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# The Jewish Immigrant Perception of the American Dream In Abraham Cahan's Yekl and Anzia Yezierska's Bread Givers

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The Jewish Immigrant Perception of the American Dream

In Abraham Cahan's Yekl and

Anzia Yezierska's Bread Givers

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English at  
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## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: <u>Yekl</u>	7
Chapter 2: <u>Bread Givers</u> : Book I	28
Chapter 3: <u>Bread Givers</u> : Book II and III	52
Conclusion	82
Works Cited	85

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. . . "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,  
Send these, the homeless, the tempest-tost to me:  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

--Emma Lazarus

"The New Colossus"

"Can't a fellow be a good Jew in America?"

"Yes, of course he can, but--well,  
wait til you see for yourself."

--Abraham Cahan

The Rise of David Levinsky

## Introduction

Scholars group works of American literature not only by genre or time period, but also by regional or ethnic boundaries. Although general American literature classes are still necessarily classified by dates, more specialized courses often focus on literature written by individuals who belong in specific categories by virtue of their heritage. Longwood College, for example, offers or has offered such courses as African-American Women Writers, Writers of the Harlem Renaissance, and Literature of the American South. Classes like these enable instructors to narrow the focus of the material and enable the student to define, based on the material presented, characteristics of the literature created by authors who incorporate their regional or ethnic backgrounds into their work.

One group not usually singled out is immigrant writers, who deserve recognition for the treatment of a popular theme of American literature: the discovery and realization of the American Dream. From all around the world, people have emigrated to the United States in search of the American Dream, an intangible and elusive concept which, although most valuable when the definition is personal, contains elements common to all Americans and is defined most appropriately by Thomas Jefferson as being entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In fact, when literary critics refer to the American Dream, they often use Thomas Jefferson's apt definition. In an article on F.

Scott Fitzgerald's treatment of the American Dream, for example, John F. Callahan states:

In its American guise, the dream Fitzgerald sought to realize flowed from that most elusive and original of the rights proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence. Framed as an "inalienable" right by Thomas Jefferson and espoused by other founders of this revolutionary nation, the "pursuit of happiness" magnified the American dream into an abiding, almost sacred promise. (379)

Inherent in the concept of the American Dream, however, is the idea that each person is valuable as an individual and his or her decisions about how to live are more important than abiding by the norm. But assimilation is just as elemental to the American Dream as individuality.

The difficulty faced by Jewish immigrants in reconciling their shared past with their individual futures in America is apparent in the literature created by this group, who, at the turn of the century, consistently address the theme of the American Dream. In his introduction to Jewish American Stories, Irving Howe defines Jewish American Literature as follows:

[Jewish American writers'] work is regional in that it derives from and deals overwhelmingly with one locale, usually the streets and tenements of the immigrant Jewish neighborhoods . . . regional

in that it offers exotic or curious local customs for the inspection of native readers; and regional in that it comes to us as an outburst of literary consciousness resulting from an encounter between an immigrant group and the host culture of America. (3)

Certainly this definition is valid for both Yekl (1896), by Abraham Cahan, and Bread Givers (1925), by Anzia Yezierska. Both have as their main setting the Jewish section of New York's Lower East Side and expose readers to the customs and habits of their main characters and the characters' friends and families. Readers learn in Yekl, for instance, about the responsibility Jake feels for his family in Russia, about his job in a sweatshop, and about the social adjustments faced by his wife Gitl as a new immigrant to America. In Bread Givers, readers share Sara and her family's struggle for survival--for example, Sara's first job selling herring on the street and her mother's ability to bargain with vendors for the best price. Readers also see that Sara's father's reluctance to work is largely cultural in nature, harking back to a time when learned men of the shtetls (villages) of the Old Country were supported by their communities and were encouraged, according to Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg in their introduction to Voices from the Yiddish, to "devote themselves entirely to religious study" (8). Finally, both works certainly address



issues raised when their main characters work toward attainment of the American Dream, even when doing so causes strife between the characters and their families.

According to Hayim Greenberg in "Notes on the Melting Pot," there are two words that can be used to describe the means by which Jews assimilate into the American culture. One is Galut, "which means exile" and carries with it the negative connotation of the treatment of Jews during the same period in European countries (235). Those who find this term too harsh to define the Jewish experience in America turn to Tefutza, a Hebrew word that, according to Greenberg, "denot[es] dispersion, [and] is pronounced in such accents as to carry overtones of meaning like expansion, growth, and prosperity" (235). Tefutza allows the Jew to take pride in the choice to reach for the American Dream and embrace the changes he or she makes in order to define himself or herself as a Jewish American. In Yekl and Bread Givers, we learn the importance of both assimilation and individuality as their main characters struggle to gain independence from their ties to the past and work toward reinventing themselves as Americans. Cahan and Yezierska use their novels to explore personal freedom--Tefutza--as the means by which to achieve the American Dream.

However, these characters differ in the means by which they travel toward the American Dream. Jake Podkovnik, the

main character of Yekl, never defines a clear sense of how he will achieve the American Dream. He hopes to gain financial freedom and a good grasp of the English language, both of which he feels will enable him to be powerful and respected. Jake's changes are superficial and he never achieves the American Dream, not only because his goals are shallow and he too often loses sight of them, but also because he relies not on himself but on others to reach them. In Bread Givers, Sara Smolinsky feels that it is through education and love that she will reach her goals of personal fulfillment and independence from her past. Ironically, she finds through the course of her search for the American Dream that it is only through embracing her past and adapting the Old World to the new that she will finally be able to "make for [her]self a person."

While Cahan's Jake and Yeziarska's Sara work toward the American Dream, both must lose something of their shared cultural past in order to grasp the future. But in losing their shared past, both Jake and Sara risk losing much more than what Howe and Greenberg call the "deeply ingrained . . . idea of the past, the claim of memory"; they also risk losing their families (4). Howe and Greenberg explain the importance of family in Jewish life, and therefore in Jewish American fiction, by defining the Jewish family as a wealth of Jewish literary subject matter:

An agency of discipline and coherence, the family

has given the children of the immigrant enormous emotional resources, but also a mess of psychic troubles. To have grown up in an immigrant Jewish milieu is to be persuaded that the family is an institution . . . inviolable, the one bulwark against the chaos of the world but also the one barrier to tasting its delights . . . . [T]he family becomes an overwhelming, indeed, obsessive presence: it is container of narrative, theater of character, agent of significance. (8)

Both Jake and Sara reject their families; Jake by divorcing his wife and Sara by moving out of her father's house in order to pursue her education. In doing so, both lose significant parts of themselves in hopes of gaining the American Dream.

Jake does not learn the importance of his rejection of the Old World and the end of Yekl finds him moving away from, instead of toward, his American Dream. Sara, however, recognizes the importance of her history and her family after she learns that they are the forces that have shaped who she is. Sara not only moves back and painfully reunites with her family, but by the end of Bread Givers she also achieves the American Dream.



## Chapter One:

### Yekl

In his essay entitled "The Jew in the American Novel," Leslie Fiedler calls Abraham Cahan's novel, The Rise of David Levinsky, "the most distinguished novel written by an American Jew before the 1930's" (76-77). Previously in the same essay, however, Fiedler tells readers that "[t]he fiction of . . . Abraham Cahan . . . appears in retrospect not merely to fall short of final excellence, but to remain somehow irrelevant to the main lines of development of fiction in the United States" (66). Although Fiedler's praise for Cahan's work is limited to The Rise of David Levinsky, other critics place importance on Yekl, Cahan's first published novel. Thomas J. Ferraro, for example, in his book Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America, calls Yekl the "widely . . . accepted founding text of English-language immigrant realism" (95). Cahan's novel Yekl deals with the important theme of the American Dream and one man's struggle to assimilate into American society and cannot, therefore, be called "irrelevant."

As one begins Abraham Cahan's Yekl (1896), it is obvious that the title character is not definitive about his identity. Chapter one of the novel is entitled "Jake and Yekl," and the reader learns there that Yekl has adapted his Yiddish name to the English equivalent Jake: ". . . the thought of ever having been a Yekl would bring to Jake's

lips a smile of patronizing commiseration for his former self" (12). Indeed, Jake not only Americanizes his own name, but also the names of his wife and son upon their arrival to the United States. Jake's conversion of his and his family's names from the Yiddish to the English is indicative of his larger struggles, including a desire to eliminate his past from his present, to assimilate into American culture, and thereby to achieve the American Dream.

Jake has done all he can to keep the life he started in Russia out of the life he now leads in America. The narrator tells the reader more than Jake has told his friends and coworkers about his past. The reader learns, for instance, that Jake is from "Povodye--a town of northwestern Russia" and that "as the only son of aged parents he had been exempt from the duty of bearing arms" (10). At the beginning of the narrative, the reader is also told that it had been "three years since that beautiful summer morning when he had mounted the spacious kibitka which was to carry him to the frontier-bound train" and toward a new life alone in America (11).

Jake seeks employment first in Boston, where there is "a lingering minority of bosses . . . who abide by the Sabbath of their fathers" (11). Even though Jake begins his career in a shop that observes the Jewish Sabbath, the reader learns that "soon after his arrival in Boston his religious scruples had followed in the wake of his former

first name" and if, after his move from Boston sweatshops to New York sweatshops, "he was still free from work on Saturdays he found many another way of 'desecrating the Sabbath'" (11-12). The longer Jake is in America, the further away his pursuit of happiness leads him from the old ideals and morals he carried over from Russia. Although Jake remains a diligent worker, he wastes his money going to dance halls and eating at restaurants instead of saving it and sending for his wife and son quickly.

Jake has only two reminders of his former self. Jake's family name, Podkovnik, has not been changed because, as the narrator states at the end of chapter one, "Jake's friends had such rare use for it that by mere negligence it had been left intact" (12). Jake's second reminder of his former self is explained in chapter three. The correspondence between Jake and his wife and parents reminds Jake of his past. Because "neither Jake nor his wife nor his parents could write even Yiddish," the letters were "carried on by proxy, and, as a consequence, at longer intervals than would be the case otherwise" (26). The reader also learns that although during his two years in Boston, Jake "used to mention his Gitl and his Yosselè so frequently and so enthusiastically, that some . . . would sing 'Yekl and wife and the baby' to the tune of 'Molly and I and the Baby,'" after he moved to New York Jake "carefully avoided all reference to his antecedents" (24).



Because Jake only keeps his last name as an afterthought, the fact that he has consciously hidden the existence of a wife and child from his New York acquaintances becomes a more significant piece of evidence that Jake is working to eliminate his past from his present. Although a sense of obligation keeps the past in his mind, Jake is having too much fun in America as a bachelor to send promptly for his family. Chapter two, "The New York Ghetto," gives the reader a glimpse at Jake's life as a single man. The reader also begins to see how weak Jake's resolutions are and how quickly he loses sight of his goals.

