorance and coarseness as he does to the poor tailor Motl. In "Married" Leah's parents disapprove of the doctor's apprentice, not because he is a poor orphan, but because he is the bearer of alien and dangerous ideas. In these works, a person's beliefs and character are ultimately more important to those around them than any class considerations. Characters act and are judged not so much according to public opinion as by the effect of their actions on the community. Community and not society, in the sense of people of high social standing, becomes the accepted and respected standard of measurement.

In the non-Yiddish works society, in both senses of the word; seems more the concern of men than women, or to put it more kindly, men see themselves as the guardians of the values of their society. In Ibsen's notes for <u>A Doll's House</u> he calls it "a modern tragedy," and he attributes this to the existence of "two kinds of moral law, two kinds of conscience, one in men and a completely different one in women. They do not understand each other," he writes "but in matters of practical living the woman is judged by the man's laws, as if she were not a woman but a man."[6] It is not clear whether this chasm is the result of innate differences or of upbringin and upbringing, but the differences, he believes, were irreconcilable.

Again, as in <u>Effi Briest</u> the crucial difference is largely one of instinct versus form. Nora, youthful, bubbling, passionate, and

shockingly indifferent to legalities and rules, represents instinct. For example, certain that the noble cause of saving a husband's life would pardon a minor transgression such as forgery, Nora is shocked to find herself accused of a crime. Her poignant explanation:

> . . . I simply can't believe that the law is right. That a woman shouldn't have the right to spare her old father on his deathbed, or to save her husband's life! I can't believe things like that. (3.228)

is convincing despite its flawed and naive reasoning. In contrast, Torvald, who represents form, is overbearing patronizing, and very much governed by the rules and laws of his society.

Ibsen's sympathies are clearly with Nora and not with Helmer. The view Ibsen expresses in the play is reiterated by his actions in life. In speaking at the Scandinavian society in 1879 in defense of giving its female members the vote, Ibsen demonstrates a similar appreciation for the female's innate sense of right and wrong: Youth has the instinct akin to genius, for intuitively hitting up against what is right. But it is this very instinct which women have in common with youth as well as with the true artist.[7]

When Nora responds to Torvald's accusatory reminder that first and foremost she's a wife and mother, saying, "I don't believe that any longer. I believe that before everything else I'm a human being" (3. 228), she is again responding emotionally.

No matter how one reacts to Nora's leaving, one must concede that it is a daring and radical step. As in all the works discussed here, the heroine's new insight puts her in conflict with and isolates her from her society. Finding the traditional supports insufficient aids in her quest for self-knowledge, she believes there to be no way to

achieve her goals within her traditional marriage.

Torvald's half-hearted appeal to her sense of religious duty is but a frantic attempt to grasp at anything. Nora's response, "Ah, Torvald, I don't really know what religion is" (3.228) demonstrates just how little she feels bound by such considerations.

Far from suggesting a concern for the possible adverse effect of Nora's deed on society, that is to say, the collective of which they are a part, Torvald's appeal to Nora's social conscience expresses rather his own fear that he will be adversely affected by society's reaction to her deed.

The intense controversy surrounding the play from its first performance to the present suggests that the issues raised by Nora's decision have certainly aroused society. In 1880, the Germans were so profoundly outraged by the ending of the play that they forced Ibsen to rewrite the last scene before allowing it to be performed in Germany. Referring to this as "an act of barbarous violence against the play,"[8] Ibsen nevertheless complied for fear the job might fall into someone else's hands. In the new ending, Helmer forces Nora to take one last look at their sleeping children and she finds herself unable to leave them. The values of family, motherhood and male supremacy are restored and reaffirmed.

Within the play, however, society does not determine Nora's actions. Perhaps this is why society found her behaviour so objectionable. Unlike Effi, for example, she does not merely respond passively to her situation, but chooses to place herself outside of respectable society. The stimulus for this is, surprisingly, not even another man--something which readers and audiences of even a hundred

years ago might have accepted--but rather, simply a desire "to find herself." The idea that a woman had a self that was not part of a family as either a daughter, a mother, or a wife was itself shocking.

Like Nora, Rokhele in Stempenyu comes to understand that her marriage cannot work as it is. However, her religious upbringing and her sense of community, as we have already discussed, ultimately act as a positive force holding the marriage together, enabling Rokhele to live happily ever after according to its rules.

In Aleyn, Sorke's leaving is as independent and outrageous an act as Nora's, and its consequences are even greater. Her actions affect not only the family but, on a symbolic level, the whole chain of God, the Tora, and the People of Israel.

Ibsen's attitude towards his society in A Doll's House is implicit. In his Life of Ibsen, Halvden Koht writes:

> The thing which filled his mind was the individual man, and he measured the worth of a community accordingly as it helped or hindered a man in being himself. He had an ideal standard which he placed upon the community, and it was from this measuring that his social action proceeded.[9]

As this quotation suggests, in A Doll's House Ibsen is highly critical of his society for not allowing Nora to be herself. Both her upbringing by her father and her marriage have robbed her of her essential being. Her "tricks" and her animal names all bespeak a negation of the self. Nora finds her only salvation in rebellion.

In the dichotomy between individual and social morality, A Doll's House clearly argues for individual morality. Although one may disapprove of Nora's methods no one can dispute her need to discover her personal autonomy and radically change her relationship to Torvald--even Torvald realizes that. In Effi Briest the individual is

crushed by a society that has little to redeem it. The Yiddish works, are also characterized by a tension between the emerging modern individual and her society. Judaism demands that the individual's will always be in harmony with the collective will presumably guided by God. Finding their will in conflict with the will of the community, most of the Yiddish female protagonists feel they must break away.

At times the individual triumphs, as in Tevye. Here, however, the daughters' independence is linked symbolically to the end of the Jewish people. In Aleyn, Sorke's irresponsible, sometimes insensitive and cruel behaviour, coupled by her father's anguish argue for a finer sense of social morality.

Even in Peretz's "Married," where family and communal pressure conspire to ruin a young woman's life, the pressure is more a result of poverty and an understandable narrow-mindedness born of desperation than of fossilized social convention and petty snobbery.

* * *

The Yiddish writers could not uphold the freedom of the individual in conflict with her society as easily as could an Ibsen, because "society" meant not just a social group, or even the all-inclusive community of a certain region or country, but also a stateless nation, a persecuted religious minority and, as yet, the only home in a world which did not yet accept Jews unequivocally. This is not to say that Yiddish literature was not critical of Jewish society; it was primarily a literature of social criticism and rebellion.

Early modern Yiddish writers of the Haskalah generation as well as the later politically radical writers saw it as their duty to criticize Jewish society. A writer such as S.Y. Abramovich (Mendele), the grandfather of Yiddish literature, was extremely biting and critical. Indeed, because Yiddish was a language known almost exclusively by Jews, it provided an effective and non-threatening instrument for internal criticism.

Yiddish literature was a literature of reform, not of alienation. Haskala (enlightenment) and later writers were engaged in the struggle to better the Jewish community. Abramovich was the principal of a modernized Hebrew day school in Odessa; Peretz, a lawyer by training, had a paid position in the Jewish community in Warsaw, Kadye Molodowsky taught in the Yiddish schools of in Warsaw and New York, and Opatoshu taught Jewish school.[10] Although many of the Yiddish writers were secularists, they were not assimilationsist. While often fiercely critical of the social and financial inequality, as well as of the oppressiveness and backwardness of the Jewish community, they nevertheless committed themselves to that community. Their works cry out, with the need for reform and particularly for a more enlightened treatment of women.

Modern Yiddish writers were in deep conflict. Because a writer needs roots and his roots were in traditional Judaism, the Yiddish writer's artistic expression often focused on the depiction of traditional Jewish life. While their criticism of their society is often scathing, it is important to remember that they wrote with a passion given only to those intimate with the problems. If they criticized the kheyder as an archaic institution, it was because they

had gone to such a school; if they were haunted by the deprivations of _tsnies_ (female modesty) as was the "I" in Kadye Molodowsky's "Songs of Women" it was because they had seen and perhaps suffered the effects.

Yiddish writers were, in many cases, in conscious personal revolt against traditional Jewish society, or had at least severed their ties in a less dramatic fashion. Their portrayal of the traditional Jewish male was likely to be influenced by their own personal rejection of that role. At the same time, they also knew the belief and devotion, albeit to their minds misguided, which illuminated the lives of their people, and they were painfully aware that enlightenment and modernity could not offer such certainty and depth. Bergelson's _Nokh alemen_ discussed in the next chapter illustrates this poignantly.

By choosing Yiddish, when they could have chosen Polish or Russian, and, in America, English, (assuming that they were linguistically capable as many Eastern European Jews were,) these writers committed themselves to the Yiddish language, hence to the Jewish people and to international anonymity. They were undeniably "Jewish" writers and not merely writers who happened to be Jewish. Neither in life nor in literature, could they simply say, "To hell with society!"—they had no other. While they criticized their society, and the treatment of women provided an obvious occasion for criticism, they never unambivalently allowed their characters a complete break with society because this would have been tantamount to betrayal. The evolution of a new community which would fuse the essence of the Jewish spirit devoid of its rigidity, unworldliness, and submissivieness with the intellectual breadth and freedom of the

modern world shaped their creative vision.

The negative judgment of the non-Yiddish authors is more pronounced because their criticism of the male protagonist is less ambivalent. The non-Jewish male characters such as Torvald and Instettin see themselves as, and were created to be, the defenders of and the spokesmen for society's values. Because the authors have these characters uphold society's most oppressive values, society emerges as a backward and oppressive force, and particularly so to women.

In this, Instettin and Torvald differ greatly from the male protagonists in the Yiddish works. This is not to say that Jewish men do not appear negative in Yiddish literature--they do, but in a different way. Nor is this to say that men were not what was meant by "society" in Yiddish literature and life. They were. As early as the Ten Commandments which were addressed to _ata,_ the masculine you, Judaism saw the male as supreme. While this male supremacy is conveyed in Yiddish literature, paradoxically,the male characters do not seem to wield any real power.

Male characters like Moyshe-Mendl in _Stempenyu_ and Borukh in _Aleyn_ are depicted as weak, somewhat _shlemazldik_ (luckless) and even emasculated. They are as unable to change their situations and as victimized by their society as are their wives.

Even someone like Stempenyu who is closer to the ideal romantic hero is browbeaten by a shrewish wife. Like Job, Tevye suffers at the hands of God and the world. Although he argues for the values of his society, it is neither in his power nor his nature to enforce them. If these men do represent society, it is a society in flux, no longer

able to hold together and perpetuate its values. The male protagonist, often weak and emasculated, symbolizes this impotence.

The Jewish male characters are depicted as powerless in contrast to the Western men who are also negative but more powerful. These male figures raise several questions about the nature of Jewish society as depicted in these works. Who holds the power in the society portrayed in the Yiddish novel if not the men? Does the weakness of the men negate the suffering of the women? Certainly it does not, for the Yiddish heroines are as miserable with their husbands as the Western women are with theirs. Because women were the weakest and most downtrodden members of the community, Yiddish writers seized on them as a vehicle to describe the evils of their society. Portrayals of women naturally focus frequently on the ills of marriage, making the negative depiction of the Jewish husband almost inevitable, not so much because he, like Instettin or Torvald, wants to impose his values on his wife, but simply because of his forced relationship to her. Yet the Jewish husbands are never really the cause of the problem; they are, rather, a manifestation of it. In part, the uncomfortable and unequal union between male and female is fostered by the Jewish religion. In a system where the relations between the sexes are believed to be prescribed by God, change comes slowly.

In part, the image of the weak Jewish male is deliberate and exaggerated. Although in the world these authors describe, the unworldly _yeshiva_-boy is the ideal husband, he soon becomes the butt of satire and criticism in their hands. It is almost a convention of modern Yiddish literature to portray the traditional _yeshiva_-trained

husband as an ineffective shlemazl (luckless fellow) who serves as a foil for the more powerful, virile and sexually appealing "modern" man. The new ideal were people who stood for worldly enlightenment and social and political progress and independence like the maskil doctor's apprentice in Peretz's "Married," or later, revolutionaries like Kronenberg in Aleyn or Perchik in Tevye.

If the powerlessness of the Jewish male character, and by extension, Jewish society, reflects the modern writer's bias, it also reflects a historical reality. The Jewish male's real-life limited control over his society informed the Jewish self-image and was carried over into literature. If the Jewish male character does not seem to be the authoritative voice of his society, as do Instettin or Torvald, it is because he is not. Ultimate power belonged, not to the Jewish male but to the non-Jewish community. Tevye's expulsion by the non-Jews at the end of Sholem Aleichem's Tevye is very much a case in point.

Yiddish literature has no heroes, only anti-heroes; it has no men of great deeds although it is rich in champions of moral battles. It is not about men of great power unless one sees greatness in the subtle shadings of a moral argument. As Howe and Greenberg put it, Yiddish literature is about "the virtue of powerlessness, the power of helplessness, the company of the dispossessed, the sanctity of the insulted and the injured."[11] Yiddish literature is about a people, who, whether through their own fault or not, (a point very much debated by Jewish thinkers of the last two centuries) were not in control of their lives.

Fragility vis a vis the external world fostered internal strength

so that ironically, a cohesive community was one in which the members themselves were at the mercy of outside powers. It stands to reason that the Jews' sense of the precariousness of their existence would be echoed in their literature. Therefore, although the community as a whole may wield tremendous influence over its members, the individuals who wield it--usually the men--do not appear strong. Hence the prevalence of the image of the traditional Jewish male as wimpy, ineffective, insecure even in his position as the head of his household.

Like Nora, the Yiddish heroines find themselves in conflict with their husbands and their society. Because Torvald represents "society" and the opinion of society other than Torvald is strikingly absent from the play, for Nora, defying his wishes means defying society as well. The playwright focuses the reader's sympathy almost exclusively on Nora and not at all on the way her behaviour will affect those around her. Torvald's arrogance and self-assumed power diminish any concern the reader might have regarding him or society at large.