The beginning of chapter two finds Jake in a bad mood. He grows "conscious of his low spirits" and resolves, after "tracing [his low spirits] with some effort to their source . . . 'No more fun for me! . . . I shall get them [his wife and son] over here and begin a new life'" (12-13). Jake clearly is unable to reconcile his past, including his religion, family, and home in Russia, with what he considers important in his present and future in America. He feels that his dreams of independence and wealth are unattainable in conjunction with the strictness of his religion, the dependence of his wife and son, and his inability to adapt these elements of his past with his new life in America.

Throughout most of chapter two, Jake is able to push thoughts of his wife and son to the back of his mind. It is only with the death of his father in chapter three that Jake

is held, as the title states, "In the Grip of His Past." Because he has kept his past so well hidden from others, Jake's New York friends never suspect he is actually married:

Judging from his unstaid habits and happy-go-lucky abandon to the pleasures of his life, his present associates took it for granted that he was single, and instead of twitting him with the feigned assumption that he had deserted a family--a piece of burlesque as old as the Ghetto--they would quiz him as to which of his girls he was "dead struck" on, and as to the day fixed for the wedding. (25)

The fact that his acquaintances know nothing of his marriage is another example of Jake's lack of willpower. Jake considers telling his friends and coworkers, but each time the thought occurs to him, he "failed to [make a clean breast of it] for mere lack of nerve, each time letting himself off on the plea that a week or two before his wife's arrival would be a more auspicious occasion for the disclosure" (26).

Because Jake has been absent from his family for three years and because his correspondence with his family is both infrequent and impersonal, Jake in turn idealizes and disdains his family and his past. Jake no longer remembers specifics about his wife and son, and he cannot afford to set aside much money for his wife's passage to America.

When he does receive a letter from his family entreating him to send the ticket, Jake is rather relieved that he is too poor to send for his wife, "and to tell the truth, at the bottom of his heart he was at such moments rather glad of his poverty" because he is happy living the life of a bachelor (27).

Because Jake's letters to the family he left behind are written by proxy, he is twice removed from them. Thus it is more difficult for Jake to see his family realistically and for him to maintain a clear sense of his wife's and son's own individuality. Jake's monthly letter, written by his translator, "might have been printed and forwarded one copy at a time for all the additions and alterations Jake ever caused to be made in it" (27). Just as it is difficult for Jake to remember his family clearly, it is also difficult for Jake's family to remember him.

Although Jake feels a terrific sense of loss when he finds, by proxy, that his father has died, his first thoughts are of himself. Because he is now the patriarch of a family he hardly remembers, Jake knows that he can no longer put off his reunion with his wife and child: "'So now they will be here for sure, and there can be no more delay!' was Jake's first distinct thought" (29). Jake again vows that he will begin a new life and is struck with fond memories of his old life, thinking that he "'would not exchange [Gitl's] little finger for all the American ladas'"



(32). When he thinks of the dancing school girls, "It fill[s] him with disgust to think of the morals of some of them," although, the narrator adds, "it was from his own sinful experience that he knew them to be of a rather loose character" (32).

Chapter four, entitled "The Meeting," describes in detail Jake's Ellis Island reunion with his wife. Although he is excited about seeing his family again, for Jake there is also an element of self-centeredness about the meeting: "the prospect of meeting his dear wife and child, and, incidentally, of showing off his swell attire to her, had thrown him into a fervor of impatience" (33-34). The focus on his own appearance leaves Jake unprepared for the sight of his wife; his first sight of Gitl is described in realistic detail by the narrator:

She was slovenly dressed in a brown jacket and skirt of grotesque cut, and her hair was concealed under a voluminous wig of a pitch-black hue. . . . She had gained considerably in the measurement of her waist . . . . The nine or ten days spent at sea had covered her face with a deep bronze, which combined with her prominent cheek bones, inky little eyes, and, above all, the smooth black wig, to lend her resemblance to a squaw. (34)

The sight of Gitl, travel-worn and distinctly un-American, disgusts Jake:

Jake had no sooner caught sight of her than he had averted his face, as if loth to rest his eyes on her, in the presence of the surging crowd around him, before it was inevitable. He dared not even survey that crowd to see whether it contained any acquaintance of his, and he vaguely wished that her release was delayed indefinitely. (34)

Although Jake is repulsed by his wife at her landing, she is impressed by his appearance, and, after a kiss that "taste[d] of mutual estrangement," Gitl tells her husband he looks like a poritz, or nobleman (35).

At times Jake feels something akin to affection for his estranged wife, but his feelings of being stifled by his past and the old world always prevail:

For a moment the sight of her . . . precipitated a wave of thrilling memories on Jake and made him feel in his own environment. Presently, however, the illusion took wing and here he was, Jake the Yankee, with this bonnetless, wigged, dowdyish little greenhorn by his side! That she was his wife, nay, that he was a married man at all, seemed incredible to him. (36)

He begins vocalizing his disapproval of Gitl's un-American ways immediately, telling her "'here everything is so different'" (37). Jake's path toward the American Dream has taken him away from his past, which is represented by the



differences between him and his wife Gitl.

Jake encourages Gitl both to uncover her head and to ride in a horse car on the Sabbath. Although Gitl takes off her wig, she puts on a kerchief, and, after a short argument with her husband, consents unhappily to the cab ride: "if she had been a culprit on the way to the gallows she could not have been more terrified than she was now at this her first ride on the day of rest" (38). This is Gitl's first break with Jewish law, and it is important to note that her only motive in doing so is to appease Jake.

In chapter five, "A Paterfamilias," Gitl's struggles to assimilate in order to please her husband are outlined. She has "compromise[d] between her conscience and her husband" by covering only a portion of her hair with a bandanna (39), and, as the chapter opens, Gitl's curiosity gets the best of her. She tries on the new hat and corset purchased, with the help of their neighbor Mrs. Kavarsky, by Jake. Gitl tries the regalia on only after assuring herself no one will see and immediately takes it off when she hears a knock at the door.

But Gitl is slowly assimilating; slowly "she was getting used to her husband, in whom her own Yekl and Jake the stranger were by degree merging them selves into one undivided being" (41). Gitl is torn between the customs of the old country and a desire to please Jake and earn his love: ". . . at one moment she took firm resolve to pluck up

courage and cast away the kerchief and the wig; but at the next she reflected that God would be sure to punish her for the terrible sin, so that instead of winning Jake's love the change would increase his hatred for her" (42). Gitl's son Yosselè eases her transition by assuring her of love and acceptance. When she becomes torn in her battle between risking either God's rejection or Jake's, she goes to Yosselè for comfort: ". . . she seized him in her arms and covered his warm cheeks with fervent kisses which did her aching heart good" (43). Although Gitl works hard for Jake's acceptance, he is blind to her transformations and still considers her presence a hindrance in his quest for the American Dream.

Jake remains frustrated by Gitl's slow progress in Americanizing herself and admonishes her for her lack of skill with the English language: "'Can't you say veenda? . . . What a peasant head! Other greenhornsh learn to speak American shtyle very fast; and she--one might tell her the same word eighty thousand times, and it is nu used'" (41). The reader sees the irony in Jake's disappointment over Gitl's slow acquisition of the English language--Jake himself is not much better than his wife. Although Jake feels it is important to speak well in order to be taken seriously as an American, the fact that he learns English only through his Jewish immigrant coworkers and not by means of a formal education can be seen clearly in his dialect. According to

Irving Howe in his introduction to Jewish American Stories, Cahan's use of dialect in Yekl can be compared to works written in Southern dialect: ". . . in baneful dialect so naturalistically faithful, or intent upon being faithful, to the immigrant moment that it now seems about as exotic and inaccessible as the Southern folk argot of Sut Lovingood" (14). While the dialect Cahan uses may be a barrier for some readers, it is important in determining the degree to which Jake is failing to meet the standards of Americanization he has set up for himself and his family.

Jake's dialect is not the only indicator of his slow progress toward the American Dream. It is important to Jake that he be independent and wealthy, and increasingly, he feels trapped and disgusted by Gitl, whose presence Jake feels as a loss of independence. He "misse[s] the company of Mamie and of all the other dancing-school girls, whose society and attentions now more than ever seemed to him necessities of his life" (44). Chapter five concludes with a visit from one of Jake's dance hall companions, Mamie, who has loaned Jake twenty-five dollars. She resents being led on by Jake and wants her money back. She tells Jake that "'o'ly a strange goil a feller might bluff dot he ain' married, and skin her out of tventy-five dollars'" (50). Mamie's visit reminds Jake that he has not advanced toward material success. Even though Jake has a steady job, he has been careless with his money. Instead of saving toward



long-term goals, like financial independence, he has been spending money indiscriminately at places like dance-halls and restaurants.

Because of Jake's past with this woman, he is embarrassed by her visit and tells his wife Mamie "'came to ask [him] about a job.'" Gitl is not fooled by this excuse because the two spoke English: "Gitl reflected that with Bernstein Jake was in the habit of talking shop in Yiddish, although the boarder could even read English books, which her husband could not do" (52). Obviously, Gitl is much more perceptive than Jake realizes.

Chapter six, "Circumstances Alter Cases," opens with the narrator's description of Jake's feelings of inadequacy following Mamie's visit:

Jake was left by Mamie in a state of unspeakable misery. He felt discomfited, crushed, the universal butt of ridicule. . . . She seemed to him elevated above the social plane upon which he had recently . . . stood by her side, nay, upon which he had had her at his beck and call; while he was degraded, as it were, wallowing in a mire, from which he yearningly looked up to his former equals, vainly begging for recognition. (53)

While Jake is frustrated by his drop in social status and the necessary curbing of his social life that his wife's arrival has precipitated and Mamie's visit has caused to

resurface, Gitl's trust in her husband has been damaged by Mamie's visit. Bernstein, one of the two boarders in Gitl and Jake's home, tells Gitl that her husband "'knows many nice ladas'" (55). Although he tries to cover this revealing comment about Jake's by "characterizing Jake as an honest and good-natured fellow" (54), the statement continues to bother Gitl.

Gitl consults her neighbor, an eccentric woman named Mrs. Kavarsky, who advises Gitl to stand up for herself and fight to keep her husband: "'Let her [Mamie] go where she came from! America is not Russia, thanked be the Lord of the world. Here one must only know how to handle a husband'" (56). But it is already too late. The day after a weak, short-lived decision "to move his wife and child to Chicago," Jake visits Mamie's home. Although they argue, "from that evening the specter of Mamie . . . almost unremittingly preyed on Jake's mind" (60). And with Gitl "he grew more irritable . . . every day" (61).