In contrast, in the Yiddish works, society is a more compelling force in the lives of the heroines. The fragility of that society is paradoxically its strength, always lingering near the surface, either pricking the heroines' conscience and informing her choices or acting as a powerful reproach.

Notes

[1] Henrik Ibsen, *The Wild Duck and Other Plays*, trans. Eva Le Gallienne (New York: Modern Libraries, 1961) xiv .

[2] Maurice Vallency, *The Flower and the Castle* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1963) 151.

[3] Vallency 150.

[4] Sholem Aleichem, *Stempenyu*, *Ale verk fun Sholem Aleichem*, vol. 2 (New York: Folksfond, 1919) 231.

[5] All quotations from the text of *A Doll's House* are taken from Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House and Other Plays*, trans. Peter Watts (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965).

[6] David Thomas, *Henrik Ibsen* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1984) 16.

[7] Hermann J. Weigand, *The Modern Ibsen: A Reconsideration* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1925) 70.

[8] Peter Watts, Introduction, *A Doll's House and Other Plays* by Henrik Ibsen (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965) 18.

[9] Halvden Koht, *Life of Ibsen*, quoted in Eva Le Gallienne, trans., *The Wild Duck and Other Plays* xii.

[10] For a scathing and sometimes hilarious fictional account of what it was like to teach in a Hebrew school see Yoysef Opatoshu, *Hebru* [Hebrew] (Vilna: Vilner farlag fun B. Kletskin, 1928).

[11] Eliezer Greenberg and Irving Howe, *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974) 38.

Chapter 9

Madame Bovary and Nokh Alemen

Mirl Hurwitz, the hero of Dovid Bergelson's novel *Nokh alemen* has often been referred to as the "Jewish Madame Bovary." Mirl, "restless and modern," says Irving Howe, "is treated somewhat in the manner of Flaubert's" heroine.[1] Although I was unable to discover whether or not Bergelson read *Madame Bovary*, it is inconceivable that a first-rate writer such as Bergelson who knew Russian, German, and perhaps French did not read *Madame Bovary* either in the Russian or German translation or even in the original French. (The work was not translated into Yiddish until after the publication of *Nokh alemen*. A translation by Mark Rakovski was published in Warsaw in 1928.) I believe that whether or not Bergelson consciously modelled Mirl after Emma, a comparison between the two works is still fruitful.

Although over fifty years elapsed between the publication of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in 1857 in France and the publication of Bergelson's *Nokh alemen* in 1912 in Russia, the protagonists of the two works appear, on the surface, to be quite similar. Whether or no Bergelson intended it, and despite great differences between Mirl and Emma, Mirl indisputably has something of the "Jewish Madame Bovary" in her. The description of Mirl as a "small town tragedy" may well be an allusion to the subtitle of *Madame Bovary*, "Moeurs de Province" (Provincial Morés). Both Emma and Mirl, beautiful, bored, and unhappy in their marriages, move against a background of the break-up of small town society with its shared values and common assumptions.

Both works are a response to the inability of traditional marriage to survive amidst the disintegration of traditional values. Unable to find answers within the old structures, both characters explore other possiblities only to find that everything leads nowhere.

Finding that love either does not exist or that it ultimately disappoints, both heroines still look for happiness exclusively through men. Although this may be a reflection of their male creators' concept of the limited possibilities available to women, it is nevertheless convincing. Both of these women are affected by traditional attitudes governing the relationship between men and women and the changes taking place in their traditional societies. With this in mind then, I shall be looking closely at the way in which this affects their attitudes towards men, marriage, adultery, children, escape, and suicide. Because both heroines were "born" into religious societies, I shall explore the way in which religion pervades their consciousness and determines their attitudes and actions towards these subjects and towards life in general. I shall examine the extent to which their situations and attitudes are the result of changes wrought by modernity or are simply a function of their characters.

Both Emma and Mirl are quintessentially modern women in the manner of W.H. Auden's statement: "The basic dilemma of modern man is the problem of living in a society where men are no longer sustained by tradition even while they are unaware of having lost it."[2] Both heroines look for meaning in a world whose basic assumptions they reject. They each live in a society which has, to a great extent, shaped their lives, but their personal visions (or in the case of Mirl, lack of vision) are incompatible with these predetermined paths.

Both Bergelson and Flaubert portray the twilight of an era. But as we shall see, Madame Bovary is a book about an adulterous woman some of whose specific adventures and attitudes are a function of the changing times. Nokh alemen is a work about the twilight of an era as it is reflected in the life of an unhappily married woman.

Madame Bovary employs the modern themes of alienation and isolation, and in Nokh alemen, Bergelson introduces into Yiddish literature the theme of the meaninglessness of life in a godless world. The title Nokh alemen, translated in the English edition by Bernard Martin as When All is Said and Done, literally means "after everything," and captures the plight of the individual in a moribund world of confusion and chaos.

The only child of Reb Gedalye and Gitl Hurwitz, members of a sinking Jewish aristocracy based on wealth and religiosity, Mirl is a reluctant heiress to their crumbling khsidish-negidish (Hasidic and upper class) world. Although the people around Mirl frequently attribute her behaviour to her being a spoiled only daughter, the author shows this explanation to be inadequate and unjust. Mirl's sense of not belonging anywhere is reinforced by the situation at home. The onzets mishmash (bankruptcy mess) which culminates in the sale of the Hurwitz's house after Reb Gedalye's death, makes her parental home, with its onslaught of creditors and bailiffs, a very difficult place to be. Throughout the book, Mirl's father's waning fortunes and his slow but irreversible movement towards death acquire meaning beyond his personal demise. Reb Gedalye's death symbolizes the death of traditional Judaism. Mirl's obsession with finding the iker (main thing), or as we might say in English, "the meaning of

life," reflects her need to fill the void created by loss of faith. What remains for Mirl after her father's death is a twilight world filled with people without faith or focus, with no core of meaning or moral center to illuminate their lives.

The Soviet critic Dobrushin sees Reb Gedalye's sinking fortunes and Mirl's aimlessness and alienation as a reflection of the necessary demise of the old Jewish aristocracy. While, from a Marxist perspective, the passing away of the aristocracy is scarcely to be mourned, the rise of the bourgeoisie which supplants it, represented by Velvel and Shmulik, is no more positive. Dobrushin sees the bourgeoisie as deadening to the spirit and soul and causing the "destruction of the personality."[3]

Part of a dying class, unwilling to marry into the bourgeoisie, and with no interest in revolutionary politics, Mirl is a "superfluous person," a term Dobrushin uses to describe people "_vos zaynen nokh der ershter revolutsie aruntergefaln unter der destruktiver farnikhtndiker kraft fun der vaksndiker burzhvasie_ (who fell beneath the destructive annihilating force of the growing bourgeoisie after the first revolution).[4]

While this sort of class analysis does illuminate political and economic aspects of the novel, class politics were hardly Bergelson's main focus; they formed rather a background for intimate aspects of the lives of the characters. If Bergelson does draw on the class structure to tell his story, it is because this was part of the reality he dealt with. Mirl's marginality and the Hurwitz family's financial situation, coupled with Reb Gedalye's death, serve as a metaphor for decline, marginality, and alienation.

Similarly, politics are not a major focus in Madame Bovary although Emma's status as a bourgeoise is important. In mocking the self-satisfied bourgeois provincial way of life, Flaubert turns the reader's sympathies towards Emma, forced to live in this dull and constraining milieu. At the same time he makes it clear that the luxury-seeking Emma is the middle class woman incarnate and that her particular malady is directly related to her class. Being a bourgeoise she has enough material comfort to know its pleasures but too little to be satisfied, and enough of the idleness not given to the lower classes to find time to bemoan the fact that fate had not made made her an aristocrat.

The emptiness from which both Mirl and Emma suffer is characteristic of the conflict between religion and enlightenment. Both works are modern in their extreme focus on the inner life of the individual and in their techniques for conveying this inner life. In exploring the inner life, both Flaubert and Bergelson focus on the female protagonist, more usually associated with emotionality, both in literature and in life.

In recording the details of Emma's life, Flaubert makes it clear that much of her dissatisfaction is linked to her being a woman. With little more knowledge of the world than she received in her convent school, Emma is married off willingly to someone whom she does not know very well and to whom she is ultimately unsuited. When her boring husband goes off on his medical rounds, she is even more bored without him than with him. Working outside the home does not appear to be an option for a mid-nineteenth century bourgeois woman in France, and so Emma has endless time to contemplate her unhappiness.

Despite the fact the Emma uses her femininity to manipulate her universe, a part of her yearns to be a man. She believes, "A woman is constantly thwarted. Inert and pliable, she is restricted by her physical weakness and her legal subjection. . . . there is always some desire urging her forward, always some convention holding her back[5] (77; bk. 2, ch. 3).

In committing adultery, Emma rebels against her limited, subservient role in society and takes some steps towards shaping her In institutionalizing adultery, French society condoned it for married men but not for married women. Flaubert's description of Emma's overt sexuality is new and shocking, as is her placing the pursuit of her own happiness above her duty to husband and child. It is not coincidental that Emma, emboldened by rebellion, frequently flaunts social convention by acting in a flagrantly unfeminine manner. During her affair with Rodolphe, she sometimes wears a "tight mannish looking vest" (165; bk. 2, ch. 12) and "She had the audacity to walk with Rodolphe in public with a cigarette in her mouth" (165; bk. 2, ch. 12). She sees giving birth to a male child as a vicarious form of redemption and rebirth:

> The idea of ginving birth to a son was like a compensation for all her past frustrations. A man, at least is free: he can explore the whole range of the passions, go wherever he likes. . . (76; bk. 2, ch. 3)

Emma is therefore terribly disappointed when she gives birth to a daughter and she remains disappointed for the rest of her life as her indifference, and even decidedly negative attitude towards her daughter suggests.

Mirl's sense that there is nothing in life worth doing is directly related to her femaleness. As a woman, and a wealthy one at

that, she is never expected to do anything except marrry well and have children. Even rich men, like Shmulik and Velvl, are expected to work. Although it would be simple-minded to suggest that Mirl could have filled the void in her life with a "career" or with political activity (interestingly, Bergelson chooses to ignore revolutionary politics almost entirely), it is significant that as a woman she has the luxury of ignoring every option.

Furthermore, as a woman and an only child, Mirl, like Tevye's daughters, poses an implicit threat to Jewish continuity and survival. Although Bergelson never explicitly uses the word kadish (a term for son, because a son says the kadish prayer for the dead over his deceased parent), Mirl's absence at her father's funeral makes it clear that he has no one to say kadish for him and thereby to perpetuate his memory.

The modernity of the themes in these works is complemented by the modernity in style. Much has been written of Flaubert's pioneering in the stlye indirect libre in which shifts in narrative perspective present events and thoughts through the eyes of both an objective third person narrator and the subject herself, sometimes in the same sentence, to create a world where reality and subjective perception are inextricably entangled. For example, consider this passage in which Emma contemplates her misfortune at having married Charles:

> She tried to imagine those events which had not happened, that different life, that husband whom she did not know. Not all men were like Charles. Her husband might have been handsome, witty, distinguished and attractive. Her former schoolmates had no doubt married men like that. What were they doing now? In cities with their animated streets, buzzing theaters and glittering ballrooms, they were leading lives which allowed them to give free rein to their emotions and develop their senses. But her life was as cold as an attic facing north, . . . (38; bk. 1, ch. 7)

These lines paraphrasing Emma's thoughts could only belong to the author. Despite her inflated artistic aspirations, we know that Emma's speech is generally anything but poetic. In this passage, the thoughts and images about the lives of her schoolmates are Emma's, the language to describe them is Flaubert's. Her notions of the blissful lives of her former schoolmates are revealed as mere supposition on her part. Here and throughout the book, the author's presence ultimately controls the passage, exposing and challenging Emma's illusions and perceptions.

Bergelson's style, a rebellion against the chatty narrator or folksy monologuist prevalent at that time in Yiddish literature, employs this same technique. In Nokh alemen too we find narrative perspective shifting back and forth between the characters and the narrator producing similar results. Take, for example, this passage recording someone's thoughts (it is not clear whose) as Mirl and Lipkis journey to the home of the midwife Shatz:

> Zaynen, heyst es, fil mentshn umgliklekh farzorgt un nisht bafridikt. Nor lebn. . . . lebn ken men nokh vi nit iz eyner aleyn in farruktn un pustn dorfvinkl, lebn oysgebahaltn un ironish shmeykhldik, vi s'lebt kegn iber ot dem royt baloykhtenem fenster di zibn un tsvantsik yorike Litvitchke, di akusherke Shatz.6

> So, that means, many people are unhappy, burdened with cares and unsatisfied. But one can still live somehow or other all alone in an out of the way and barren corner of the village, one can live hidden and with an ironic smile as does the twenty-seven year old Lithuanian woman, the midwife Shatz, across from the red lit up window.7

At first glance, it seems as if an omniscient third person narrator is reporting someone's thoughts; but whose? The colloquial "heyst es" (that means) indicates that the narrator is recording something on the border between thought and speech. The passage

immediately preceding the above quotation suggests that these are the "long, sad, weary thoughts"(62-63; bk. 2, ch. 2) of the people in the gliding carts returning home, but the travellers cannot all have the same dreary resigned thoughts on life which the reader recognizes as bearing Mirl's stamp. Nor do they know the midwife Shatz or her ironic smile. In this way, reality is filtered through Mirl's perception to create a world in which objectivity and subjectivity flow illusively and dangerously into one another.

But while the confusion between reality and misperception is the heart of the problem for both Emma and Mirl, their perceptions of reality and illusion are very different. Emma suffers from an overabundance of illusion; Mirl, from a lack of illusion. Emma believes that there is more to life than meets the eye; Mirl, less. Emma's sensibility is focused on the wrong things; Mirl's has been numbed. Emma sees temporary solutions as the key to permanent happiness; Mirl ultimately discounts all solutions because they are insufficient to lead her to the "iker" (main thing), and are always followed by the nagging sensation of "Yes, but what will come after that?"