Gitl's doubts about Jake's fidelity are confirmed at the end of chapter six. Fanny Scutelsky visits Gitl and tells her to beware of Mamie: "she has set her mind on your husband, and is bound to take him away from you. She hitched on to him long ago. But since you came I thought she would have God in her heart, and be ashamed of people. Not she! She be ashamed" (63). Gitl is crushed by the news, and she goes to Mrs. Kavarsky to find out what she

must do to keep her husband faithful.

Chapter seven is, as the title indicates, "Mrs. Kavarsky's Coup D'Etat." After "listen[ing] to her neighbor's story with a bored and impatient air" (64), Mrs. Kavarsky tells Gitl: "'You shall wash off your silly tears and I'll arrange your hair, and from this day on there shall be no more kerchief'" (67). While Mrs. Kavarsky cut and curled her hair, Gitl "endured it all without protest, blindly trusting that these instruments of torture would help reinstall her in Jake's good graces" (67). Jake wants a woman who is Americanized; although her motivation is not assimilation, Gitl wishes to please Jake.

Jake, however, is beyond the point at which anything can be done to encourage his affection toward his wife: "Gitl's unwonted appearance impressed Jake as something unseemly and meretricious. The sight of her revolted him" (68). Mrs. Kavarsky first lists the merits of his wife, and, when Jake is still unconvinced, she paints instead a negative portrait of women like Mamie: "'Do you think a stylish girl will make you a better wife? If you do, you are grievously mistaken. What are they good for, the hussies? To darken the life of a husband? That, I admit, they are really great hands at'" (69). At this point, Jake can no longer stand feeling un-American, and he tells both his wife and his neighbor that he will no longer live in a manner unbefitting the assimilated man he believes himself

to be:

"I am an American feller, a Yankee-- that's what I am. What punishment is due to me, then, if I can not stand a shnooza like her? It is nu ushed; I can not live with her, even if she stand one foot on heaven and one on earth. Let her take everything"--with a wave at the household effects --"and I shall pay her as much cash as she asks--I am willing to break stones to pay her--provided she agrees to a divorce." (70)

It is ironic that not only does Jake still use broken English like a greenhorn, but he is also offering Gitl money that he does not have. After this outburst, Jake walks out, knowing he will not go home for the night. Although he tries to think through his anger, he is unable to see himself as anything but "a wretched outcast, the target of ridicule--a martyr paying the penalty of sins, which he failed to recognize as sins, or of which, at any rate, he could not hold himself culpable" (73).

The chapter ends with Jake no longer even trying to think realistically about what he will now do with his future. He instead creates scenarios in which he sees "himself stealing into his house in the dead of night, and kidnapping [Yosselé]," moving to London with Mamie and his son, and "supposing that his wife suddenly died, so that he could legally marry Mamie and remain in New York" (74).



Chapter eight finds Jake and Mamie engaged in "A Housetop Idyll," wherein Jake describes his troubles to her. Jake begins their conversation by guiltlessly manipulating a response of pity from Mamie. Jake decides that crying will help invoke Mamie's sympathy: ". . . feeling that it would be easy for him to break into tears he instinctively chose this as the only way out of his predicament" (75). He tells her that "'since [Gitl] came I began to understand how dear you are to me'" because he sees Mamie as a way out of his current dilemma (76).

Once Mamie assures herself that Jake is hers, she shows him her bank book and devises a plan to free Jake from Gitl:

Jake was to take refuge with her married sister in Philadelphia until Gitl was brought to terms. In the meantime, some chum of his, nominated by Mamie and acting under her orders, would carry on negotiations. The state divorce, as she had already taken pains to ascertain, would cost fifty dollars; and the rabbinical divorce would take five or eight dollars more. Two hundred dollars would be deposited with some Canal Street banker, to be paid to Gitl when the whole procedure was brought to a successful termination . . . . When they are married they will open a dancing school. (81)

It is ironic that Jake has, in the space of a single



conversation, assured himself that after his divorce from Gitl he will be being controlled by another woman. Although he had convinced himself that one of the reasons for his divorce in the first place was that he could no longer stand being imprisoned by marriage, Mamie has planned out the rest of their lives. His whole life is now "completely in the shop girl's power," but he is "glad to be relieved from all initiative--whether forward or backward--to shut his eyes, as it were, and, leaning upon Mamie's strong arm, let himself be led by her in whatever direction she chose" (81-82). Jake's path toward the American Dream is dependent on Mamie, even though it has been a goal of his from the novel's beginning to be independent.

From the conversation between Mamie and Jake on the rooftop, the narrator jumps ahead in time, and chapter nine, "The Parting" begins "on a bright frosty morning in the following January" with the divorce proceedings (82). Jake and Gitl are "face to face" for "their last meeting as husband and wife." The narrator's description of Gitl is a testament to the power of time as a catalyst for assimilation:

The rustic, "greenhornlike" expression was completely gone from her face and manner, and, although she now looked bewildered and as if terror-stricken, there was noticeable about her a suggestion of that peculiar air of self-confidence

with which a few months' life in America is sure to stamp the looks and bearing of any immigrant.

(83)

Jake is upset by this transformation in Gitl; he feels that "her general Americanized make-up . . . seemed to defy him, and as if devised for that express purpose" (84). It is important to note that although Gitl's changes are pointed out as the same changes "any immigrant" would undergo over time in America, Jake is surprised that any transformation in Gitl has occurred at all.

The narrator contrasts Gitl's advancements in assimilation during Jake's absence with Jake's total stagnation during the same time period. The contrast between Gitl's assimilation and Jake's stagnation is pointed out by Sanford E. Markovitz in his book Abraham Cahan. Markovitz notes that the novel " . . . is driven by a combination of character development and personality conflict as individuals struggle for their freedom in America between the imposing environmental forces of the East Side and the suppressed voices of their European past" (70). Jake not only appears both "fidgety" and "haughty," both characteristic of Jake in the past, but he is also accompanied to his divorce proceedings by "an envoy from Mamie" who has been "charged to look after the fortitude of Jake's nerve" (83).

Although Gitl has suffered an overwhelming loss with

her divorce, it is Jake who is indicated in the title of chapter ten as "A Defeated Victor." In fact, Gitl is moving on with her life through her impending marriage to the boarder, Bernstein. As Mrs. Kavarsky notes, she will have "a young man of silk who is fit to be a rabbi, and is as smart and ejecate as a lawyer." In coming to America, Gitl, "a blacksmith's wife," is free to marry a "learned man, who is a blessing both for God and people." Gitl is not as upset as she seems by the divorce:

The truth must be told, however, that she was now continuing her lamentations by the mere force of inertia, and as if enjoying the very process of the thing. For, indeed, at the bottom of her heart she felt herself far from desolate, being conscious of the existence of a man who was to take care of her and her child, and even relishing the prospect of the new life in store for her.

(88)

Jake, on the other hand, is not looking forward to his marriage to Mamie. Immediately following the divorce proceedings, Jake, Mamie, and Mamie's emissary "were passengers on a Third Avenue cable car, all bound for the mayor's office" to get married (89). Although pleased to be divorced, "in his inmost heart he was the reverse of eager to reach the City Hall. He was painfully reluctant to part with his long-coveted freedom so soon after it had at least



been attained, and before he had time to relish it" (89).

Although Jake works at eliminating his past from his present throughout the entire novel, he does not succeed. Even as he rushes toward the mayor's office to marry Mamie, he thinks of what he is leaving behind: ". . . he beheld [Gitl], Bernstein, Yosellé, and Mrs. Kavarsky celebrating their victory . . . . Their future seemed bright with joy, while his own loomed dark and impenetrable" (89). Even through his divorce, Jake cannot disengage his thoughts from his past. In severing his physical ties with his past, Jake has lost the means by which he would be able to come to terms with that past.

On the other hand, there is no evidence that Jake has made any real effort to assimilate into American culture. He uses the rabbinical divorce; he is still uneducated; he has not created his own goals; nor has he the means by which to achieve the goals his future wife Mamie has set for him. At the conclusion of Yekl, Jake has, therefore, not only lost one identity, but done so without gaining another.

Although Jake's American Dream includes independence and wealth, he has been unable to attain either of these because instead of setting goals for himself he has allowed circumstances or other people determine his actions. Only because of his father's death does he reunite with his wife and son and only because of Mamie's money and her plans for their future is he able to part with them. Even though Jake

is physically separated from his past, Jake's family, especially Gitl and her transformation into an assimilated American, weigh heavily on him. So not only is Jake dependent still on his past, but he has also not gained any independence in his current life with Mamie. Instead, Mamie controls Jake, her money, and their future. From the beginning of Yekl, Jake gains no ground on the American Dream; in fact, Yekl's conclusion finds Jake further from his attainment of the American Dream.

## Chapter Two:

### Bread Givers: Book I

In his essay "'Working Ourselves Up': Middle-Class Realism and the Reproduction of Patriarchy in Bread Givers," Thomas J. Ferraro tells readers that Anzia Yezierska's 1925 novel is characterized by some as "cartoonish in plot and characterization; assimilationist in drive, anti-Semitic in effect if not in intent" (53). Indeed, contemporary critics thought the novel would soon be outdated. Instead the novel represents an important aspect of the Jewish immigrant struggle to achieve the American Dream: the main character's struggle to assimilate without abandoning her heritage. About Yezierska and her semi-autobiographical main character Sara, Alice Kessler Harris writes: "If Anzia Yezierska was not typical of immigrant women, neither was she unique. Her struggles, in lesser proportions, went on everywhere . . . . her work is suffused with the unending trauma of adjustment . . . part of every individual's entry into America" (xii). The theme of Yezierska's work, achievement of the American Dream, is both important and timeless.

Anzia Yezierska's novel Bread Givers is divided into three books which correspond to three stages in the main character's search for the American Dream. In the first book, "Hester Street," the narrator and main character, Sara Smolinsky, introduces readers to her family and herself through a series of vignettes. Sara's family consists of herself, her three sisters, Bessie, Fania, and Mashah, and

their mother and father. By the end of this section of the novel, all of the family members will have undergone significant changes; and Sara will have taken a major step toward independence.

In the beginning, it is obvious that the Smolinskys have not achieved the American Dream. Sara explains that although she is young, ten years old, the poverty in which she and her family live is a burden to her: " . . . from always it was heavy on my heart the worries for the house as if I was mother" (1). Regardless of the household's worries, Sara is a proud person. She has refused to continue "to go out early, every morning, while it was yet dark, and hunt through ash cans for unburned pieces of coal, and search through empty lots for pieces of wood" because the work makes her feel "like a beggar and a thief" (7). But when her mother reprimands her for wasting thick potato peelings, Sara assuages her guilt by going out to get more coal: "I didn't care if the whole world looked on me. I was going to bring that coal to mother even if it killed me" (8). Because Sara believes that through her hard work she will be able to ease the burden of poverty for her and her family, Sara early on exhibits the characteristics necessary to achieve the American Dream. Sara is able to survive and help her family survive, because even in the midst of her poverty, she is tenacious.

Another example of the young Sara's tenacity and



independence is seen later in the first chapter when she realizes "'Nobody is working and we got to eat,'" and she tells her family, "'If I could only peddle with something I could bring in money'" (20). Taking a quarter, Sara buys twenty-five herring from Muhmenkeh, a sympathetic neighbor. Sara explains how she is able to sell the herring: "So loud was my yelling, for my little size that people stopped to look at me. And more came to see what the others were looking at" (21). Sara turns a twenty-five cent profit and the sense of accomplishment she feels at having contributed to the family's finances inspires this comment:

I was always saying to myself, if I ever had a quarter or a half dollar in my hand, I'd run away from home and never look on our dirty house again. But now I was so happy with my money, I didn't think of running away, I only wanted to show them what I could do and give it away to them. (22)

Even though Sara is willing to work hard, she feels a strong sense of obligation to her family, so she cannot become the independent person that she wants to be, even at the age of ten.

In Chapter Two, Sara introduces her father, Reb Smolinsky, with a story about his trip to the American courts for hitting the landlady after she stepped on the Holy Torah. When Sara's mother tells her husband that "the butcher and baker and Zalmon the fish-peddler left their



work to bail him out," he responds, "Nu? Why shouldn't they take my part? . . . Am I not their light? The whole world would be thick in darkness if not for men like me who give their lives to spread the light of the Holy Torah" (24).

When Reb Smolinsky gets in trouble, in this case legal trouble, he expects others to bail him out. At the end of the chapter, Mother tells her children that the reason they are in America is that their father needed to recover from a business failure: "He was a smart salesman, only to sell things for less than they cost . . . . And when everything was gone from us, then our only hope was to come to America, where Father thought things cost nothing at all" (34).

Father never takes the responsibility he needs to improve his and his family's station in life; in the first example, he allows mother, the butcher, the baker, and the fish-peddler to bear the responsibility, and in the second example, he expects America to be accountable for fulfilling his dreams.

Through the course of the next three chapters, each of Sara's sisters falls in love, and the reader gains significant insight into the character of the father through his response to his daughters' choices. Although Bessie is the last sister to fall in love, because she is the oldest, Sara begins with her. She explains that, to everyone around her, Bessie's marriage prospects looked grim: "And so the neighbors saw Mashah always with a bunch of men, buzzing

around her like flies around a pot of honey. They saw Fania go to the night school and the library with the writing young man. But Bessie had nobody" (37). The one-sentence paragraph that follows Sara's explanation of Bessie's possibilities conveys the excitement that the family feels when Bessie finally finds someone: "And then it happened" (37). When Bessie solicits the help of her sisters to clean up the house, the family finds it odd: "Father called her the burden-bearer, because she was always with her nose in the earth slaving for the family, and now she suddenly wanted to lift up her head in the world and live" (39). The next night, Father meets Berel Bernstein, who has come to visit Bessie, and ultimately finds him an unsatisfactory match because Bernstein is unwilling to support not only Bessie, but also her entire family.

When Bernstein begins to explain his reasons for wanting to marry Bessie, "Father gave a quick, sharp look on the man, and then his eyes went on Bessie, like she had brought a thief in the house" (44). Berel Bernstein wishes to take Bessie as a wife so he can have a maid--the same reason her father does not want to lose her. A verbal battle ensues over Bessie, with Reb Smolinsky arguing that he would lose too much to have Bessie married: "'Don't forget when she gets married, who'll carry me the burden from this house? She earns me the biggest wages. With Bessie I can be independent. I don't have to grab the first

man that wants her. I can wait yet a few years'" (45). When Father further argues that "'It's not enough to take my Bessie without a dowry. You must pay me yet" (47), Bernstein will not accept that condition:

"'I'm marrying your daughter--not the whole family. Ain't it enough that your daughter kept you in laziness all these years? You want yet her husband to support you for the rest of your days? In America they got no use for Torah learning. In America everybody got to earn his living first. You got two hands and two feet. Why don't you go to work? . . . I'm no greenhorn. I'm no cow you can milk. If you don't want it yet, then good-bye and good luck." (48-49)

Although Father's argument seems unreasonable, he is relying on sound Old World values. In their Introduction to Views From the Yiddish, Howe and Greenberg explain: "Traditional Jewish life had given a place of honor to a caste of the learned, and the shtetl economy, no matter how threadbare, usually managed to support a number of men who devoted themselves entirely to religious study" (8). Reb Smolinsky, a member of this learned elite in Russia, has not learned to shoulder the responsibility of family support that is expected of him in America.

After his tirade, Bernstein tries to convince Bessie to marry him even without her father's permission, but she



refuses to do so, saying: "'I haven't the courage to live for myself. My own life is knocked out of me. No wonder Father called me the burden bearer'" (50). Because Bessie feels a responsibility toward her family more acutely than a desire to gain independence from them, she continues to bear the burdens of her father, mother, and sisters, and not those of Berel Bernstein. Sara is upset over what she sees as Bessie's continued indentured servitude and her loss of a new life. Sara describes her reaction as follows: "I walked in after Bessie and hid myself behind the door of the bedroom and I cried and cried" (51). Sara is compassionate toward her sister's plight. She wishes for freedom not only for herself, but also for Bessie.

In the next chapter Yezierska describes how Mashah, who has had many suitors, falls in love. Sara notes that instead of thinking only of herself, "it was a man that was the beginning and end of her existence" (53). The man with whom Mashah falls in love is a piano player named Jacob Novak, whom she met after hearing in the street the beautiful music coming from his home.

Because beauty is so important to Mashah, it is fitting that she find and fall in love with a man who can afford to give beauty to her. Jacob Novak's father "owned a big department store . . . and Jacob looked like from rich people. It didn't shout from his clothes, the money they cost . . . . But it breathed from his quiet things, the solid richness



from the rich who didn't show it off anymore" (56). Reb Smolinsky dislikes only the fact that Jacob plays the piano on the Sabbath; because Jacob's family is so wealthy, he has no qualms about approving a marriage between the two.

Instead, Jacob Novak's father treats Mashah's family as her father treats others, with certain disdain. About Jacob's father's visit to the Smolinsky home, Sara says:

One look he gave on all of us. Then for a minute his eyes burned over Mashah. Even though his lips answered politely the introduction, we saw Mashah shrink and fade under his eyes as the flowers faded under the glitter of diamonds. From Mashah, he gave the house another look over. And all Mashah's beauty couldn't stop the cash-register look in his eyes, that we and our whole house weren't worth one of his cuff buttons. (58)

Mr. Novak tells his son to stay away from Mashah, and he does until after his big concert. Jacob returns, however, telling Mashah he will not be ordered around by his father: "I've been a coward--bullied by my father. I listened to him because of the concert--but no more. You're everything to me" (62). When Reb Smolinsky finds them, however, he breaks up Mashah's relationship with Jacob just as he broke up Bessie's relationship with Berel.

It is at this point in the novel that Sara expresses her opinions about her father's actions. Through his harsh

treatment of Mashah, Sara begins to see her father as "a tyrant, more terrible than the Tsar from Russia" (65). Sara is like her sisters in that she resents her father's constant preaching and the threats he uses to force his children to conform to his ideals. But unlike her sisters, Sara cannot reconcile his ideals to her own, so in addition to resenting her father, she begins to hate him:

I began to feel I was different from my sisters. They couldn't stand father's preaching any more than I, but they could suffer to listen to him, like dutiful children who honour and obey and respect their father, whether they liked him or not. If they ever had times when they hated Father, they were too frightened of themselves to confess their hate. (65)

The earliest hint the reader is given of Sara's separation from her family through her feelings toward her father occurs when she says that she would "wake up in the middle of the night when all were asleep, and cry into the deaf, dumb darkness, 'I hate my father. And I hate God most of all for bringing me into such a terrible house'" (66). Because her father is a holy man, Sara equates him with the Jewish religion. And so, because she finds her father intolerable, she finds her religion intolerable as well.

In Chapter Five, the reader is introduced to Fania's love interest, a poet named Morris Lipkin. Reb Smolinsky

begins immediately to argue that a writer, even a writer for the newspaper, would not be able to provide well for Fania. He asks Fania whether she wants "starvation and beggary for the rest of [her] days" (68), and then adds that "[e]ven Job said, of all his sufferings, nothing was so terrible as poverty" (69). Sara, however, notes the contradiction of her father's words by asking him, "' . . . didn't you yourself say yesterday that poverty is an ornament on a good Jew, like a red ribbon on a white horse? . . . [D]idn't you say that the poorest beggars are happier and freer than the rich?'" (70). Father's response, "'You're always saying things I don't even ask you,'" is an inadequate counter (70).

Mother, strengthened by Sara's outburst, challenges her husband by saying, "'If these men are not good enough, why ain't you smart enough to bring somebody better?'" (70). Father responds, "'I'll show you how quickly I can marry off the girls when I put my mind on it'" (71). But Mother doubts her husband will be effective: "'Yah,' sneered Mother. 'You showed me enough how quickly you can spoil your daughters' chances the minute you mix yourself in. If you had only let Mashah alone, she would have married the piano player'" (71). Mother's interjections, though few, convey a sense of her strength and intelligence, traits that Sara seems to have inherited.

Reb Smolinsky cannot resist the challenge to find what



he thinks are respectable husbands for his daughters. When Fania dares to question her father's matchmaking abilities, asserting instead her desire to marry the poet, Morris Lipkin, Father says, "'Either you listen to what I say or out you go of this house! . . . Such shameless unwomanliness as a girl telling her father this man I want to marry'" (75-76). With this statement, Father both rejects the American way, where women and men choose whom they will marry and, because they know he will force them out if they cross him, scares his three oldest daughters into conforming to his wishes and marrying the men he chooses.

Father's first match is between Mashah, his most beautiful daughter, and Moe Mirsky, a man who Father thinks is a successful diamond merchant. Sara, the narrator, explains why Mashah marries Moe: "She didn't care so much about Moe Mirsky and his diamonds . . . . [S]he was sick and tired from the house and crazy to get away" (77). Abe Schmukler, in the "cloaks and suits" business (78), is brought home by Father for Fania. Again Sara explains that although there is no love in Fania for Abe, she sees marriage as the only means of escaping Father's house:

Fania wasn't stuck on his cloaks and suits any more than Mashah was stuck on Moe Mirsky and his diamonds. But how could the girls stop to think whether they liked the men, or didn't like the men, so long as they got a chance to run away from



our house, where there would be no more of  
Father's preaching. (79)

They believe that marriage is their only hope for any  
semblance of the American Dream.