In keeping with the themes of helplessness, decay and emptiness the tone of Nokh alemen is gloomy and restrained. While Emma's fate is possibly worse than Mirl's, she and the whole work often pulsate with the excitement of her dreams. Madame Bovary is rich in detailed descriptions of the things Emma had and longed to have. Even the clothes she wore are meticulously described as if some secret power to change her life lay in each button and pleat.

Nokh alemen does not have the sumptuous descriptions and rich

texture created by Flaubert's constant appeal to the senses. Through its long sentences, frequent repetition of phrases and the unnatural convoluted syntax with the verb or participle often coming at the end,[8] it achieves instead a perfect balance of form and content in which the heavy somber mood is echoed in its heavy tone. Individual scenes and the plot as a whole offer no excitement, only the inactivity and emotional paralysis of the characters. The lassitude of the characters is matched by a lassitude on the page.

Emotional emptiness is matched by sparse description. Bergelson uses one or two objects, briefly but skillfully described, to create a mood. A heavy oak sideboard and a room thick with the cigarette smoke of creditors capture the doleful atmosphere at the Hurwitz house. People too are described with a well-turned, sometimes humourous phrase. The comparison of Velvl's mother's heavy asthmatic breathing to that of an overfed goose, the likening of Nosn Heller to someone who was expelled from high school, and the midwife Shatz's ironic smile all succinctly convey the essence of the character.

Although the characters are well drawn and portrayed with psychological depth, _Nokh alemen_ has a certain allegorical undertone. Mirl, who, on one level, seems a study in depression, on another level, represents a generation lost to Judaism, and Reb Gedalye represents the death of traditional Judaism. Mirl's personal "small town tragedy" becomes the tragedy of traditional Judaism in thousands of towns and cities throughout Eastern Europe.

Mirl fluctuates between utter desperation and rare flashes of hope in which the meaning of existence, albeit without specific content, is revealed to her:

> Un gedukht hot zikh ir shoyn, az zi lebt nit vi ale mentshn, nor zi geyt arum bay der zayt fun lebn, afn oylem hatoyu un plontert zikh dortn fun kleynerheyt in a langn farvogltn kholem, vos hot nisht kin onheyb un nit kin sof.
> Ot iz zi shoyn, dukht zikh, itst tsu epes tsugekumen un vet epes ton, un efsher iz zi nokh tsu gornisht nit gekumen un vet gornit nit ton. Eyne aleyn vet zi nokh vayter arumblondzhen, vi an eybiker kholem fun toyevoye un vet inergets nit onkumen. (143; bk. 2, ch. 8)

> And it seemed to her that she did not live like other people but that she went around all alone on the periphery of life, in the world of chaos and had been faltering there since she was little in a long restless dream that had no beginning and no end.
> And now, it seemed, she had attained something, and would do something, and maybe she hadn't attained anything and would do nothing. All alone she would continue to wander around aimlessly, like an eternal dream of chaos and would not arrive anywhere.

If and when Mirl does exercise her will, it is, as the author says, "a foggy will" always pervaded by doubt. Emma's every action, by contrast, is prompted by illusion. Gradually, each of her illusions, beginning with marriage, is destroyed. While many earlier fictions with female protagonists end with marriage as a happy culmination, in Madame Bovary Flaubert reverses the traditional pattern and begins with Emma's marriage. Emma's first spoken words, "Oh why did I ever get married?" (38; bk. 1, ch. 7) signal the start of an anti-romantic emphasis in marriage.

At the core of both works lies what Victor Brombert calls "the drama of incommunicability."[9] Madame Bovary portrays a world in which people speak to each other but are not heard, where the real life and the fantasy life of characters coexist in jarring opposition and where the dreams of one character are often undercut by the thoughts and schemes of another. The relationship of Emma and Charles provides the most glaring example of this incompatibility. While Emma believes

that happiness and romance are only to be found in unreachable realms, Charles believes "he had everything he could wish for" and that "he knew human life from one end to the other" (76; bk. 2, ch. 3).

Emma suffers from an isolation and alienation born of illusion. No matter whom she is with, no matter what she does, she always feels empty. In her yearning for the far-off and imaginary, she dismisses the here and now, believing that what is within her grasp is no longer worth reaching for. The intrusion of reality constantly diminishes the most romantic of moments and the most elevated of passions. The ideal of motherhood is profaned by the reality of her baby's drooling on her dress, and the very words which feed romantic passion are but clichés.

For Mirl in Nokh alemen as for Emma, relationships with almost everybody in her life are exercises in non-communication. But while Emma reaches out to some people and fails to communicate because she refuses to see and hear what is before her, Mirl reaches out to no one and interprets everything through the prism of her despair. Her parents have no idea why she is so miserable and none of the men who swarm around her can help her find the "iker" (main thing) which she believes she must find. Bergelson's technique of rendering much of the dialogue indirectly, through the third person, further accents the "drama of incommunicability."

In a passage in which Mirl and Lipkis walk over the barren snowy fields, each wrapped in his or her own thoughts, Mirl says, half to Lipkis, half to herself, "Er shtelt zikh for, vi ir iz itst alts fremd un alts eyns?" (Can he imagine how everything is now alien and indifferent) (46; bk. 2, ch. 1)?

The indirect dialogue again blurs the boundaries between thought and speech, helping to preserve the somber surface of the narration. In this passage, Lipkis represents for Mirl not another person but an almost anonymous ear. The indirect discourse captures the distance and the lack of communication between these two characters.

Although Mirl, like Emma, looks for answers on an emotional and not a religious level, her unhappiness, unlike Emma's seems directly linked to the passing away of a religious tradition. She is, if we adhere to Auden's definition, the quintessential modern heroine.

Travel

A great deal can be learned about the way Emma and Mirl perceive of and deal with reality by examining their attitudes towards travel. While Emma's desire to travel reflects her longing for escape and her tendency to confuse reality with fantasy, Mirl's indifference to new places mirrors her emotional paralysis.

In his study on patterns of imagery in <u>Madame Bovary</u>, Victor Brombert remarks that "images of movement reinforce the theme of escapism. . . . Departure, travel and access to privileged regions are recurring motifs."[10] Emma believes that the happiness she dreams of, must be somewhere; she has only to find that place. Realizing that marriage and even the honeymoon are not the perpetual bliss she had thought they would be, Emma holds geography responsible. To be happy:

> She and her husband would probably have had to go off to those countries with romantic names where newlyweds can

> savour the bliss in such delicious langour! They would have slowly climbed the steep slopes in a post-chaise with blue silk curtains, listening to the postilion's song echoing among the mountains, along with the tinkling of goat bells and the muffled roar of water falls. . . . It seemed to her that certain parts of the earth must produce happiness like a plant indigenous to that soil and unable to flourish anywhere else. If only she could lean over the balcony of a Swiss chalet, or enclose her melancholy in a Scottish cottage, with a husband wearing a long black velvet cloak, a sugar-loaf hat and fancy cuffs! (34-35; bk. 1, ch. 7)

Emma fails to realize that melancholy, no matter where "enclosed," cannot lead to happiness. Her image of herself leaning over the balcony of a Swiss chalet is ironically undercut by the reality of her leaning over the window of her home in Yonville, bored and miserable, watching the peasants pass by.

Dissatisfied with her life as a provincial housewife, Emma dreams of Paris. Unable to go there, she buys a map and walks up and down its magical streets in her mind. She buys all the Paris journals and becomes an expert on fashion, debuts, and first nights, mistaking the superficial trappings of culture for culture itself.

Emma's penchant for travel again reveals how fundamentally different from and incompatible with Charles she is. While Emma can never be satisfied no matter where she is, Charles, by contrast, thrives on domesticity, blissful in his belief that ". . . the universe did not go beyond the silken confines of her [Emma's] petticoat" (29; bk. 1, ch. 29).

Indeed, Emma's illusions about travel are constantly undercut by the narrator's choice of images and skillful ordering of scenes. While Emma glorifies the life of the traveler, Flaubert compares Emma and her lost illusions to "a traveler who leaves some of his wealth at every inn along the road" (149; bk. 1, ch. 9), an image which stresses

the sadness and loss that inevitably come with travel and experience.

The hilarious coach ride in which Emma and Leon consummate their love, brilliantly mocks Emma's romanticization of travel. In a scene that is the antithesis of her dreams of romance in gently floating gondolas or silken-lined post chaises, Emma and Leon engage in sordid and frenzied love-making in the back seat of a provincial coach drawn by two "sweating nags," much to the amazement of the bewildered coachman who "could not imagine what mania for movement was keeping these people from ever wanting to stop" (211; bk. 3, ch.1).

Yet, at the base of Emma's yearnings for unknown places, lies a morbid fascination with death. "She wanted both to die and to live in Paris" (149; bk.2, ch. 9) in that order of preference, we may assume. Even her dreams of leaving Charles and running off with Leon always end with her feeling as if "some dark mysterious abyss were opening up before her" (94; bk. 2, ch. 5). The image of the abyss suggests how formless and unattainable Emma's illusions and desires are, for the realization of one desire merely creates another, and hence, an infinity of longing. Perhaps also, although she may not be conscious of it, the notion of fulfilling her dreams is as terrifying as continuing in her misery. A romantic, Emma fears, at least subconsciously, the very gratification of her desires, since yearning and not fulfillment nourishes her passion.

While both Emma and Mirl conceive of themselves as apart from the life around them, Emma imagines herself happy somewhere at the center of some magical realm. Mirl, on the other hand, sees herself as eternally unhappy, walking "*Eyne aleyn arum bay der zayt fun lebn, afn oylem hatoye*" (All alone at the edge of life, in a world of chaos)

(143; bk. 2, ch. 7). She sees every car or train passing through the _shtetl_ as just another harbinger of sadness, telling of the eternal sameness of life in different places, and calling forth the thought of "many stories started and never finished" (58; bk. 2, ch.2) about adultery and death.

Significantly, we last see Mirl at the railroad station waiting for someone who never appears. Probably hoping to meet that person who can help her find the _iker_, she is once again disappointed. The outside world offers no more help than the _shtetl_. After a week of this fruitless waiting, Mirl boards a train, but nobody knows to where. Her unrevealed destination suggests that this trip, like all her actions in the past, is merely one more aimless move leading nowhere.

While Emma's obsession with travel is a symptom of a profound malaise rooted in her inability to accept reality, Mirl's almost total indifference to both familiar and far-off places is a symptom of a different kind of malaise. Emma blames her unhappiness on geography, believing change would be possible if only she were somewhere else, while Mirl abdicates responsibility by believing change to be impossible anywhere. While the assumption that life is everywhere the same may point to some degree of self-knowledge, it is here born, not of insight, but of despair. Far from enabling Mirl to deal with her situation realistically, it renders her impotent. She has neither dreams nor plans and is blind to any alternatives. In her mind, the boredom of one place can only give way to the monotony of another.

Unlike Emma, who envies those who have the experience of living abroad, Mirl sees such a venture as one more exercise in futility.

She herself rejects studying abroad as an option when, seeing her maid eat sunflower seeds one evening, she realizes that, *"Eyne un di zelbe pustkeyt vil men fun zikh mit yodern un mit a bukh fartraybn,"* (One wants to drive away the same emptiness by eating seeds or by reading a book) (83; bk. 2, ch. 4). Esther Finkel, a young woman from Mirl's town studying in Paris, whose sad face reveals that *"vegn iberike glikn gevoynt men zikh op in Pariz tsu trakhtn"* (in Paris one gets out of the habit of thinking about excessive joys) (173; bk. 2, ch. 9) bears testimony to this opinion.

If there is any one place that assumes significance for Mirl it is the Dead City in the poet Hertz's story of the same name told by Midwife Shatz in Bk. 2, Ch. 3. In this tale a *fartribener navenad* (exiled wanderer) roams aimlessly from village to village having lost track of the difference between Sabbath and week days.

Feeling encumbered by his load of now useless articles, he throws them away and sets off for the place "swallowed up by the horizon." He arrives in the Dead City at twilight and in a corner of a house he finds a slender young woman clutching to her breast a wax doll which she refers to as a *"farshleyerter toyes"* (veiled mistake). She has been waiting for him a long time but he has arrived too late; everyone is already dead. Having nowhere to go, the Wanderer remains there, the guardian of the Dead City, musing that he alone is alive and waits for no one any more.

The tale captures the mood of hopelessness and decline shared by both Mirl and Hertz. The twilight mood of the Dead City parallels the oft-referred to twilight atmosphere of Mirl's life. The wanderer and the slender dark-haird woman represent Hertz and Mirl. In losing

track of the difference between the Sabbath and weekdays, the wanderer, like Hertz loses touch with Judaism. Hertz, as we shall see later, yearns for the Sabbath and for the beauty and tranquility of spirit that comes with belief, but he cannot believe. The wanderer's throwing away all his belongings, suggests that, like Hertz and Mirl, he rejects the possibility that anything concrete can alter the ultimate meaninglessness of life.

Later, at her own engagement party, pale and slender, dressed in a dark silk dress, and feeling herself like a "geshleyerte lele" (veiled doll), Mirl evokes the image of the woman in the Dead City holding the doll--her veiled mistake. The doll in the story, waxlike and lifeless, foreshadows Mirl's aborted baby and the "veiled mistake" refers to the marriage and pregnancy from which she waits for Hertz to rescue her. The woman's greeting to the wanderer, "Azoy shpet bistu gekumen, m'hot do af dir azoy lang gevart, un itst kuk, zey zaynen shoyn ale toyt," (You've come so late. People have been waiting for you for so long here, and now look, they're all dead) (74; bk. 2, ch. 3) is later echoed in Mirl's words to Hertz when he appears after her father's death. "Hertz" she says, "kh'hob do af dir azoy fil gevart, keyner hot nokh gevis keyn mol af dir azoy fil nit gevart," (I've waited for you so long. Nobody has ever waited so long for you) (177; bk. 4, ch. 5). Although Hertz remains in the shtetl with Mirl for a time, he is unable to help her for, like the wanderer, he shares a greater kinship with the dead than with the living.

While Emma lives much of her emotional life in a fictitious world, Mirl is the subject of a fiction. But fiction does not change reality; Hertz's tale is devoid of illusion and echoes Mirl's reality in all its sadness and hopelessness.

Emma and Charles Bovary

Let us now turn to an examination of Emma and Mirl's relationships with various men to see what they reveal about our heroines' struggle to find meaning in life. Both Emma and Mirl look to men to bring them happiness and a sense of purpose and belonging. Each of their lovers represents to them a different solution and each man ultimately disappoints.

Emma weds Charles thinking that she loves him, but learns all too soon about the disappointments of marriage. Expecting marriage to be a state of continual passion, Emma could "not bring herself to believe that the calm in which she was living was the happiness she had dreamed of" (34; bk. 1, ch. 6).

To use Brombert's term, "incommunicability," frequently illustrated by the jarring juxtaposition of thoughts and scenes, lies at the heart of the relationship. Emma, whose preconceived notions of love, gleaned from sentimental novels and lurid romances, do not allow her to be open to love when it presents itself in any but the prescribed forms, finds that Charles falls hopelessly short of her romantic ideals.

Believing a man should be accomplished in all the masculine arts, she is devastated to find out that:

> He did not know how to swim, fence or shoot a pistol, and one day he was unable to tell her the meaning of a riding term she had come across in a novel.
>
> But shouldn't a man know everyting, excel in all sorts of activities, initiate you into the turbulence of passion, the refinements and mysteries of life? This man taught nothing, knew nothing, wanted nothing.(35; bk. 1, ch. 7)

Emma's dreams of the ideal man are countered by the mundane

reality of a man who "exuding self-satisfaction" would eat his dinner, "get ready for bed, lie down on his back and begin to snore" (36; bk.1 ch. 7).

The incompatibility is again brought out in the juxtaposed descriptions of Emma's fantasy of life in Paris and Charles's routine as a country doctor. While Emma dreams of Parisian ambassadors moving across gleaming parquet floors in drawing rooms paneled with mirrors, men riding their horses to death, women in trailing gowns, and lives of "profound mysteries and anguish concealed beneath smiles" (50; bk. 1, ch. 9) pervaded by decay and languor and a rarified yearning for death, Charles goes off on his rounds as a country doctor. Instead of gleaming parquet floors and elegant drawing rooms, he rides from farm to farm in the snow and the rain. The "profound mysteries" of his profession are revealed, not in love affairs and politics but in dirty basins, bed pans, and soiled underwear. The ennui of sickly duchesses rising at four in the afternoon and men riding their horses to death for pleasure and excitement is contrasted with Charles's frequent confrontations with death in all its sordid reality.

Although Charles lacks the charm and accomplishment of Rudolphe and the seeming sensitivity of Leon, it is not clear that either of the latter two men are any more distinguished in mind or deed than he is. They are all mediocre, but Charles, at least, is capable of great love. It is, as Barbara Smalley points out in her book <u>George Eliot and Flaubert</u>, "the greater success for Flaubert that he is able to portray a commonplace mind experiencing a blind love that is revealed as something deep and tragic."[11]

Although one may argue that Charles cannot love Emma, but only an

image of Emma, because he does not know her, he loves all of the Emma that she allows him to know. Charles may not have known the fine words in which to voice his love nor did he conform to Emma's image of what a lover should be, but he loves Emma totally, absolutely, and in an utterly romantic way. It is a love undiminished by the familiarity and routine of marriage and no less arduous for the neglect and constant abuse to which it is subject. Yet only on her death bed does Emma come to realize that Charles loves her with the passion and ardour she has sought frantically and vainly all her married life.

Tragically, even the deepest love is not enough. While it may be argued that Emma does not even try to appreciate Charles and would be incapable of accepting any man who did not fit her romantic image, it is also clear that Charles is a less than attractive mate for Emma. Flaubert deliberately begins the book with Charles to call attention to his inadequacy. In this opening scene, depicting Charles Bovary's first day at school he is described as awkward and dull. Everything about him bespeaks mediocrity and worse. His tight-fitting jacket suggests constriction of spirit and mind, his unpolished shoes hint at his own coarseness and even his Latin style is "without elegance." His punishment of having to conjugate "Ridiculus sum" (I am ridiculous) twenty times is an ironic foreshadowing of his later fate as a cuckold. The ridiculous cap he wears "whose mute ugliness has great depths of expression, like an idiot's face" (2; bk.1, ch. 1) symbolizes Charles.

Indeed, as a child and throughout his fictional life, Charles is simple and coarse. Despite, and perhaps because of his shortcomings, Flaubert makes Bovary a somewhat sympathetic character, capable of

eliciting great compassion from the reader. Flaubert himself suffered from dyslexia as a child, not learning to read and write until age nine, and was considered, as Sartre point out, "the family idiot"[12]. Quite possibly, he put something of himself into Charles.

It may seem odd that in a book about Madame Bovary, Flaubert both begins and ends with Monsieur Bovary. In beginning the book with Charles, however, Flaubert not only emphasizes just how impossible a match Charles is for Emma, but he also introduces the themes of inadequacy, failure, and incommunicability which define Emma's life. As Brombert points out, the teacher cannot even hear Charles pronounce his name,[13] and the poor boy's attempts at pronouncing it yield only a jumble of syllables. It is not clear whether this is due to Charles's dullness or simply to his embarrassment and awkwardness, but again Charles echoes Flaubert's childhood inadequacies.

Although Emma and Charles appear and are very different, at base, they suffer from the same shortcomings. After Emma's death, the grief-stricken Charles becomes a macabre parody of her. "She was corrupting him from beyond the grave," (296; bk. 3, ch. 11). In ending the book with Charles and not with Emma, Flaubert once again has Charles echo her fate. If Emma is killed by her illusions, so too Charles dies when the grand illusion of his life--Emma's love--is destroyed.

Is Emma to be blamed for not loving a man who is dull, bumbling, and certainly intellectually inferior to her? He is mediocre and undistinguished and incapable of great thoughts or deeds. He is not even a real doctor, but merely an "officer de santé." When, goaded by Homais and his own vanity, he does attempt something more daring and

operates on Hippolyte's clubfoot, he fails miserably. Limited and narrow, his aspirations never take him beyond a mediocre medical practice in Yonville and his greatest dreams are those of bourgeois comfort and respectability.

No matter how unrealistic and confused we may judge Emma's dreams and aspirations to be, no matter how unhealthy her dissatisfaction with her surroundings and her obsession with the world beyond, there is something poignant and wonderful about her dreams. Charles's horizons are too narrow and his visions too ordinary to understand these dreams. While it is his very simplicity that allows Charles to be happy with Emma, it is also his simplicity that ultimately makes disaster inevitable. No one is to blame, except as he himself would have said and for once he would have been right--fate.

Rodolphe

Emma's first lover, Rodolphe Boulanger, conforms more closely to her romantic ideal than does Charles. In being with him she thinks she has moved closer to the world of the nobility she encountered at the ball at La Vaubyessard which so tantalizes and frustrates her. Unlike Charles, Rodolphe rides horses, keeps pistols, engages in manly sports like hunting, owns a chateau and has fifteen thousand francs a year. Obviously a shrewd judge of character, Rodolphe intuits Emma's unhappiness, and presents himself as a kindred soul, sensitive, lonely, longing for death, and, like her, out of place in the tedious country milieu.

The author's opinion of Rodolphe is brought out very cleverly in

the famous wooing scene at the agricultural fair. Rodolphe's pleas and promises of love are comically undercut and interrupted by the mention of money, livestock, and manures:

> I tried to make myself leave a hundred times, yet I followed you, I stayed with you. . .
> Manures! . . .
> I'll take the memory of me with you. . .
> For a merino ram. . .
> . . .but you'll forget me. I'll have passed through your life like a shadow.
> No, it's not true, is it? I will have a place in your thoughts, in your life, won't I?
> For pigs, Monsieur Leherissé and Monsieur Cullembourg are tied for first place: sixty francs. (129; bk. 2, ch. 7)

At first the affair goes well, but soon they too are incompatible. While Emma is proud to have a lover and thus to have joined "the lyric legion of those adulterous women" (140; bk. 2, ch. 9) she had read about, Rodolphe is looking for the gratification of his lust and not for emotional involvement.

Even their first sexual encouter bears the signs of this incompatibility. Emma lies overwrought, her heart palpitating, savouring the magic of their first embrace, while Rodolphe stands unmoved, "a cigar between his teeth, mending a border bridle with a penknife" (139; bk. 2, ch. 11).

More callous and cynical by nature than romantic, and unable to see why Emma "should make such a fuss over sommething as simple as a love affair,"(161; bk. 2, ch. 12) Rodolphe soon tires of her. Unable to recognize the sincerity behind the words and deeds he has witnessed so many timne before, he finds Emma to be like any other mistress.

> The charm and novelty gradually fell away like a garment, revealing in all its nakedness the eternal monotony of passion, which always has the same form and speaks the same language. He, this man of great experience, could not distinguish dissimilarities of feeling beneath similarities of expression. (165; bk. 2, ch. 12)

Indeed, there is nothing novel in Emma's expression, and although she may consider herself a poetic soul, Flaubert makes it quite clear that she is no poet. "No one could love you the way I do!" she exclaims to Rodolphe. "I'm your servant and your concubine! You're my king, my idol!" (165; bk. 2, ch. 12). Ironically, Emma fails to realize that although she resents Charles for not speaking as a lover ought to speak, she is equally as ineloquent in declaring her love to Rodolpohe. Just as she dismisses Charles because she cannot recognize the feeling beneath his unpolished and often bungling manner of showing his love, so Rodolphe dismisses her.

Too much of a coward to put an end to their affair directly, Rodolphe continues the charade of loving Emma and even of running off with her forever. Extricating himself from the affair on the very day they had planned to leave, he sends Emma the inevitable farewell letter. The letter and the description of how it was written are a parody of romantic letters and an indictment of Rodolphe's true character. In his explanation for why he cannot embark on the trip, readily transparent to anyone except Emma, he portrays himself as the self-sacrificing hero who refuses to let her ruin her life for the sake of their present but fleeting "ideal happiness." Then, to settle the matter definitely, he adds the convenient thought that "Only fate is to blame," and congratulates himself on having chosen "a word that always makes an impression."[14]

Ironically, this is the same phrase Charles uses both when he botches the operation on Hioppolyte's leg and when he meets Rodolphe after Emma's death and forgives him for their affair. For Charles, fate is an excuse for his inability to control his life. For

Rodolphe, a manipulator very much in control of his life and his women, fate is a handy phrase to absolve himself of the responsibility he knows he bears.

It would be false to say that Emma learns anything from her affair with Rodolphe for it is not in her nature to learn from her experience. However, the reader learns that the glittering world of wealth and title which Rodolphe represents to Emma does not hold the key to her happiness. People do not live "happily ever after" here any more than they do anywhere else. While Charles's loving heart is obscured by his dull wits and common manner and appearance, Rodolphe's dashing exterior masks a heart that is shallow and false. Emma's inability to see this points to her own blindness which hinders her from ever finding anything genuine and meaningful.

Leon

In many ways, Leon, Emma's second lover, is a male version of Emma. Both are bored in Yonville and imagine that life elsewhere must surely be better. Believing themselves to be intellectually superior to those around them, they talk at length about "the Paris theater, the titles of novels, new quadrilles." In short, "the world," Flaubert adds cuttingly, "which neither of them knew" (73; bk. 2, ch. 2).

Leon's fantasy life is very much akin to Emma's and, he too, imagines himself in Paris:

> He began to make inner preparations, mapping out his new life in advance. He furnished an apartment for himself, in his imagination. He would lead an artist's life! He would take guitar lessons! He would wear a dressing gown, a Basque beret, blue velvet slippers! And already he admired his

> mantelpiece with two crossed fencing foils above it, surmounted by a skull and the guitar. (102; bk. 2, ch. 6)

As the skull suggests, Leon, like Emma, touched by the "romantic sensibility" of the age" revels in the morbid, thinking this to be a sign of a sensitive and artistic temperament. He is not, Flaubert makes quite clear, an artist, and shares with Emma a preoccupation, not with art, but with the cliché́d image of the artist. His later sorry attempts at composing love poems, which end invariably with his copying a sonnet from a keepsake album, mock his literary pretensions.

Leon's excited realization that he had "a real mistress" (229; bk. 3, ch. 5) echoes Emma's own sense of exaltation in the Rodolphe section at having a lover. The roles are now reversed. Leon, younger and somewhate effeminate, allows Emma to take the dominant masculine role. "He was becoming her mistress more than she was his" (240; bk. 3, ch. 5).

Although Leon does have his shortcomings and is not the sensitive poetic soul he would like to believe he is, he is, in the beginning, genuinely in love with Emma. His passion for her is complete and all-consuming. In an example of dual focus typical of Flaubert, we are told, that enamoured of Emma, "He admired the exaltation of her soul and the lace on her petticoat" (229; bk. 3, ch. 5).

This relationship is nevertheless doomed to failure. Emma's profound unhappiness and insatiable thirst for intensity lead her to a satanic passion which frighten Leon away. In the urgency of her caresses and the frenzy of her passion, "Leon felt the presence of something mad, shadowy, and ominous, something that seemed to be subtly slipping between them, as though to separate them" (244; bk. 3, ch. 6).