Father's success as a matchmaker is questioned,  
however, when Mashah comes home and tells her father and the  
rest of the family that not only was her husband not a  
diamond dealer--he was instead only "'a salesman in a  
jewelry store'" (83)--but he also lost his job the day after  
his marriage to Mashah. Instead of helping his daughter,  
Father berates Mashah, telling her finally, "'As you made  
your bed, so you got to sleep on it'" (83). Ironically, the  
reader notes here that it was not Mashah who made her bed,  
but Reb Smolinsky himself. With her lack of happiness,  
wealth, or love, and especially with her crushed spirit,  
Mashah is no closer to the American Dream that she was in  
her father's house.

When the Smolinsky family receives a letter from Fania,  
six months after her move to California with Abe Schmukler,  
that outlines her husband's gambling and her own loneliness,  
and pleads with her father to allow her to leave her husband  
and return to New York, Father is again oblivious to his  
role in his daughter's dissatisfaction, telling her in a  
letter: "Don't dare come and disgrace me before the  
neighbors . . . . You had a right to find out what kind of  
man your husband was before you married him. The neighbors

here won't believe that you left him . . . . As you made your bed, so you must sleep on it" (85). Sara, noting the irony--Father has, in fact, made Fania's bed also--can't keep her opinion to herself and demands of her Father: "Didn't you yourself make Fania marry Abe Schmukler when she cried she didn't want him? You know yourself how she ate out her heart for Morris Lipkin . . . . I'll never let no father marry me away to any old yok'" (85). Through the experiences of Mashah and Fania, Sara sees that in order to create any semblance of the American Dream, she must not allow Father to control her future.

Next Bessie, the oldest daughter in the Smolinsky family, has a husband chosen for her by father. Chapter six, "The Burden Bearer Changes Her Burden," opens with Sara bringing her readers up to date on her life. She says that she is working in "a paper box factory" and that Father not only takes all her wages, giving a tenth to charity, but he also "never let me have the money to buy myself anything I needed" (89). Reb Smolinsky places the needs of nameless, faceless others before the needs of the wage-earning members of his own family.

Sara explains also that "Father got himself into the matchmaking business" (91). And when the recently widowed fish peddler, Zalmon, comes to Father looking for a new wife, Father decides to match Zalmon with his eldest daughter Bessie, who finds the match unsuitable. When

Father tells her his plan, she says, "'I hate Zalmon. I hate the smell of fish. If he were the last man on earth I wouldn't marry him'" (98). Bessie's dilemma, as she explains it to her younger sister Sara, is that she "'Can't stand it any more at home, and [she] can't stand Zalmon the fish-peddler'" (105). However, Bessie is schooled in the Old World beliefs that a father cannot be crossed and ultimately, Reb Smolinsky will succeed in matching Bessie with Zalmon, just as he previously matched Mashah and Fania with men he choose.

In Chapter Seven the Smolinsky family's life seems to improve with Bessie's marriage to Zalmon. Zalmon has given five hundred dollars to Father for Bessie's hand and Father decides to buy a business with it. Father explains what he is looking for: "'I only want to go into business so as to keep sacred my religion. I want to get into some quick money-making thing that will not take up too many hours a day, so I could get most of my time for learning'" (111). So Father wants the wealth promised by the American Dream without exerting any effort in order to get it.

Mother begs Father to look for a business without taking the money with him: "'In God's name, let me only hold the money. In my stocking it is safer than in your pocket'" (112). But Father takes the money and buys a grocery store. When the former owner of the grocery store leaves at the end of the business day and Father takes over ownership and



operation, the Smolinsky family begins to see that Father has not purchased a bargain. Sara reports on the state of what looked like a fully stocked store:

The shelves had goods only in the front row. The white space behind was empty. Mother stabbed a knife into the tub of butter and hit into the hard wood beneath the thin spread which had been plastered against the fake wood bottom. I picked up the top layer of a newly opened case of eggs and found only empty paper fillers beneath. (119-20)

Just like the arranged marriages of his three eldest daughters, Father has again invested little time and thought into the dream of bettering the lives of both himself and his family. Although Father wants to be successful and see his family well off, he is unwilling to invest the effort needed to make his American Dream a reality.

Father doesn't fully understand the ramifications of his actions. When Mother spells them out to him, "'Gazlin! Now that the girls are married and no wages coming in, what shall we live on'" (124), he replies, "'This man who robbed me only pushed me closer into the arms of God. Now I know that everything that happens to us is from God, for our own good'" (125). Sara, Mother, and the readers now know that the family will have no success with Father as head of the household because Father will never work to achieve success



and the American Dream.

Chapter eight brings the novel's climax when Sara deviates from the Old World pattern perpetuated by her family and begins a life of her own. Sara begins the chapter reinforcing the fact that she and her mother are working hard to make Father's investment profitable: "While I was busy fixing the place, Mother was out bargaining with the wholesalers to trust her with enough goods to restock the store" (128). When Mother asks Father to help her by weighing the salt she is placing in bags, he breaks a bag of salt, exclaiming, "'The grocery business is only for thickheads and truckdrivers. Such long hours of brainless drudgery is only for grubby grinds who have no high thoughts to think out'" (132). Father not only complains about having to work; he also drives customers away. When a customer comes in asking for bran, Father begins a tirade, telling the man that back home they only give bran to livestock: "'Americans are such fools, they make eating out of it. This is a sensible store, we don't keep such nonsense'" (133). Both Mother and Sara see that even with all their hard work, the family will not advance if Father will not help them, or at least leave them alone to run the business as they see fit.

However, the next customer to enter the store, a neighborhood girl who brought only ten cents to pay for a twelve cent pound of rice, becomes the catalyst for Father's

next eruption of anger toward Sara. When Sara tells Father that the young girl will return with the two cents to finish paying for the rice, Father says, "'Without asking me? I'm the one to decide who is to be trusted'" (134). Sara, who is angered by her Father's inability to see that she and Mother are working hard to keep the store open, asks him: "'Why do you make such a holler on me over two cents, when you, yourself, gave away four hundred dollars to a crook for empty shelves'" (135). That Sara is standing up for herself, as well as that Father knows what Sara says is true, even though he does not want to admit it, angers him even more: "'Blood-and-iron! How dare you question your father his business? What's the world coming to in this wild America? No respect for fathers. No fear of God.' His eyes flamed as he shook his fist at [Sara]" (135). Father, who, when he bought the grocery store, could not praise America enough, finds that he does not approve of his Americanized daughter, Sara, because he is finding it difficult to dictate her actions.

Sara's struggle with her father over the foundering grocery store shows what Gael Wilentz calls "the double bind of Jewish women," that is, "the duty of the wives and daughters to support the family and their acceptance of the secondary status consigned to them" (34-35). Wilentz agrees that Yezierska's Jewish immigrant characters are realistic portrayals of those struggling for a place in America at the

turn of the century:

Yezierska illustrates the dilemma of the Jewish immigrant woman whose conflict between living her life as an Americanerin and retaining the strength and sustenance she receives as part of the Jewish community is further exacerbated by her desires for independence as a woman. (33-34)

Unlike her mother and older sisters, Sara finds it impossible to be both a bread giver and a second-class citizen.

Likewise Sara, the Americanized daughter, is finding it difficult to live with her Old World mother, who allows Father's tirades to go virtually unchecked, and especially difficult to allow herself to be managed by Father, a man who has proven himself unable to manage any of her sisters' marriages or the operation of his grocery store. Sara thinks:

Oh God! Two cents! My gall burst me! For seventeen years I had stood his preaching and his bullying. But now all the hammering hell that I had to listen to since I was born cracked my brain. His heartlessness to Mother, his pitiless driving away Bessie's only chance to love, bargaining away Fania to a gambler and Mashah to a diamond-faker--when they each had the luck to win lovers of their own--all these tyrannies crashed

over me. Should I let him crush me as he crushed them? No. This is America, where children are people. (135)

With these thoughts, Sara decides that she can no longer live in the oppressive environment of her father's home. At seventeen Sara decides that to survive, she must leave her family to find the fortune promised to her by the American Dream.

When Father sees Sara leaving and learns that she doesn't plan to return, he tells her: "'No girl can live without a father or a husband to look out for her. It says so in the Torah, only through a man has a woman an existence. Only through a man can a woman enter Heaven'" (137). Sara, who believes that America will reward her perseverance and ambition regardless of her gender, responds: "'I'm smart enough to look out for myself. It's a new life now. In America, women don't need men to boss them'" (137). When Father sees that this time his words have had no effect on her, he pleads with her to stay: "'Where do you find a poor father who has done for his children as much as I? I didn't cripple you. I didn't give you consumption. I didn't send you to work at the age of six like some poor fathers do. . . '" (137). But Sara does not back down: "'I've got to live my own life. It's enough that Mother and others lived for you'" (137). With these words, Sara truly shows her blood-and-iron. And with her



last words to Father before she goes to seek her own fortune in New York City, the reader sees that Sara is more like her father than any of her sisters: "'My will is as strong as yours, I'm going to live my own life. Nobody can stop me.'" Yet she is different in a meaningful way: "'I'm not from the old country. I'm American'" (138). Sara is capable of leaving because she knows that to make the American Dream a reality, she will have to rely not on her father's guidance, but on herself.

Chapter Nine, the final chapter of the first book of Bread Givers, shares the book's title. Two of Sara's sisters, Bessie and Mashah, are still living in New York; and it is to Bessie's house that Sara goes when she reaches New York City. Sara arrives late in the evening at Zalmon and Bessie's house. When their evening fish selling ends, and Zalmon asks Sara why she has come, Sara tells him and Bessie that she has left home. Zalmon, also unable to see any benefit to Sara leaving her father's home, tells her that she had "'better go straight back, then. A girl's place is under her father's hand'" (141). The reader expects this response from Zalmon, though. Reb Smolinsky gave him his eldest daughter's hand in marriage and even earlier, when Reb Smolinsky was sued by his landlady, Zalmon was one of the neighborhood men who had enough respect for Reb Smolinsky to hire a lawyer for his defense.

Once Zalmon retires for the evening, Bessie shares with

Sara her opinion of Sara's action, which differs greatly from that of her husband: "'Thank God you had the courage to break away. If I'd had your sense, I wouldn't have sunk into Zalmon's fishwife'" (142). Although Bessie finds Sara's actions brave, she cannot help her by offering her a place to stay. She laments the fact that she has no room for Sara in her home, but she is able to offer Sara a suggestion: "'I haven't even a corner for my own sister . . . But Mashah has no fish store. She has no stepchildren. Among your own you can always squeeze yourself together'" (142). Sara is disheartened by the state of Bessie's life. She sees that it is no easier under Zalmon's roof than it was under Father's, but she still has hope that Mashah's home will be able to accommodate her.

Sara dreams that at Mashah's house, "there would be no fighting, no yelling, no Zalmon and no fish smells. Only Mashah's own little children, Danny, Ruthy, and the baby, to light up and make more beautiful the beautiful place" (144). When she meets Mashah's husband, Moe Mirsky, on the street, with his "new checked suit, . . . freshly ironed trousers, . . . silk socks and patent-leather shoes," Sara thinks him "a grand gentleman" and is encouraged (144).

But when Sara arrives, she finds Mashah in the hallway of her building arguing with the milkman, whom she is unable to pay. The picture Sara paints of her sister leaves the reader feeling the hopelessness of Mashah's situation. Sara

describes her face as "black with want" and her eyes as "[d]umb with the shame of her poverty . . . begging pity" (145). As she enters Mashah's home, Sara is impressed by the beauty there, but she sees "what bloody toil it had cost to turn the dirt of poverty into . . . shining cleanliness":

Beauty was in that house. But it had come out of Mashah's face. The sunny colour of her walls had taken the colour out of her cheeks. The shine of her pots and pans had taken the lustre out of her hair. And the soda with which she had scrubbed the floor so clean, and laundered her rags to white, had burned in and eaten the beauty out of her hands. (147)

Mashah, who was the envy of all her sisters because she was spectacular and vivacious, has lost all of her youth and beauty. Sara both pities the condition in which her sister must live and is angered by Moe Mirsky's inability to support his wife and children, while he is walking around town in new clothes.

Sara ruins her chances of staying with Mashah when she finds it no easier to hide her disdain for Moe than she found it to hide her disdain for her father. When she hears Moe berating Mashah, telling her: "'You're nothing but a worn out rag . . . . Nice clothes would be wasted on you . . . Always there's something the matter with you. I hate sick people'" (150). When Moe tells Sara that "'the way I



run my house is none of your damn business,'" Sara contradicts him:

"It is my business. Mashah is my sister. How dare you eat yourself in a restaurant while the children's milk bill is unpaid? You married Mashah because she was beautiful, then you piled your children on her neck, starved her, wore her out. You spoiled her beauty. Then you blame her for losing it." (150-51)

Both Mashah and Bessie are living in circumstances no better than the one Sara had with Father and she realizes that staying with family will not allow her to be freed from the oppression she felt under her father's roof.

By going first to her sisters, Sara proves that she still loves her family and would not, by choice, completely sever her ties with them. She also knows, however, that the men in her family, her father and her sisters' husbands, will not allow her to realize her full potential. In order to do so, to become independent, she must leave them behind and strike out on her own. Again and again throughout the first book of Bread Givers, Sara has proven herself capable of thinking for herself, of earning money for her family's well being, and of standing up for what she believes in.

Sara has achieved her independence from her family by leaving her father's and Mashah's homes. The real struggle of maintaining her independence is a challenge Sara has yet



to conquer. And there is more to the American Dream. Sara knows she must also become educated and live comfortably on her own before she can call herself successful. The true test of Sara's ability to achieve the American Dream comes in Book Two, when Sara realizes that although she is not of the Old World, she is not yet a true member of the New, that she is still more immigrant than she is American.

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### Chapter Three:

#### Bread Givers: Books II and III

Book Two of Anzia Yezierska's Bread Givers finds Sara struggling to gain control of her destiny while she is, as the title suggests, "Between Two Worlds." She has severed her ties with the Old World and is not at all prepared to be part of the New. She wants "Only to make myself somebody great," and spends her first night alone "walk[ing] the streets, drunk with my dreams" (155). In order for Sara to realize the American Dream, she must be self-sufficient, educated, and content.

It is important to note that Sara's first morning away from her family finds her truly alone for the first time in her life: "As I sat there, in the stillness of the morning, I realized that I had yet never been alone since I was born. This was the first time I ate by myself, with silence and stillness for my company" (156). Because Sara has never been alone, she has been unable to focus her attention on her own goals, sacrificing, up to now, the American Dream for the survival of her family and the only way of life she has known.

Sara sets about the task of finding a room for herself; after she is rejected by several renters, she asks one woman why everyone is so unwilling to take her in as a boarder. She is told there is "'Less trouble, less dirt, with men'" (157) and must finally settle on a room that is "a dark hole on the ground floor, opening into a narrow airshaft. The

only window where some light might have come in was thick with black dust" (158). Even here the renter does not want to allow Sara to board when she learns Sara plans to attend night school to learn to be a teacher: "She drew back as if I was about to rob her. 'My gas! My gas bill. What I'd get from your rent, I'd lose on the gas'" (159). Sara is able to convince the woman to rent to her only after giving her a month's rent, six dollars, in advance. By acquiring this room, Sara has gained a vital means by which to continue her search for the American Dream.

Now that she has a room, however, Sara must find a job in order to keep it. Calling upon the same tenacity that helped her sell herring to feed her family when she was ten and helped her rent a room the previous day, Sara gets a job at a laundry that pays five dollars a week. At the end of her hard first day at work, Sara is undaunted and continues to reach for fulfillment of the American Dream: "Great dreams spurred my feet on my way to night school" (161). Early on in her serious quest, Sara does not settle only for independence, but instead immediately begins to educate herself. When she goes to enroll in night school, she asks for "a quick education for a teacher" (162). When the teacher responds with "a hard laugh," Sara says: "I came out of my high dreams by registering for English and Arithmetic" (162). For the first time Sara understands the reality of the struggle behind her idealistic notions.

At this point, Sara has three main concerns: studying her lessons, making enough money at the laundry to remain self-sufficient, and eating well enough to keep up her strength. Although she finds her English lessons confusing, Sara studies "with fierce determination" amid the "jarring clatter" of the street that is her constant companion (164). In Chapter Eleven, Sara's boss takes three dollars out of her weekly wages when she burns a shirt and she laments the great cost of her mistake:

Three dollars out of my wages when every fraction of a penny was counted out where it had to go. Maybe for weeks I'd have to live on dry bread to make up the loss. I got so frightened, from weakness I longed to throw myself in some dark corner, only to weep away my bitter luck. But I dared not let go. The boss was around. I picked up the iron again, though I could hardly shift the weight back and forth. (166)

The loss of three dollars is a major obstacle in Sara's path, but she does not allow it to keep her from striving for her goals.

Finally, Sara explains the strategy involved in getting a good meal at the cafeteria:

I tried to see which one of [the servers] served the stew. My portion depended on her mood of the minute. If I'm lucky to strike her when she feels



good, then the spoon will go deep down into the pot and come up heaping full. If she feels mean, then I get only from the tip of the spoon, stingy portion. God! She holds in her hands my life, my strength, new blood for my veins, new clearness in my brain to go on with the fight, Oh! If she would only give me enough to fill myself, this one time! (167-68)

Sara also learns that it is only through her ability to remain focused on the final product of her sacrifices, namely an education and a comfortable job, that she will be able to continue working toward these goals.

After Sara attains her independence, she is first reconnected to the Old World when her mother comes to her with a feather bed and a jar of pickled herring. Through this act of her mother's love Sara realizes, "I never knew till now how close to my heart my mother was" (170). When her mother tells her she can't stay, Sara is touched by her mother's act of kindness: "Hours she travelled, only to see me for a few minutes. God! How much bigger was mother's goodness than my burning ambition to rise in the world" (171). Through her mother's selflessness, Sara is able to begin to connect positive emotions with her family and her past.

Although this experience is a catalyst for Sara's deeper appreciation of family, when her mother asks Sara to

"only come to see me soon," she refuses to return her mother's goodness, telling her: "'I'd do anything for you. I'd give away my life. But I can't take time to go 'way out to Elizabeth. Every little minute must go to my studies'" (171). Even after this short time away from her family, Sara is less concerned with what a visit from her would mean to her mother, who values her family above all else, than she is with striving to reach the total independence from the Old World that she feels an education will grant her. However, Sara will come to regret telling her mother, "'I could see you later. But I can't go to college later'" (171).

Yezierska makes the conflict between the values of the Old and New Worlds even more apparent when Sara tells her mother, "'I have so much to learn before I can enter college,'" then asks her, "'But won't you be proud of me when I work myself up for a school teacher, in America'" (172). Her mother's goals for Sara clearly lie elsewhere: "'I'd be happier to see you get married. What's a school teacher? Old maids--all of them. It's good enough for Goyim, but not for you'" (172). Sara knows that before she attains her goals, any marriage would be disastrous: "'Don't worry. I'll even get married some day. But to marry myself to a man that's a person, I must first make myself a person'" (172). Sara believes that anything that would sidetrack her from her dream--be it visiting her

mother or marrying--would prove fatal to that dream.

Although Sara is committed to the American Dream, at times during her struggle she longs for the familiar Old World ways and laments "[h]ow torn apart and divided" her family is now (173). While cooking oatmeal one day, she discovers that eating alone has become "hateful" and yearns for the familiarity of the Old World:

A longing came over me for the old kitchen in Hester Street. Even in our worst poverty we sat around the table, together, like people. Even Father's preaching and Mother's worrying made mealtimes something higher than mere eating and filling the stomach. (173)

Even though Sara knows what she must do in order to succeed, scenes like this one convey to the reader a real sense of how difficult it is for Sara to abandon her past to forge a new future.

A visit from Fania and Bessie in Chapter Twelve solidifies Sara's desire to continue on her journey toward the American Dream. Neither Fania nor Bessie can understand why Sara has committed herself to a struggle that seems meaningless to them. But as the conversation with her sisters progresses, Sara realizes both sisters are unhappy. By the end of the chapter, Fania and Bessie make an apt comparison between Sara, who refuses to let a visit with her family interfere with her studies and her desire for a

better life, and their father: "'She's worse than Father with his Holy Torah'" (178).

In Chapter Thirteen, entitled "Outcast," the reader begins to see that Sara is, in fact, an outcast not only by choice from her family, but also from her co-workers at the laundry. As she studies one day during lunch, "A longing to join the crowd and be happy with them" overcomes Sara (179). When she moves closer to the group and overhears a "coarse, funny story," she quickly moves away, causing them to mock her decision to move out of her Father's house to live alone (179). Sara's coworkers imply that she has left her family in order to be with a man, the only explanation they can give to Sara's show of independence.

Because her co-workers are representative of the Old World, Sara could survive without their approval if she were accepted into the New World. But she is also a pariah in school: "Even in school I suffered because I was not like the rest. I irritated the teachers" (180). The rejection Sara feels heightens her desire to fit in and is a harbinger of her decision to change her appearance in order to be favorably regarded by her coworkers.