Feeling himself increasingly consumed by Emma and afraid that their affair is ruining his career, Leon's passion begins to flag. In a passage as damning as any in Madame Bovary, the narrator explains his decision to give up Emma, settle down, and work hard:

> He therefore gave up the flute, exalted sentiments and flights of fancy--for every bourgeois in the heat of his youth, if only for a day or a minute, has believed himself incapable of stormy passions and lofty enterprises. The most mediocre libertine has dreamed of oriental queens; every notary bears within himself the remains of a poet. (251; bk. 3, ch. 6)

If Emma finds the men in her life inadequate it may be because she attracts and is attracted to people much like herself. The men she chooses reflect her own shortcomings and parody her faults. In Emma's mind, Charles is a saviour who will rescue her from boredom on the farm and provide the key to marital bliss, Rodolphe is the masculine ideal combining wealth, title, and appearance, and Leon represents the sensitive poetic soul. But real life marriage to Charles is as dull as maidenhood, and without the benefit of hope. The hollowness of Emma's love of wealth and fashion is revealed in Rodolphe and her own artistic and intellectual pretensions are mocked in Leon.

However, given that the book offers no one who is not a mediocrity, one can also ask if Flaubert believes that there are people in this world who rise above the mediocre. At base, Flaubert posits a society and a world with no genuine belief system and where the alternate gods of money, title, and even beauty are insufficient to fill the void. But whatever the shortcomings of the world and the men in it, and notwithstanding the constraints imposed by her gender, there is something in Emma's psychological make-up that would doom her to unhappiness even under the most ideal circumstances. Although the

husband and two lovers Emma chooses fall far short of perfection, the question as to whether any man could have lived up to her impossible illusions, still remains. An incurable romantic, unwilling to accept life around her and subconsciously yearning for death, Emma dooms herself. Wanting always to live life at a climax, she fails to appreciate the process to the climax. High points, whether sexual or emotional, only blind her to her immediate ecstacy and cause her to ache with longing for more of the same. More of the same is never quite as good as it is supposed to be, and so, men, like everything else in life, disappoint.

Mirl's Men

If Emma never learns that no one can fill the emptiness within her, Mirl knows that perhaps too well from the very beginning. If ever a novel teaches that women cannot find fulfillment exclusively through men, _Nokh alemen_ is that novel. While Emma believes in romance as the key to happiness, Mirl regards it merely as the most viable of a number of hopeless options.

Mirl's life story is the story of a series of directionless entanglements with a number of men, yielding unhappiness for both parties. Each man in Mirl's life represents a different path. Whether it be finanical security, quiet domesticity, intellectual companionship, or sexual excitement, each by itself is insufficient.

Velvl Burnus

The book begins with Mirl defiantly sending back the _tnoyim_ (engagement contract) to Velvl Burnus and thereby breaking off the _kleynshtetldiker shidekh_ (small town match) which had dragged on for four years. As with Emma's early marriage in _Madame Bovary_, Mirl's broken engagement suggests the failure of the marriage tradition. _Nokh alemen_ is about isolation and demise, not union and continuity, and this broken engagement is the first in a series of broken unions and missed connections.

Although Velvl is a very decent fellow, he is not a good match for Mirl. Not nearly as intellectual or introspective as she, he seems to inhabit a different world. His fantasies of Mirl playing the gracious hostess and serving tea to his associates on the farm show that he sees Mirl, not as she is, but as he would like her to be. Nevertheless, his feelings for her and the whole Hurwitz family are deep and sincere and his disappointment over losing Mirl is intense.

Much of Book 1 is told from Velvl's perspective, and the novel begins, in fact, with Velvl, broken-hearted over having been rejected by Mirl, exiling himself to the country to manage a farm. Although Velvl is not an intellectual and his unhappiness is based on concrete disappointment, rather than abstract existential despair, it is through Velvl that Bergelson introduces the themes of personal unhappiness and self-exile which will be key themes in Mirl's life. Through Velvl, he establishes the pattern of hope and deflation that extends throughout the book, for Velvl, like Mirl, is constantly caught between the longing for happiness and the recognition of

hopelessness. In one of the last images of the book, Velvl lurks around the train platform hoping to breathe in something of Mirl's essence. A poignant but vain gesture, it echoes, as did his presence at the beginning, Mirl's own feelings of unfulfilled love and disappointed expectation.

While the Hurwitz family represents the decline of the shtetl aristocracy and of the old economic system, Velvl, the son of nouveau-riche parents, represents the rising new social elements. In refusing Velvl and the "kleynshtetldiker shidekh" (small-town match), Mirl symbolically rejects the authority and values of her family as well as her designated role in society.

As Reb Gedalye lies dying he is painfully aware that his daughter will not follow in his footsteps. While Mirl is glaringly absent from her father's funeral, Velvl is very much there. Although not an official pall-bearer, he is allowed to carry the coffin with Reb Gedalye's son-in-law Shmulik. In so doing, he establishes himself, at least symbolically, as Reb Gedalye's heir. Velvl honours and longs to emulate the qualities of sheyner yid (a term denoting a combination of piety, high moral standards, wealth, and community respect) that Reb Gedalye represents to him. For Velvl, Reb Gedalye's death symbolizes the demise of all that was noble and venerable in shtetl life. Now, he feels, "in shtetl vet zayn pust, un kin derekh-erets vet shoyn nit zayn far vemen do tsu hobn" (It'll be empty in town, and there won't be anyone to respect anymore) (159; bk.4, ch. 2). The broken engagement implies the end of that way of life, and Velvl is left to mourn the passing of the old order which Mirl rejects.

Lipkis

Book 1 of _Nokh alemen_ is dominated by the image of Mirl and the lame student Lipkis walking endlessly and aimlessly around town. Because of his limp, his poverty, and his intellectual pretentiousness, Lipkis is never a serious contender for Mirl's love. She uses him to pass the time and to outrage her family.

Mirl's choice of Lipkis as a companion is an implicit comment on her own crippled will. "_Un der farneplter viln iz vider mit ir_. . . _Un itst blonket zi gantse teg arum shtetl un Lipkis hinkt ir nokh_" (And her foggy will was with her again. . . . And now she roams around the _shtetl_ for days at a time and Lipkis limps after her) (68; bk. 2. ch. 3). Lipkis is the physical manifestation of Mirl's emotional paralysis. Their endless walks leading nowhere are a reflection of the monotony, and lack of direction in Mirl's life.

In his musings, silly and pretentious as they sometimes are, Lipkis often echoes Mirls' unspoken thoughts. Knowing the futility of speech and instinctively distrusting the intellectualization of emotion, Mirl maintains her integrity precisely by not trying to turn her problems into intellectual abstractions. Lipkis is a parody of Mirl's thoughts and suggests how Mirl might have appeared had she chosen to voice them.

Although Lipkis allows Mirl to bully and ignore him, his operation and recovery at the end suggest that he is no longer going to let himself be pushed around by Mirl.

Hertz

Of all the men in Mirl's life, the Hebrew poet Hertz is one of the few who is an intellectual companion and an equal. She believes that "Hertz hot gevis gehat beyad zi tsu farshteyn un ir dermit etvos gringer makhn" (Hertz was certainly capable of understanding her and making things easier) (184; bk. 2, ch. 11).

Although Hertz appears to understand people, "Er hot. . . gemakht an ayndruk fun a mentshn, vos veys shoyn gevis epes mer fun an andern vegn lebn, yednfals klert er aleyn azoy un shraybt vegn dem bikher" (He made an impression of a person who certainly knows more than other people about life, in any case, he thinks so himself and writes books about that) (178; bk. 2, ch. 9). Mirl cannot be sure that he is not self-deluded or deliberately giving a false impression and exploiting his cynicism as wisdom.

Ironically, it is the intellectuality, alienation, and cynicism with which Mirl so identifies that also make Hertz so difficult to relate to. Although his name means "heart," Hertz is not a man of the heart. Where Mirl needs the heart, he responds with his head; where she needs compassion, he responds with cynicism.

Cynical about everything from his work to women, Hertz's affection for Mirl is marred by an aggressive ambiguity. The seemingly affectionate note he writes her on leaving town, "Oyb er vet nokh a mol aher in shtetl kumen, vet dos zayn oysshlislekh tsulib ir, Mirlen" (If he ever comes to this town again, it will be entirely because of her, Mirl) (183; bk. 2. ch. 11) leaves her frustrated and angry at the expression of a concern and affection that may also,

according to his own admission, never be shown.

Rather than trying to understand her, which Mirl believes he could do, and which "iz im lekhlutn nit gegangen in lebn" (did not matter to him at all) (184; bk. 2. ch. 11), Hertz engages in what we would call "power struggles" today. He distances himself from Mirl reducing her to an intellectual abstraction. Mirl is angered because Hertz "feels himself higher than her" and she resents his calling her a "kleynshtetldike tragedie" (small town tragedy) and an "ibergang punkt" (transition point). By the term "kleynshtetldike tragedie" Hertz indicates that he is aware of Mirl's pain, but chooses, as the epithet "kleynshtetldik" suggests, to trivialize it. The term "ibergang punkt" implies that Hertz assumes that nothing will ever become of Mirl. It does, however, aptly capture her historical and personal situation. Caught between the demise of an old economic and religious system and the advent of a new way of life, Mirl stands at a crossroads, and goes nowhere.

As a Hebrew poet, Hertz is also, as he admits, a "transition point." Sufficiently removed from Jewish tradition to write modern fiction, he nevertheless chooses to write in a Jewish language, and, hence, exclusively for Jews. In writing poems and stories of alienation from Judaism in the ancient Jewish tongue, Hertz reveals a profound ambivalence. He is not a Zionist nor a believer in any ideology of national Jewish rebirth that would render writing in a dead language for an almost non-existant readership less absurd. His vocation as a Hebrew poet is therefore one more example of his ironic attitude towards everything in life, including himself. "Shraybn bay tog iz im shoyn a bizoyen far zikh aleyn, un farn gantsn shtetl yidn,

velkhe badarfn es nisht" (Writing by day is an embarrasment for himself and for the whole town of Jews who do not need it (71; bk. 2, ch. 3).

Shmulik Zaydenovsky and Marriage

Although Mirl and her husband Shmulik Zaydenovsky are both from rich and religious families, Shmulik is probably the least appropriate of all of Mirl's suitors. Mirl, unlike Emma, knows from the outset that marriage will be unbearable. Her consent is the sign of total personal despair and surrender. Mirl's friends desert her when they hear of her arranged marriage thinking that, "a meydl, vos ken zikh itst gefinen in der ben-hashmoshesdiker shtub vu khsidim zingen arum ir khosn, vos zi hot im derkent durkh a shadkhn. . . vegn vemen iz do, be-etsem, faran tsu trakhtn" (a girl who can now be found in a twilight house where hasidim dance around her groom whom she met through a matchmaker. . . why should one devote the slightest thought to her?) (174; bk. 2, ch. 11). Shmulik, however, is still very much a part of that world.

Generally physically unappealing and boring, Shmulik is most repugnant to Mirl when he appears most Jewish. Watching him as he sings a Days of Awe melody and "hot derbay a narishn ponim un makht mit di hent vi a khazn" (has a silly face, and motions with his hands like a cantor) (162; bk. 2, ch. 9), she is revolted. Her reaction is a comment on her alienation from Judaism.

Shmulik is mild mannered and gentle to the point of being insipid and self-destructive. In choosing to marry Mirl he is forced to accept her conditions that the relationship be platonic and that she

be free to dissolve the marriage whenever she chooses. By accepting these terms Shmulik knowingly dooms himself to misery. Perhaps the compliance which allows Mirl to marry Shmulik also makes him repugnant to her.

Unlike Charles Bovary, Shmulik is not a dupe and is always very much aware of his wife's feelings for him. For Mirl as for Emma, parental financial motives are an important factor in determining the marriage. Realizing that love is not the main thing, Mirl decides to help her father out of his financial difficulties by marrying Shmulik. Her hope that her life can thus serve some purpose is soon disappointed. Instead of bringing her parents financial security, marrying into the Zaydenovsky family brings them the shame and humiliation of feeling themselves the poor in-laws. Marriage can save neither Mirl nor her parents. One more example of a worn-out system suffocating those who must still live by it, on a symbolic level, Mirl's marriage to Shmulik points out the futility of applying old solutions to new problems.

In a world where marriage signifies an affirmation of traditional values and a desire to perpetuate life, it is no wonder that Mirl's marriage to Shmulik is a disaster. Thousands of young women before Mirl managed to stay in miserable arranged marriages, most likely because they still viewed marriage as meaningful in God's scheme of the universe. Because Mirl does not believe in God and therefore sees no ultimate purpose in existence, everything, including marriage, seems futile.

There is nothing which she wishes to enhance or strengthen by union and nothing which she wishes to perpetuate by procreation. In

rejecting her husband and then motherhood, Mirl exercises a prerogative unthinkable to a more traditional woman like Sholem Aleichem's Rokhele. Rather than being a link between her parents' generation and that of her children, she detaches herself from the former and, in choosing an abortion, prevents the latter from ever coming to be. Marriage, to Shmulik or to anybody, is therefore pointless.

Nosn Heller

Mirl has not one but two involvements[15] with Nosn Heller whom Bergelson describes as "der fartsveyyoriker Nosn Heler" (the Nosn Heller of two years ago) (18; bk. 3, ch. 2). This allusion to Mirl's affair with him two years before the book opens implies that any involvement with Nosn can only be a repetition of this earlier dead end affair.

Described in a typically and wonderfully Bergelsonian epithet as indelibly bearing the look of an "aroysgetribenem groys shtotikh gimnazist" (an expelled big city high school student) (18; bk. 3, ch. 2) who did not pass his exams, Nosn is a person who never graduated to the next level, academically or otherwise. The frequent references to his "rented room" which Mirl enjoys for its privacy and quiet also suggest that Nosn has not yet established a place for himself, both literally and metaphorically. Although Mirl is more sexually attracted to Nosn than to any of the other men in her life, she knows that life with Nosn can offer her only a shallow physicality and

emotional sterility.

Mirl therefore rejects Nosn's marriage proposal asking, "Nu, un nokh dem, nokh der khasene?" (Well, and after the wedding, what then?) (28; bk. 3, ch. 2). Unlike Emma who tries to turn her life into a never-ending romantic rendez-vous by making magic out of monotony, Mirl rejects this sexual solution. Love, Emma believes, is the eternal prolongation of one's most passionate moments, while for Mirl, passion, if it exists, vanishes as it blossoms, altering nothing but the present moment.