Sara decides to change her appearance from "gray, drab, dead . . . [l]ike an old lady in mourning" (181), by "let[ting] loose the love of color" in herself (182). After purchasing a new hat and cosmetics, Sara realizes she has stooped to "the outside show" which she criticized in her



sister Fania (174):

On the outside I looked like the other girls. But the easy gladness that sparkled from their eyes was not in mine. They were a bunch of light-hearted savages who looked gay because they felt gay. I was like a dolled-up dummy fixed for a part on the stage. (183)

Although pressure from her peers to conform to their lower standards is a minor setback for Sara, she moves on from the experience even more determined to become educated: "I threw myself more desperately than ever into my studies. My one hope was to get to the educated world, where only the thoughts you give out count, and not how you look" (183). Through this experience, Sara realizes that she has misplaced her concern. She decides that until she is educated, how others perceive her is unimportant.

Another major setback occurs in Chapter Fourteen when, right after Sara fails a geometry test and thus doubts her ability to "swallow all that dry learning you had to swallow to enter college," she receives a letter from Fania telling her that a friend of Fania's is coming to New York to meet her because he feels Sara is "just the wife he needs" (185). At this point, Sara is upset because she feels as if the sacrifices she has had to make in her personal life for her education have been useless. She is alone and depressed because of a goal that now seems unattainable: "The

loneliness of my little room rose about me like a thick blackness, about to fall on me and crush me" (186). When Max Goldstein, Fania's friend, drops in on Sara during this time of self-doubt, and flatters and flirts with Sara, he seems to her ideal.

Max not only tells Sara the story of his rise from poverty as a new immigrant in America to his current wealth in California, but also that he admires her for her own independence: "I think more of you for standing on your own two feet" (188). When Max insists on taking Sara out to "play and forget" (192), she finds the vaudeville show tasteless, but the dancing fills her with "wild gladness" (193). After this first night of fun with Max, Sara says, "I had tasted pleasure. And it burned in me for more, more" (194). By only their second night together, however, Sara finds Max less the ideal man than she thought the previous night:

Last night his adventures were new and interesting. But now again his talking only about himself and his business began to get on my nerves. Why don't he ask how I am? Why isn't he interested in my studies? Was the whole world only the boom, boom, boom, of his real-estate schemes? (195)

Although Sara would like to spend a quiet night with Max, he convinces her again to "get out into the world" (196). With

Max, Sara could easily marry, have children, and have the money that Max's business would supply her. With marriage, motherhood, and money, Sara would have everything her father thinks she needs for successful fulfillment of the American Dream.

Because Sara finds herself infatuated with the idea of being in love, she is almost able to convince herself that Max loves her and that she could give up her goals of independence and education for him. But when Max proposes to Sara, saying, "'I'm such a good catch. No wonder all kinds of women are after me . . . . But I'm such a crazy, I want what I want, and I want you. So what do you say?'" (199), Sara sees him "turn into a talking roll of dollar bills right there before my eyes," and she realizes that "to him, a wife would only be another piece of property" (199). At this point, Sara is able to turn down Max's proposal of marriage and go back to focusing on her education with new purpose. What her relationship with Max has renewed and highlighted for Sara is her desire to learn: "If I'd let myself love him, I'd end by hating him . . . . I looked at the books on my table that had stared at me like enemies a little while before. They were again the life of my life" (200-201). Sara knows she will not really be a person without the education she desires so strongly. And until she can live on her own, she will not live with anyone else.

Fania and Bessie have earlier compared Sara's drive for

an education to their father's ambitious study of the Torah; and at the beginning of Chapter Fifteen, Sara makes the same connection:

A sudden longing to see my father came over me. I felt that my refusal to marry Max Goldstein was something he could understand. He had given up worldly success to drink the wisdom of the Torah. He would tell me that, after all, I was the only daughter of his faith. (202)

This new correlation between her and her father causes Sara to embrace his teachings: "How rich with the sap of centuries were his words and wisdom! I never knew the meaning of his sayings when I had to listen to him at home. But now it came over me like half-remembered, far-off songs, like music and poetry" (202-203). When he shows up on her doorstep, she discovers a new respect for her father: "Now, as I looked at him, he seemed to me like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Solomon, and David, all joined together in one wise old face. And this man with all the ancient prophets shining out of his eyes--my father" (203). Sara's father, however, has come to express his anger at Sara's refusal of marriage. He has not yet seen that Sara has come by her passion for knowledge honestly.

Reb Smolinsky berates Sara for turning down what he is sure is the last marriage proposal she will receive, and Sara notes that "[j]ust as I looked to Father for love, he



rose up to stone me" (204). She sees her father as "a tyrant from the Old World where only men were people. To him I was his last unmarried daughter to be bought and sold" (205). The argument continues until Sara realizes she and her father will not agree: "I saw there was no use talking. He could never understand. He was the Old World. I was the New" (207). A bitter end to their argument comes after Sara tells her father, "'All my selfishness is from you . . . . I ran away from home because I hated you. I couldn't bear the sight of you'" (207), and he replies by cutting her off not only from her family, but also from the Old World: "'How came you ever to be my child? I disown you. I curse you. May your name and your memory be blotted out of this earth'" (208). Although Sara has tried to embrace her father, he refuses her for being independent and rejecting the traditional role he feels she should eagerly accept.

According to Carol B. Schoen's autobiography of Yezierska, the subtitle to Bread Givers, A Struggle Between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New, "indicates the main focus on the psychological tensions between the obstinate patriarch and his equally stubborn daughter, of love distorted by pride and poverty, of the pain of inescapable guilt" (62). Although Schoen's statement describes accurately much of Bread Givers' focus, when Sara goes to college, the focus shifts to Sara's personal development outside the force of her family.

Chapter Sixteen describes Sara's leaving for college, a journey that takes her further than she has ever been, both physically and emotionally, from the Old World: "I felt like the pilgrim fathers who had left their homeland and all their kin behind them and trailed out in search of the New World" (209). The long bus ride excites her, as does the New America she discovers in the unnamed college town at the end of her trip. Sara is amazed by the quiet, peaceful place she has come to. The "calm security" of the neighborhood and its houses, each with "its own green grass in front" (210), is reflected in the people she sees:

They had none of that terrible fight for bread and rent that I always saw in New York people's eyes. Their faces were not worn with hunger for things they never could have in their lives. There was in them that sure, settled look of those who belong to the world in which they were born.

(211)

The contrast between what Sara has known and what is reality for "these born lucky ones" for whom "joy seemed to stretch out for ever" (212) is great. In her "gray pushcart clothes" (212), Sara is still an outcast. Even though she has worked diligently to gain entrance into this New World, the "born lucky ones" still see her as a product of the Old World.

Sara immediately finds work as an ironer at a laundry

and is excused by the dean from attending a required Physical Education course when she explains to him how unnecessary the extra exercise is for her. She realizes how isolated she is at college after feeling she must attend a freshman dance in order to "tear myself out of my aloneness" (218). She sacrifices a dollar of her tightly budgeted money for a ticket to the dance and discovers her status:

"I was nothing and nobody. It was worse than being ignored. Worse than being an outcast. I simply didn't belong. I had no existence in their young eyes. I wanted to run and hide myself, but fear and pride nailed me against the wall" (219). Sara flees from the dance and walks until she gains control over her pain and self-pity:

Darkness and stillness washed over me. Slowly I stumbled to my feet and looked up at the sky. The stars in their infinite peace seemed to pour their healing light into me . . . . What was my little sorrow to the centuries of pain which those stars had watched? So near they seemed, so compassionate. My bitter hurt seemed to grow small and drop away. If I must go on alone, I should still have silence and the high stars to walk with me. (220)

Sara's dedication to her dream is strongly apparent in those lines, as is her resilience. She has met and negotiated all the hurdles that have lain in her path toward the American



Dream thus far.

During her second semester at college, Sara is able to make a connection between what she is learning in school and what she has experienced in life that re-inspires her. When her psychology professor asks the class to "'Give an example from your own experience showing how anger or any strong emotion interferes with your thinking'" (222), Sara relates to the class an apt example involving Zalmon the fish-peddler. Sara describes how, with this one instance, a new drive for knowledge is awakened in her:

In a few weeks, I was ahead of any one else in the class. I saw the students around me as so many pink-faced children who never had had to live yet. I realized that the time when I sold herring in Hester Street, I was learning life more than if I had gone to school. The fight with Father to break away from home, the fight in the cafeteria for a piece of meat--when I went through those experiences I thought them privations and losses; now I saw them treasure chests of insight. What countless riches lay buried under the ground of those early years that I had thought so black, so barren, so thwarted with want! (223)

Not only does the experience in her psychology class reawaken in Sara a desire for knowledge; it is also a catalyst for her realizing the importance of her



experiences. She now believes that she needs independence more than assimilation.

Largely because of the inspiration she receives in her psychology class, Sara becomes infatuated with her psychology professor and even goes so far as to rent a room in the same boarding house. When it becomes painfully obvious to her that Mr. Edman will not return her love, Sara comes to a realization: "After a while, I understood why the young men didn't like me. I knew more of life as a ten-year-old girl, running the streets, than these psychology instructors did with all their heads swelled from too much learning" (231). But even in the face of her unrequited love for Mr. Edman, Sara finds a friend in the dean of the college, who tells her: "'All pioneers have to get hard to survive . . . . I'm more than a little ashamed to realize if I had to contend with the wilderness I'd perish with the unfit. But you, child--your place is with the pioneers. And you're going to survive'" (232). The dean's description of Sara as a pioneer is accurate. Even if she has never found a way to fit in as if she were born in comfort, Sara has found her niche.

Book Two ends with Sara's commencement, where Sara feels "[g]lad but downhearted . . . glad because I'd won, but so sad I was to leave the battlefield" (233). At the commencement Sara wins a thousand dollars for writing the best essay on the topic, "What the College Has Done for Me."

She describes the triumphant scene in which she goes to the stage to accept her reward: "all the students rose to their feet, cheering and waving and calling my name, like a triumph, 'Sara Smolinsky--Sara Smolinsky'" (234). Sara is able to leave college no longer an outcast. She has come to full realization of what her struggles have done for her--how she has pioneered and conquered a New World.

Although by the end of Book Two Sara has conquered college life, she remains throughout the section, as the title indicates, largely "Between Two Worlds." With Book Three, which is entitled "The New World," Yeziarska brings her main character's evolution from the Old World to the New, from immigrant to American, full circle. Thomas J. Ferraro agrees that each section title underscores Sara's evolution. In his book, Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants In Twentieth-Century America, Ferraro says that "Sara Smolinsky does indeed, in the course of the novel, escape from the downtown ghetto" (57). Sara Smolinsky not only returns to New York and sets about repairing the rift created between her and her family, but, in doing so, she also struggles to attain the last essential piece that will complete her quest for the American Dream. Sara has gained independence and education, but still needs love to have finally "ma[de] for [her]self a person" (172).