Montchik Zaydenovsky

Shmulik's cousin Montchik Zaydenovsky is, like Lipkis, never a suitor Mirl considers seriouly. Complicated family entanglements and her general sense of hopelessness are probaly responsible for Mirl's attitude towards Montchik. A successful businessman and the favourite of the Zaydenovsky clan, Montchik is summoned by the family to speak to Mirl and help straighten out the marriage. He quickly realizes that Mirl is no mate for Shmulik, and he pleads with the family to have compassion for her since she is surely as miserable as Shmulik. While fulfilling his mission, Montchik too, falls in love with Mirl, but realizing how inappropriate this is, he never acts on his feelings. Significantly, Mirl's last letter, which constitutes the last words of the book, is addressed to Montchik. She never sends the letter but this is a measure, not of her feelings for Montchik, but of her sense that words are meaningless. Montchik is the only man in her life, she realizes, who both understands her and cares about her. But

even this intuitive understanding is not enough. Because she knows that love will not impart meaning to her life, but does not know what will, she believes that neither Montchik nor anyone else can fill the void she feels.

Children

Emma Bovary has one child, Mirl Hurwitz has an abortion. In both cases, these characters' attitudes towards children reveal much about their attitudes towards life and towards being women, and are very much in opposition to the prevailing opinions of their society.

By informing the reader of Emma's pregnancy immediately after she burns her bridal bouquet, Flaubert underscores the fact that the expected child is the fruit of an unhappy union. The image of the decayed flowers and paper petals going up in smoke tell of Emma's dashed marital hopes.

Although Emma's feelings about giving birth are mixed, her natural curiosity and hunger for experience get the better of her. She looks forward to having a child so "she could know what it was like to be a mother" (76; bk. 2, ch. 3). But, as always, she confuses material goods with emotional fulfillment, focusing on the baby's cradle and layette, rather than on the life she is about to bring into the world.

Emma sees a child as someone through whom she can live vicariously. To have a daughter who would, by virtue of her sex, be doomed to the same miserable existence as she, is, therefore, unbearable to her. Her fainting when she hears she has given birth to a girl is a reflection of this negative feeling.

In naming the baby, "Berthe," because she had heard a marquise at La Vaubyessard call a young woman by that name, Emma is again pinning all her frustrated hopes on the child,--even though it is a girl.

Even during her pregnancy when she realizes that she cannot spend as much money as she would like on things for the baby she comes to feel indifference and resentment towards her unborn child. Finding little Berthe ugly, she neglects her, leaving the job of raising her almost entirely to the maid. Only during odd phases of extreme repentance does Emma take any interest in her child, showering her with floods of almost maniacal affection. In the rare moments when Emma's idealized notions of motherhood make her long for her child and the intense emotional connection that she feels should exist betweeen mother and daughter, her romantic notions are quickly undercut by the reality of the little creature which is constantly "mewling and puking" in its mother's arms.

Emma's indifference to her child is naturally a reflection of her indifference to her marriage. According to Tony Tanner in Adultery in the Novel:

> For in many of the novels involving adultery, . . . often there is curiously little interest in them [children], even on the part of the mother (or especially on the part of the mother). They [the children] become a pathetic kind of living evidence of the radical failure of the marriage as a genuinely fruitful union and contract. . . . Among other things they seem to indicate an exhaustion on the part of the parents, (or again most usually the mother), an indifference to the whole generative and regenerative process. It is almost as if, while seeking to ground and ensure its own perenniality, life in bourgeois society is losing its point. . . . The negative or reverse aspect of an inclination to adultery would seem to be a disinclination to maternity.16

This certainly applies to Emma. The idea of perpetuating life--something which she finds wanting in all respects--holds little allure

for her. The further she moves from being the virtuous wife, the more apathetic she becomes towards her child, so much so that in planning to run off with Rodolphe, she forgets about Berthe. Berthe is to her one more unpleasant aspect of the reality she wants to escape. Her decision to take her with them on the trip comes only after Rodolphe asks her, hoping to deter her, what will be done with her daughter. Her belated concern for the child is prompted as much by a desire to placate Rodolphe by taking care of all the menacing details as it is by her maternal affection.

If Emma's negative attitude to her child reflects her unhappiness with her marriage and with life, and her rejection of her role in society, Mirl's decision to have an abortion speaks even more powerfully to these matters.

For a short while, Mirl does consider giving birth to the child she is carrying. Perhaps because she has no dreams, she does not, like Emma, see a child as a way to live out her unfulfilled fantasies. But she does feel that a child may be a source of mutual love in an otherwise loveless world. "She doesn't love Shmulik. She doesn't love anyone. And mothers love their children, after all. Who knows?" (129; bk. 3, ch. 13).

Mirl's maternal fantasies soon collide with her fear that having a child would trap her forever and prohibit her from finding the _iker_. She would instead be reduced to a _nianke_ (nanny) with a host of trivial but necessary concerns clouding any broader horizons.

In one of the few instances in the book in which she actively takes her life into her own hands, Mirl, goaded by these thoughts,

decides to have an abortion. The clear crisp winter day on which she decides compliments her resoluteness. Characteristically, one of Mirl's rare moments of decisiveness leads to death and not to increased vitality.

The scene in the abortionist's office is likely a first in Yiddish literature. By portraying the doctor as a sleazy man with insulting looks, unclean thoughts, and a judgmental attitude towards Mirl, Bergelson heightens the reader's sympathy for Mirl. Bergelson's technique of shifting perspective makes it unclear whether the doctor actually looks and feels as Mirl thinks he does or whether Mirl's perception of him is evoked by her own uncertainty and guilt.

While the abortion may be immediately personally liberating for Mirl, she realizes that, "Again she did not believe in the new life ahead of her" (129; bk. 3, ch. 14).

The symbolic effect of Mirl's abortion is powerful. Because she finds life meaningless, she, like Emma, is loathe to perpetuate it. Abortion, in cases like Mirl's, is, of course, not permitted by Jewish law. Totally detached from her community in a way that Emma never is, she rebels against all communal values by transgressing the very first _mitzva_, to "be fruitful and multiply." When Shmulik's mother assumes that having a baby will prevent her from divorcing Shmulik, Mirl's response, "What has this to do with the divorce?" (116; bk. 3, ch. 12) shows the extent to which she disregards convention.

While Emma leaves a wretched impoverished child with Charles to mock her dreams of wealth and title, Mirl leaves no one behind. If

birth symbolizes hope and life and the perpetuation of the community, Mirl, the only daughter and only hope of the Hurwitz family, must have no progeny. Jewish life in Nokh alemen ends with Reb Gedalye's death. By rejecting the khsidish-negidish tradition of her family, which is almost an anachronism in its own time, Mirl is like the half-dead woman in Hertz's Dead City, walking around at the edges of a twilight world, clutching a lifeless doll to her breast. . .

Religion

Just as men do not help either Emma or Mirl find meaning in life, so too, does religion prove inadequate.

Emma, to paraphrase Auden, is no longer sustained by her Catholicism but is unaware of having lost it. She lives in a society still deeply Christian in form and ritual but not in moral character. A practising Catholic and a churchgoer who thrills to the rituals and symbols of Christianity, Emma, nevertheless, does not look to Christianity as a moral guide. Her belief is superficial and oriented towards the symbols and sensuousness of the religion and not towards morality or dogma. Although she believes in God and turns to him for support, comfort, and even, she hopes subconsiously, passion, she is not afraid to sin before HIm. Nor does she accept His plan for the universe, and more specifically, His plan for her. Catholicism does, however, exercise a strong hold on her emotional makeup. Her early education in a convent school shapes her character and moulds her subconscious. The church with its glorification of martyrdom and suffering nourishes young Emma's propensity for morbidity:

> . . . she loved the sick sheep, the Sacred Heart pierced by His cross. She tried to fast for a whole day to mortify

> herself. She tried to think of some vow she could fulfill. (30; bk. 1, ch. 6)

In the convent she comes to confuse spirituality with sensuality. The "warm atmosphere of the classrooms, the perfumes of the altar, the coolness of the water in the holy founts, the radiance of the candles" (30; bk.1, ch. 6) all envelope her in a mystic languor.[17]

At times of her deepest anguish, Emma does seek spiritual guidance from the church. Father Bournisien cannot comprehend Emma's unhappiness. Suffering, he assumes, must come either from heat or indigestion. Unable to address himself to spiritual problems, incapable of true compassion, and oblivious to the drama inherent in the rituals he performs, he is an inadequate spiritual leader for his parishioners.

The shattering of the plaster priest from Emma's garden on the trip from Tostes to Yonville and the rotting ceiling in the church in Yonville seem less than subtle allusions to the fragility and decay of religion within Emma's sphere.

Emma's sporadic outbursts of religiosity verging on madness are prompted more by fleeting guilt, escapism, and materialism than by genuine religious and moral concern.

Ironically, Leon's seduction of Emma begins in a cathedral. The church, Leon imagines, "would spread out around her like a gigantic boudoir, the vaults would bend down to the confession of her love in the shadows" (207; bk. 3, ch. 1). The holy sanctuary was but the prelude to the bedroom. The paintings of "The Resurrection," "The Last judgment," "Paradise," "King David," and most important, "The souls of the Damned in the Flames of Hell," which the verger so

frantically tries to call to Emma and Leon's attention are ironic foreshadowings of the very unChristian drama of lust and adultery which Emma and Leon are soon to enact. As always, Emma confuses the spiritual with the material, mistaking the concrete manifestations of religiosity for piety itself. If she dreams, at certain moments, of becoming a saint, it is more because she is inspired by the desire for an "emerald studded reliquary at the head of her bed" (185; bk. 2, ch. 14) than by a deeply felt piety.

It is because of the confusion of spirituality with sensuality, so vividly illustrated in the following passage describing Emma's last communion, and not because of any challenge to Christian dogma or the denial of God, that Flaubert was accused of blasphemy at the trial of Madame Bovary.

> . . . she stretched forth her neck as though she were thirsting, pressed her lips to the body of the God-man and imprinted on it, with all her fading strength, the most ardent kiss of love she had ever given. Then the priest. . . began the annointments: first her eyes which had so fiercely coveted all earthly luxury; then her nostrils, so avid for warm breezes and amorous scents; then her lips, which had opened to speak lies, cry out in pride and moan in lust; then her hands, which had taken such pleasure in sensuous contacts; and finally the soles of her feet, once so swift in hurrying to gratify her desires, and now never to walk again. (280; bk. 3, ch. 8)

The comingling of religious and sexual imagery in this passage reflects the jumble in Emma's mind. Raised with a religiosity which drew its terminology from the world of earthly love, taught to seek celestial bliss, to pray to a "heavenly" lover, and to aspire to "wed a heavenly spouse", Emma has always confused the two. Wanting nothing in life so much as passion, eternal bliss, and veneration, Emma turned, at various times, unsuccessfully, to both religion and

love. To be adored as a mistress or venerated as a saint seemed, in turn, solutions to the problem of mediocrity and meaninglessness.

Writing at a time when the rise of science had done much to challenge the basic tenets of Christianity, and credos of deism and atheism threatened traditional belief, Flaubert is critical of the proponents of both religion and modern science. Through Homais, the self-proclaimed champion of progress in Yonville, Flaubert satirizes the advance of science for science's sake and through Father Bournisien he points out the inadequacy of the Catholic clergy. Although Flaubert shows how the Christian establishment is ill-equipped to answer the spiritual yearnings of a woman like Emma, he is not concerned with condemning Christianity or proving it insufficient for the "modern" person. Although it is obvious that a religion which encourages one to accept the status quo and praise God will have little to say to a woman who finds everything about the status quo objectionable, the inadequacy of the Catholic Church had been a subject of criticism much before progress threatened to render faith obsolete. It is neither enlightenment, nor the rationalism demanded by science nor the spectre of an indifferent universe that makes Christianity an insufficient answer to Emma's troubles. The problem lies more with Emma and her inability to accept reality than with any belief system outside her.

One can argue that Emma is unhappy precisely because she has departed from religious tradition, but to the extent that she is religious, her Christianity is as much a part of her illusion as of her reality. I maintain that given the character created for her by Flaubert which is chronically disposed towards unhappiness, her

propensity towards drama and rapture, her selfishness and her lack of patience and discipline, she would have been miserable at any time; the times merely make her unwilling to accept her misery.

Because Emma is Catholic, she really has no option but to stay married to Charles and seek happiness through escape. Indeed, unlike Anna Karenina or Nokh alemen, divorce is never even mentioned as an option, yet clearly this fact is crucial. While divorce is impossible, French society of Emma's day was much more forgiving of adultery than Jewish or British society where divorce was an option. Although it is arguable whether Catholicism can justly be blamed for not providing Emma with enough emotional and spiritual support, it is indisputable that by forbidding divorce Catholicism kept people trapped in unhappy marriages. Escape through fantasy, adultery, and ultimately suicide, are Emma's only options.

Perhaps because Mirl has rejected her religion, albeit unofficially, while Emma has not, references to religion are not as frequent or overt in Nokh alemen as they are in Madame Bovary. Even so, there is perhaps no single factor more crucial to understanding Mirl's state of mind than the decline of the orthodox Jewish way of life.

The ben-hashmoshesdik (twilight) atmosphere of Nokh alemen reflects the twilight of Judaism. This waning of belief accounts for the sense of utter hopelessness shared by Mirl and her contemporaries.

The few religious functionaries in the book such as the Rabbi and the Rebbitzin Libke are shallow, narrow-minded characters, devoid of true piety or spirituality. Their personal shortcomings bespeak the impoverished state of organized religion.

Structured around the Jewish calendar, the time sequence of the book serves either to complement or to underscore events ironically. For example, the timing of Mirl's decision on the Jewish holiday Purim to marry Shmulik imparts a dimension of heroism to her deed. She reminds the reader of Queen Esther of the Megila, the heroine of the story of Purim who marries a stranger, Ahaseurus the King of Persia, Jews believe, to save her people. Because Mirl's parents have arranged her marriage, partly to help themselves out of their dire financial straits, one would expect them to be pleased with their daughter's "good match." Upset by their plight, they are instead humiliated at being the "poor in-laws." Seeing her parents discomfort at the engagement party, Mirl tries, unsuccessfully, on Passover, the holiday of liberation, to free herself from the commitment. Rosh hashone (the Jewish New Year) when, as the lady of the house, she should be presiding over the holiday festivites, Mirl abdicates all responsibility and goes home to her parents. Sukos, a holiday where meals are traditionally eaten outside in the suka (tabernacle/booth), Mirl shuts herself in her bedroom and will have nothing to do with anyone. "It was during the frosty snowstorms between Christmas and the gentile New Year" (145; bk. 4, ch. 1) says the first line of Book 1V. The shift to non-Jewish time references, immediately preceding Reb Gedalye's death, signals the end of Jewish time, and with it, the end of Mirl's Jewish framework for relating to the world.

The last days of her sojourn in the shtetl correspond to the Nine Days preceding Tisha B'av, the holiday commemorating the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Hertz's visit to Mirl at the beginning of the Nine Days, during which time it appears as if he is being kept by

her at the local hotel scandalizes the townspeople, and in their eyes, defies everything proper and Jewish.

Hertz, however, is unable or unwilling to help Mirl, and she reaches a point of despair on the fast day Tisha B'av. Mirl's question to Velvl Burnus's sister about what day it is is an allusion to the traveler in the tale of the Dead City who has lost track of the difference between week days and holy days. Were she to remain in town, she too could do nothing more than become the guardian of a dead town.

Looking like a "fasting mourner", although oblivious to the day, Mirl is the embodiment of the modern Jewish tragedy. It is as if she were subconsciously mourning the path leading her away from Judasim, a direction she has chosen.

Mirl's departure from town forever the day after Tisha B'av is symbolically linked to the destiny of the Jews. Returning to the shtetl and summoning Hertz had been her last attempt at pulling her life together; she failed. Like the Jews in Jerusalem thousands of years before when the Temple was destroyed, Mirl is a stranger in her own home. In echoing the destruction of the temple, the destruction of Mirl's own little world is elevated beyond a personal tragedy to a national tragedy. Mirl, the only daughter, comes to symbolize a whole generation of lost souls, and her break with Judaism,--the death of a world.

The weakening hold of religion on individuals in society is a major theme in Nokh alemen and Madame Bovary. In neither case is the author primarily concerned with pointing out the ills of these belief

systems or in engaging in polemics. They choose rather to show how their heroines are affected by the changing role of religion.

Although Emma believes she is a believer, religion is not a powerful enough force in her life to prevent her from sinning, to answer her questions, or to inspire her to conscious rebellion. Nor is she sufficiently concerned with religion to feel the loss of the sense of wholeness and stability that true faith would impart to her life.

If Emma responds to the rituals and language of belief they are not for her incentives to piety but stimuli to her sexual appetite. Madame Bovary is not a novel about the death of religion but rather about the manipulation of religion. Emma's Christianity is as much a part of her illusion as of her reality. Catholicism is one more illusion in her store of illusions; one more thing to be used to save her from the horrors of every day life.

Unlike Flaubert, in Nokh alemen, Bergelson writes not merely of the ineffectiveness of religion but of the demise of a religious tradition. Nothing, neither love nor money nor secular ideologies can fill the resulting emptiness. Although Mirl is referred to as a transition point, in terms of Judaism she seems more of an abrupt end. While Christianity pervades Emma's consciousness, Judaism does not pervade Mirl's. Perhaps this should not be surprising. In contrast to Emma who has had a convent education, Mirl says that "since childhood she was not taught to be religious" (187; bk. 3, ch. 11 107). This statement reflects a historical reality. As we discussed in Chapter 1, it was not uncommon, even in Orthodox circles, to give boys a rigourous Jewish education and to ignore the religious

education of girls.

Despite the lack of a formal Jewish education, girls were expected to soak in enough from the environment to carry on Jewish tradition. Mirl has not. Given her background, her connection to and concern for Judaism is striking in its scantness. The absence of religious content in Mirl's life is the very basis of the novel. Like Emma, she never consciously meditates on religion. Unlike Emma, she performs no religious rituals and seeks no guidance from religious functionaries. Nor does she deplore the inability of religion to help her.

In distancing herself from Jewish observance, Mirl breaks drastically from tradition in a way Emma never did. At times, she does succumb to certain dictates of Jewish life, allowing her marriage to be arranged by her parents and a shadkhn and participating in holiday celebrations. When she turns to tradition, it is not because, like Emma, she sees any hope or promise but rather because in her despair she feels unable to withstand the force of the community. It would be false to say that Mirl finds the Jewish religion itself oppressive, but like almost everything else in her life, it is one more thing that does not provide her with an answer to life's deeper questions, and, therefore, a matter of indifference to her. While Emma still thinks she believes, and uses religion as one more illusion, Mirl's complete lack of illusion or hope is a function of her non-belief. Unlike Emma, she does not manipulate religion to suit her desires, because desires are pointless in a world that has no meaning.

Suicide

Both Emma and Mirl consider suicide; Emma actually takes her life, whereas whether Mirl does or not remains ambiguous.

After a series of disappointing love relationships, a string of debts and promissory notes, and finally, a notice of seizure of property, Emma takes poison, and dies. Although Lheureux's threats of seizure are certainly to be taken seriously, Emma knows quite well

that despite great difficulty in repaying the debt, Charles would have forgiven her, and somehow, even if it meant taking desperate meansures, have taken the burden of payment on himself. It is something more than the fear of discovery which drives her to suicide. As Victor Brombert says, "Repeatedly, Emma wakes up to the realization that her capacity to dream is powerless to change the world."[18] With the disappointment of each realization, she retreats further into her dreams, pursuing them with more ardor and frenzy until she finally sees before her the total collapse of her universe.

Emma is ready game for the unscrupulous Monsieur Lheureux. Lheureux, whose name means "The happy one" constantly tantalizes Emma with the possibility of attaining happiness through the acquisition of material things.

Because Emma's desire for luxury is the shallowest of her desires, material acquisition is least able to satisfy her emotional needs. Her despair over finances acts as a catalyst for her emotional crisis, making her materialism most directly responsible for her death.

But it would be simplistic to describe Emma as materialistic. A woman of insatiable longings, she never learns to disentangle the various sources of her dissatisfaction. "Her carnal desires, her longing for money and the melancholy of her unfulfilled passion merged into one vast anguish" (94; bk. 2, ch. 5). Her possessions had come to symbolize to her the achievements of her life and the striving by which she was both ennobled and deluded. Her sense that "her whole existence, down to its most intimate details, was laid open like a dissected corpse before the eyes of" (255; bk. 3, ch. 7) the bailiff and the two witnesses who make an inventory of her possessions for seizure demonstrates this.

Emma's financial crisis provides a vehicle by which she tests the men who claimed to love her. Neither Rodolphe nor Leon responds to her appeals for money. Reaching her breaking point when Rodolphe insists that he does not have the money, "She was now suffering only through her love, and she felt her soul slipping away in the memory of it" (271; bk. 3, ch. 8). His refusal points out to her the flimsiness of this "great love" that had supposedly given meaning to her life, and makes her wonder if her she has not been blind to reality.

The blind man, a crazed, macabre figure, personifies this blindness. Significantly, the blind man is the last person whom Emma hears. Her last words, "The blind man" (282; bk. 3, ch. 8) spoken as he passes by her house singing a lewd song as she lies dying are an answer to her first words in the book, "Oh, why did I ever get married?" (38; bk. 2, ch. 7) and an explanation of all the major actions in her life. Always choosing illusion over reality, the

surface for the thing itself, Emma lets her blindness lead her to her death. The blind man with his song full of light-hearted erotic innuendos, his flesh "falling away in crimson shreds" (230; bk. 3, ch. 5), and his very being a corruption of physicality, mocks the physicality to which Emma has been a slave and serves as a macabre debasement of all physical longing. Given Emma's temperament, her life can never be but a series of longings and illusory fulfillments giving way to more emptiness and longing. Having "destroyed all chances of happiness by insisting on too much of it," (251; bk. 3, ch. 6) she dooms herself to eternal misery.

For Emma, suicide is not a final act of assertion. Sensing that she cannot change the world to fit her illusions and that life as it is, is not worth living, Emma abdicates control. She does not achieve self-knowledge before her suicide but is, rather, paralysed by despair. It is not the realization that life is meaningless, but, rather, the experience of the extreme pain of existence that drives her to suicide.

Emma views death as a great relief. Seeing herself finally free of "the betrayals, infamies, and countless desires that had tortured her" (275; bk. 3, ch. 8), she thinks, "Ah, death is no great matter, I'll just go to sleep and everything will be over" (273; bk. 3, ch. 8). Again, she is deluded. Her death is hideous and awful and its effects on Charles and Berthe, excruciating.

Although Emma is largely responsible for her unhappiness, there is, nevertheless, something poignant and beautiful in her striving for something else. The delusions and longings which destroy her are also the reflections of a passion and intensity given only to a rare few.

Who can blame Emma for attempting to escape a reality which is grim and limiting?

If in Emma's dreams of Paris, she is deluded by superficial glitter, she is also inspired by a thirst to live life to the fullest and gain the sort of experience that a Yonville can not offer. Indeed Flaubert mocks the self-satisfaction of characters like Father Bournisien, Charles, and particularly Homais. Yet success is given to the Homaises and not to the Emmas of this world as Homais' receiving of the cross of the Legion of Honour at the very end suggests. The triumph of the self-aggrandizing Homais whose blind and almost mindless devotion to rationalism and scientific progress stands in direct contrast to Emma's pursuit of beauty and emotional fulfillment, suggests just how absurd and unbearable bourgeois, self-satified, small town life can be.

Is Emma to blame if life in Paris or at La Vaubyessard, as Flaubert suggests, offers the same emptiness as life in Yonville, but disguised in grander more glorious forms? Is Emma to blame if in trying to escape the mediocrity of Charles, life offers her only the mediocrity of Rodolphe or Leon? It is difficult to say, for nothing in the text suggests that somewhere there are better men or better places. Reality, on the whole, whether in Tostes, in Yonville, or Paris, is a grim matter. Emma's tragedy lies in her inability to accept a reality that is not worth accepting. . .

Suicide and Mirl

If Emma commits suicide because life does not conform to any of her infinite illusions, Mirl considers suicide because she has no illusions, and life stripped of illusion seems pointless and depressing. People like herself, she believes, either "_vern zingers in di shantanen, oder zey nemen zikh dos lebn_," (become singers in nightclubs, or they take their own lives") (136; bk. 2, ch. 7). All aspirations seem idle, material things give no joy, and even love is not the _iker_ (main things), although people still pretend that it is. "People know this," Mirl thinks, "but they won't say it" (186; bk. 2, ch. 11).

At one point Mirl rejects suicide because she still has too much self-love to inflict on herself the violence required to kill herself. "_Azelkhe sheyne hent_. . ." (Such pretty arms. . .) she thinks as she looks at her arms, "_Zey tuen ir bang yedes mol vos ir kumt oys vegn zelbstmord tsu trakhtn_ (she feels sorry for them every time she happens to think about suicide) (137; bk. 2, ch. 7). She also has contempt for the "half silly, half clever suicide notes" (230; bk. 3, ch. 5) people leave.

Despite Mirl's rejection of suicide and suicide notes in earlier parts of the book, it is not altogether clear that she does not seriously contemplate and/or commit suicide at the end of Book lV and leave just such a note. A case could be made for either side.

The sale of her father's house, symbolizing her dislocation from both her material and physical heritage, her realization that Hertz is unable or unwilling to help her, the timing of his visit and her own

departure around Tisha B'av, and her uncharacteristic uncontrolled sobbing before she leaves, all suggest that Mirl has reached the lowest point of her life.

These sad circumstances combined with her unsent note to Montchik, which Lipkis finds in the last chapter, suggest that she may have committed suicide and left exactly the sort of "half silly, half clever note" she condemned earlier. In addition, although she is critical of writers who "start their books with somebody's sad spring," (137; bk. 2, ch. 7) in her letter to Montchik she stoops to just such a cliche herself.

Mirl is too clever not to notice this. That she conforms to her own worst stereotype may suggest she no longer retains the integrity that would have prevented her from behaving in this way.

On the other hand, since no direct mention is made of suicide, it is quite possible that she does not take her life, but merely goes off to some unknown destination. The complete reversal of her style reflected in her note suggests that the note is a self-conscious parody of exactly those things she claims to disdain. She finds suicide too pretentious an expression of personal misery in a world in which unhappiness is the norm. Despite everyone's criticism of her and her "only daughterly ways," Mirl has, in fact, demanded little of everyone around her. Her integrity has always prevented her from indulging in the sort of self-dramatization and maudlin sentimentality which might motivate suicide.

In any case, by the end she finds life more unbearable than ever and an overall sense of hopelessness pervades the last chapters; she becomes one of the living dead like the woman in Hertz's "Dead City."

Before, no matter how despondent she had been, Mirl had always been saved from total hopelessness by the sense that what she was looking for did exist somewhere. "She still thought that somewhere life would be better for her." With this illusion gone, she takes on the air of a person who has been told, "You have destroyed your life and now it is lost for ever and ever" (180; bk. 4, ch. 5).

Reb Gedalye's way of life is now "nokh alemen" (all over with) and nothing new arises in its stead. Whether Mirl lives or dies, she is the symbol of a lost generation that can neither follow in Reb Gedalye's footsteps nor find meaning and hope in a new path. With no goals, no hopes, no beliefs, no community, and no connection to the past, Mirl and the members of her "shirayim dor" (generation of leftovers) seal their own fate and are ultimately the agents of their own demise. The twilight world must, sooner or later, give way to night. . .

Notes

1 Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, A Treasury of Yiddish Stories (New York: Schocken Books, 1973) 89.

2 J. Isaacs, An Assessment of Twentieth Century Literature (London, 1951) 111-112, quoted in Barbara Smalley, George Eliot and Flaubert: Pioneers of the Modern Novel (Athens: Ohio University press, 1974) 6.

3 Y. Dobrushin, Dovid Bergelson (Moscow: Olgiz melukhe farlag, 1947), 79-80.

4 Dobrushin 71.

5 All references to the text of Madame Bovary will be taken from: Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary, trans. Lowell Bair (New York, Toronto, London: Bantam Books, 1972).

6 All references to the text of Nokh alemen will be taken from: Dovid Bergelson, Nokh alemen (Berlin: Vostok, 1922). This reference, 62-63; bk. 2, ch. 2.

7 The translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

8 In Yiddish, the verb is always the second grammatical unit in a sentence. Although the participle need not immediately follow the auxiliary verb, Bergelson's frequent separation of verb and participle and his separating subject and verb by interposing a subordinate clause are deliberate innovations, and indeed, part of what makes him the unique Yiddish stylist that he is.

9 Victor Brombert, The Novels of Flaubert: A Study of Themes and Techniques (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

10 Brombert 57.

11 Smalley, George Eliot and Flaubert 93.

12 Jean-Paul Sartre, The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert 1821-1857, trans. Carol Cosman (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981) vol. 1.

13 Brombert 44.

14 All references to the letter are from Flaubert, Madame Bovary, Bk. 175; bk. 2, ch. 12.

15 I use the word "involvements" rather than "affairs," because the nature of Mirl's relationship to Nosn after her marriage is left deliberately ambiguous.

16
Tony Tanner, Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University press, 1979), 98.

17
It is interesting to note that in his Emile Rousseau confirms Flaubert's account of the pernicious effects of convent education on women. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile or On Education (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1979) 388-89.

> Convents are veritable schools of coquetry. . . of a coquetry which leads to all the perversities of women and produces the most extravagant ladies of high fashion. When young women make the abrupt transition from the convent to wild company, they immediately feel they belong. They have been raised to live there. . . it seems to me that in Protestant countries there is generally more attachment to family and there are worthier wives and tenderer mothers than in Catholic countries; and if this is the case, one cannot doubt that this difference is in part due to convent education.
>
> . . . An apparent constraint is imposed on girls for the sake of finding the dupes who marry them on the strength of their bearing. . . . What they covet is not a husband but the license of marriage. . . .
>
> All these diverse educations equally deliver young persons over to a taste for the pleasures of high society and to the passions soon born of their taste. . . . Young provincial women, taught to despise the happy simplicity of their morals, hurry to Paris to share the corruption of ours.

Whether or not one agrees with Flaubert and Rousseau, Rousseau's account suggests that Emma's education embodies a commonly held opinion about convent schools. 15. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile or On Education (New York: Basic Books, Inc.), pp. 388-89.

18
Brombert 85.

Conclusion

After studying these works, I have found, as I conjectured earlier, that there are both great similarities and significant differences in the portrayal of the emerging modern woman in Yiddish and Western works.

The emerging modern woman is in conflict with her society. Having been taught in all cultures to be docile and submissive, she finds that the expectations of society run counter to her own notions of freedom and personal happiness. Because marriage is the course most frequently taken by these characters, this conflict is most commonly evident in marriage. In both literatures, the customs relating to marriage and the depiction of the heroine in marriage are very similar. Conventional arranged marriages are the norm and they offer the heroine little happiness. Marriage becomes a measure of social change and stability. A happy arranged marriage signifies and maintains social harmony. A failure or deviation threatens the order of that society. In both literatures, the heroine's discontent with marriage and with life in general is reflected in an indifference towards giving birth and rearing children. The heroine's relationship to her family thus becomes a measure of the viability of her society.

It is precisely on the question of the viability of their societies that the Yiddish heroines differ from the Western. In all of these texts, the heroine lives in a world in which religion is becoming less important, yet she still feels pressed by its constraints and demands. For the Jewish woman, in particular, the dilemma is a matter of individual will conflicting, not only with

norms and conventions which might change with the times as they did in Effi or Nora's society, but with laws which the community believed to be holy and unchangeable. Although the Western writers may portray rebellion against religion or benign indifference toward it as a factor determining the character's choices and actions, they never make it the dominant theme of the work. The personal story comes first and religion and nationality are secondary. In contrast, in the Yiddish works the heroine's connection to her Jewishness is frequently the root out of which the story grows, and which then determines her attitudes toward men, marriage, adultery and life.

Yet, despite this crucial difference in content, the Yiddish works I have chosen are fairly similar in form to the works of Western fiction. Kadye Molodowsky uses free rhythms and blank verse already common in European and American poetry. *Stempenyu*, and *Aleyn* are conventional novels. *Nokh alemen*, more experimental in form, implements the techniques of impressionism and shifting narrative perspective already developed by Western writers. Only Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye der milkhiker*--a loosely woven together collection of monologues which can only be called a novel for want of a better term --is in a class of its own. Having few models to emulate in their own language, the Yiddish classicists--Abramovich, Peretz, and Sholem Aleichem--struggled to find a narrative voice. They found themselves more at home with genres like the monologue and dialogue where they could mimic, or pretend to mimic, spoken Yiddish than with the more conventional third person narrator. It is therefore not surprising that in *Tevye* Sholem Aleichem is at his best, far surpassing his achievement in his novel *Stempenyu*.

After the pioneering work done by writers like Sholem Aleichem and Abramovich, later writers like Opatoshu and Bergelson gravitated more naturally, sometimes successfully and sometimes not so successfully, to prevalent Western forms. This is not surprising since they were modern people with one foot in Jewish tradition and another in the modern secular world. The forms of traditional Yiddish literature such as the homiletic tale, the parable, and the wonder story were insufficient to deal with increasingly complex issues arising in Jewish life which was now characterized not by faith but by rebellion, not by communal cohesiveness but by communal disintegration.

Given the Yiddish writers' overwhelming national concerns, it is not surprising that the Yiddish works are more given to allegory. The heroine and her community come to represent the entire Jewish people, and her struggles, the struggles of her people. While the author in the non-Yiddish works is certainly concerned with women in general and with society, he focuses more on the individual woman and the way in which she is affected by her society. Her individuality is often more clearly delineated than it is in the Yiddish works.

In the Yiddish works, Mirl Hurwitz's notion of herself as part of a _shirayim dor_ (remnant generation) which is unsure if there will be another to follow hers suggests the tenuousness of Jewish continuity. Rokhele in _Stempenyu_ is not only a woman but a _yidishe tokhter_ (daughter of the Jewish people), whose behaviour, as the narrator himself tells us, is meant to illustrate the particularity of the Jewish people and the uniquenes of the Jewish novel. Emma Bovary, however, may not be regarded as a representative "daughter of the

French nation." She is more the victim of her own illusions than of the society of which she is a part.

This orientation toward national survival is an understandable reaction from writers who were products of a community threatened by both anti-semitism and assimilation. Because of its insecurity, the Jewish community viewed any violation of its values as a betrayal in favour of an alien world.[1] This concern is not reflected in the non-Jewish works. Emma Bovary's adultery was a sin according to Christianity, and, it may be argued, threatened the social and moral order of the day. It was, however, not an affront against the entire French nation, nor was it perceived as threatening the physical survival of Emma's people, as, for example, did Rokhele's behaviour in Sholem Aleichem's Stempenyu. Because Jewishness was defined as both the religion and nationality of its adherents, any decline in sexual morality was seen as weakening not only the spiritual but also the physical viability of the community. Furthermore, the Jewish woman was not merely an individual, she was a yidishe tokhter daughter of the Jewish people); the very words connote her innate bond and moral responsibility to her nation, its beliefs and customs.

This is not to say that the Christians did not take their Christianity seriously. However, the tenuous plight of their religion and nation is not at the heart of the work of almost every mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century English, French, German or Norwegian writer as it is for Yiddish writers. Ibsen could write about a woman's struggle for personal autonomy within a changing Norwegian society without implying the demise of Christian morality. Flaubert and Fontane did not have to worry about the survival of their

language.

Why should the survival of the Jews as a religious community be important to someone who professes atheism or agnosticism at best? Yet it was! Despite their often secular personal orientation, the issue of the survival of traditional Jewish life occupied the minds of writer after writer and confronted heroine after heroine. Whether consciously or unconsciouly, Yiddish writers knew that they drew their sustenance from the religious tradition. It was as if they sensed that the freedom which allowed them to write in Yiddish also threatened the future of the language and the nation which spoke it. Therefore, although they and their heroines were lured by the new freedom, they could never present it without ambivalence.

In Kadye Molodowsky's "Froyen lider", the I persona's attempt to escape the haunting presence of her deceased ancestresses, ends with her summoning up before her a vision of her pious mother as she herself murmurs, "a shtiln eynfakhn / gebet tsu got" (a quiet simple prayer to God). She remains tied, almost mystically, by silken cords to the tradition against which she rebels. Even when freedom is clearly necessary for the heroine's well-being, as it is in Aleyn, the author never lets her attain it without conveying a sense of sadness at the loss resulting to society.

This same sense of loss is not charactersitic of the Western works. In A Doll's House religion is brought up only as a convenient excuse to deter Nora from leaving, and society is something to which Torvald must conform to ensure his professional and social advancement. In Effi Briest the role of religion is hardly significant, and society, as represented by Instettin and Effi's

parents, is ultimately responsible for Effi's death. If Emma Bovary's manipulation of religion is meant to signify a religion in crisis, Father Bournisien's simple-minded fulfillment of his clerical role shows the complacency of the church in the face of this crisis. Monsieur Homais' meteroic rise and his receiving of the Medal of Honour suggest that the future of bourgeois society is secure.

Is this obsession with survival specific only to Yiddish works or is it shared by Jewish works in general? While this question merits a study of its own, a brief look at the writing of Anzia Yezierska, an American Jewish writer born in Russia, would be instructive. The pidgin English of her immigrant characters, which, when translated verbatim into Yiddish, yields a perfect Yiddish,[2] suggests that Yezierska was certainly capable of writing in Yiddish. Yet she chose to write in English, the language of her adopted home and culture, and to espouse the values of America. Like many of the writers discussed here, in her novel Bread Givers (1925), Yezierska writes of the conflict between the old world and the new. Tyrannized by a religious father who thinks that a woman's only purpose in life is to marry, serve her husband, and have children, Yezierska's heroine and narrator Sarah Smolinsky dreams of casting off her "greenness," going to college, and becoming a real "Amerikanerin."

As she does so often in Yiddish works, the protagonist struggles for accomodation and reconciliation, but here her rebellion against tradition is seen as an incontestable psychological necessity. Despite Sarah's reverence for her father and his world, Sarah must make her own way as a free and modern woman.

Naturally, one ought not come to any conlusions about all Anglo-

Jewish writers based on Yezierska's novel, but I am struck by what it suggests to me about the connection between form and content in Yiddish literature. In 1920, a group of introspectivist Yiddish writers known as the In zikhistn said that "a Yiddish poet does not need any specifically 'Jewish themes.' A Jew will write about a Hindu fertility temple and a Japanese shinto as a Jew. . . . it is not the task of the poet himself to search out and demonstrate his Jewishness."[3] Yes, theoretically, Yiddish writers could write about subjects that had nothing to do with Jewishness and, in poetry, they sometimes did. But in prose, they rarely did. Prose writers describe the life they know and for the Yiddish writer that was Jewish life. They portray the concerns of their society and culture, and for Yiddish writers, that meant a concern for survival.

Like Western writers, they wrote of women searching for happiness in ways both in harmony with and in conflict with their societies. Yet they did not choose to write in the languages of other Western writers; they chose to write in their own language. It was as if the decision to write in Yiddish determined the content and ideology of their works. They wrote of Jewish life as they saw it, both oppressive and beautiful in its traditionalism, and sometimes alluring in its dynamism. And always they wrote of heroines pulled between two worlds. By venturing into the outside world, the heroines, like the language in which they were created, moved farther away from the source of their Jewishness. The writers looked with both wonder and fear at where this venture would lead. . .

Notes

[1] This overwhelming national concern is also evident in the Yiddish literary criticism of the first half of the twentieth century. It may appear that I have ignored the Yiddish critics, and the truth is, I read many but did not find them that helpful. In a field dominated by men, there is an understandable lack of interest in the subject of women in literature, and hence, little material on many of the works. Nokh alemen is an exception. Yiddish literary critics trained before the Holocaust, if they were trained at all, were not given to close reading of texts, or to analyzing form, structure, or rhetorical devices. They tended more toward broad generalizations about the beauty of the author's style, the depth of his creative soul, and the way in which his work reflects and elevates the national spirit.

There are some exceptions to this. Sh. Niger's article on Yiddish literature and the female reader was extremely helpful on Early Yiddish literature. Oyslender's article on the young Sholem Aleichem and his novel Stempenyu, and I.J. Trunck's book on Tevye and Menakhem-Mendl illuminated Sholem Aleichem's works to some degree. (See bibliography for full references.) Soviet Yiddish critics such as Dobrushin dealt insightfully with Nokh alemen despite the obligatory Marxist analysis as did Susan Slotnik in her doctoral dissertation on "The Novel Form in the Works of David Bergelson." Very few contemporary critics have dealt with the woman in Yiddish literature. In short, the field is open!

[2] Having grown up myself with Yiddish and the English of immigrants, I find the English of Yezierska's characters overdone. While people learning a language do tend to translate from their native tongue into the new language, I don't think they do it as consistently as do Yezierska's characters. I often have the feeling that rather than rendering the English of immigrants she constructs their language by translating verbatim from the Yiddish. This leads me to believe that she was certainly capable of writing in Yiddish.

[3] Y. Glatshteyn, A. Leyeles, N. Minkov, "Introspektivizm", In zikh, New York, 1920.

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