Sara is proud of her achievements in college and wishes immediately to show the world the fruits of her labors: "If

only I could have taken out my diploma and held it over my head for all to see! I was a college graduate! I was about to become a teacher of the schools" (237). Winning the essay contest has provided her the means by which to return to New York and begin her new career in style. Not only does the prize money allow her to "begin my new career as a teacher as well dressed as any of them" (239), but it also affords her the opportunity to find a nice apartment easily: "It was merely a matter of going to the real-estate office . . . . [I]n about an hour I had selected a sunny, airy room, the kind of room I had always wanted" (240). Sara lacks only love to have achieved her American Dream completely.

Because Sara's focus on her education and independence have dominated her life for so long, and because she was disowned by her father, when Sara decides to visit her family after six years, she questions how she will be received upon her return: "Would they understand that my silent aloofness for so long had been a necessity and not selfish indifference" (242). Although immediately recognizing that her father has changed little and therefore instinctively hiding herself until he leaves for the synagogue, Sara finds that her mother is dying.

Sara sees "[p]lain and suffering on all her [mother's] features," and regrets having told her years ago that "'I can come see you later, but I can't study later'" (244).



When Sara tries to make up for these words, telling her mother "'Now I'll come to you often,'" her mother replies, "'Now--now? Don't you see it's my end'" (244). At this point, Sara feels obligated to fulfill her mother's dying wish: "'Be good to Father,' she begged. 'I'm leaving him in his old age when he needs me most. Helpless as a child he is. No one understands his holiness as I. Only promise me that you'll take good care of him, and I can close my eyes in peace'" (245). Sara's return home only to be faced with the death of her mother is an example of what Ferraro asserts is Yezierska's implication that "Sara's ascent into individualism threatens an older form of women's strength, that of mutual support" (75). The support Sara received from her family, especially her mother and sisters, was traditional, but because of her ambitions, she could not see it as support at all; instead Sara saw her family's efforts to find her a husband as a rejection of her struggle to attain the American Dream.

Sara's desire to atone for her previous aloofness toward her mother inspires her to bear her father when he returns "red with anger at the sight of [Sara]," telling her, "'So many years you left your mother. Aren't you ashamed of your heartlessness'" (247). Sara has gained, in her six years disconnected from her family, the maturity to tolerate her father without returning his angry outburst with one of her own.



Because she accepts her father's tirade without comment, Sara is able to appreciate the displaced pride her father expresses in her accomplishments. In introducing her to her mother's doctor, Father says, "'And this, my youngest, is a teacherin. She has a head on her. Takes after her father, even though she's only a girl'" (249). Father not only takes credit for Sara's ability, but also for her education: "'Nu, Doctor! Where do you find a poor father letting his daughter go to college? It cost me enough, her education, all those years of wages that I lost'" (249). Sara's father is angry not because Sara has achieved the American Dream, but because he has not. Ultimately, he is eager to take credit for her accomplishments, even though he is responsible only for her setbacks. Sara, out of a desire to retain a connection to her family, is mature enough to allow her father to retain his illusions.

To encourage the reader's understanding of Sara's guilt at having rejected her family, when Sara's mother dies, the author has her mentally repeat the words that have come back to haunt her: "She had begged me to come and see her. And I had answered her, 'I can come to see you later, but I can't go to college later . . .'" (252). Yezierska then shows that although Sara had been alienated from her family, a reunion occurs at her mother's death: "I felt literally Mother's soul enter my soul like a miracle" (252). Sara has

changed, but is both unwilling and unable to embrace the Old World with the same fervor with which she wishes to embrace her family.

When the undertaker begins cutting into the clothes of the bereaved family members, "according to the Biblical law and ages of tradition," Sara refuses to comply with the Old World custom: "'I don't believe in this. It's my only suit, and I need it for work. Tearing it wouldn't bring mother back to life again'" (255). By her rejection of this tradition, Sara widens the gulf that her education creates between her and her family. When Sara rejects the Old World elements of her culture, her family perceives her actions as a rejection of them. But Sara feels she owes it to her mother to begin again with her family: "I had failed to give Mother the understanding of her deeper self during her lifetime. Let me at least give it to Father while he was yet alive" (257). Sara begins to embrace her past, and in so doing, works toward gaining her father's acceptance.

After Mother's death, Father remarries quickly. When Sara and her sisters find out Father has married Mrs. Feinstein, they recognize another of Father's bad decisions: "'That woman will fatten now on Mother's death'" (261). It is Sara's sisters who now reject the family by refusing to support their father, but when the new Mrs. Smolinsky sends Sara a letter at school asking her, "Drop everything and hurry up, come at once," Sara goes because, "if Father was

in trouble, I had to go" (262).

When Father's wife argues to Sara that she married Reb Smolinsky because "'He told me all his children would put enough money together to keep him in comfort,'" Sara tells her that although she and her sisters feel they are responsible for Father's well-being, none of them feels obligated to support her as if she were a family member: "'Father had money from four lodges. Enough to keep him a lifetime. If he were in need and alone we would have supported him. But we can't keep two people'" (264). Although Sara's father has done nothing but hinder her progress and development, she still feels a responsibility for him. Chapter Nineteen closes with an explanation of her dilemma:

But as I came back to my quiet, sunny room, my heart ached for Father. What was my duty? Was it to give my hard-earned school money to this woman healthy enough to go to work? I tried to still my conscience with reason. But my heart ached with the unceasing question, "What will become of Father if we abandon him to the mercy of that woman?" (268)

Sara has developed from a child who justifiably resents her father's intrusions in her quest for the American Dream, to an adult who is concerned about the welfare of her father because she feels an Old World sense of duty and



responsibility to her family. The measure of her development is apparent in the questions she poses.

In Chapter Twenty, Sara describes her movement from the Old World to the New in a way that leaves the reader no doubt as to the circular nature of her journey: "The windows of my classroom faced the same crowded street where seventeen years ago I started out my career selling herring" (269). Sara has reached her primary goals of having a well paying job and a good education, but when she reflects on her progress, she encounters an issue that is preventing her complete happiness:

Maybe after all my puffing myself up that I was smarter, more self-sufficient than the rest of the world--wasn't Father right? He always preached, a woman alone couldn't enter Heaven. "It says in the Torah: A woman without a man is less than nothing. No life on earth, no hope in Heaven."  
(270)

After fully resolving her desire for an education and a career, Sara is faced again with a need to feel loved.

Along with Sara's return to family and Hester Street, Sara falls in love with a man who has not only attained the American Dream, but who started out under circumstances almost identical to Sara's. Hugo Seelig is the principal at the school in which Sara teaches and her description of him emphasizes the qualities Sara has been in search of: "A



Jewish face, and yet none of the greedy eagerness of Hester Street anymore. It was the face of a dreamer, set free in the new air of America. Not like Father with his eyes on the past, but a dreamer who had found his work among us of the East Side" (273). Although Sara's stepmother has sent the principal a letter outlining Sara's unwillingness to support her and her father, Hugo Seelig compliments her on her teaching and walks her home.

Sara invites Seelig into her apartment, which he calls "'beautiful and empty'" (277), and Sara describes their conversation: "We got to talking about ourselves, our families, the Old World from which we came. To our surprise we found that our beginnings were the same. We came from the same government in Poland, from villages only a few miles apart" (277). This discovery of a shared past has a profound effect on Sara. Hugo Seelig recognizes the importance of Sara's struggles to become a person. Because Seelig embraces their shared past, he is also able to help her realize that only through understanding and appreciating her past will Sara be free to experience happiness, a necessary element in the American Dream.

Chapter Twenty, "Man Born of Woman," is the final chapter of Bread Givers. In it, Yeziarska ties up all the loose ends of Sara's life, bringing the novel to a satisfying close. The chapter opens with Sara's realization that the happiness she has found as an educated woman in

love with an educated man who is, like her, committed to bringing education to poor immigrants on Hester Street, is worth the lean years in which she focused on her studies and was isolated: "Why were my years of lonely struggle unlit by the hope that I might some day be as happy as I was now? Why did I ever feel cheated and robbed of the life that more fortunate girls seemed to have? And here I had so much more than my heart could hold" (281). Her happiness is more profound than any happiness she would have found had she given up on the American Dream.

After her graduation from college, Sara works on repairing the chasm her rebellion created between her and her family. With her father's remarriage, she and her sisters refuse to support their extravagant stepmother and Sara loses contact with her father again. But Sara is a product of her past and is plagued by a guilty conscience at having neglected her father:

A longing to see Father came over me. What had happened to him in all these months? I could stifle my conscience no longer. Wife or no wife, I had to see what I could do for him. Even his wife I could not hate anymore. For after all, it was her blackmailing letter that had opened Hugo's eyes to me. (282)

According to Ferraro, Sara's guilt over neglecting her father is cultural: "The culture of the past works through

internalization of its norms; the vehicle of Smolinsky's hold over Sara is guilt" (84). When Sara literally bumps into her father on a street corner, she is amazed at the poor shape her father is in: "How changed he was! How old and suffering! He, the master--with the stoop of poverty on his back! And I had been so happy" (285). In gaining control of her future, Sara has lost the important connection to her past which is essential in marking her rise and also is the factor necessary for Sara to be content. Until Sara is able to embrace her past, her happiness will be marred by recurrences of guilt over the abandonment of her family.

When Sara and her father meet on the street corner, he neither facilitates their reunion nor eases Sara's guilty conscience. Instead, Reb Smolinsky laments his children's neglect:

"Have I children like other people's children who carry their father like a crown on their heads? Have they provided for me as God-fearing children provide for an old father? . . . [T]hey leave me in my old age, as they left King Lear--broken--forgotten . . . . God! What have I sinned, to come to this? I, Reb Smolinsky--down among the pushcarts . . . . " (284)

It is after her father's diatribe that Sara remembers her mother's dying words, her plea to Sara that she look after

her father in his old age.

Sara takes her father home and then, because he is weak and delirious, runs to get him a doctor. It is as she goes to get the doctor that Sara realizes how vital her connection to her father is:

How could I have hated him and tried to blot him out of my life? Can I hate my arm, my hand that is part of me? Can a tree hate the roots from which it sprang? Deeper than love, deeper than pity, is that oneness of the flesh that's in him and in me. Who gave me the fire, the passion, to push myself up from the dirt? If I grow, if I rise, if I ever amount to something, is it not his spirit burning in me? (286)

With these thoughts, Sara knows that she is irrevocably intertwined with her Father. She is no longer capable of ignoring her past; instead, she must embrace it along with her father and adapt the Old World in order to be content in the New.

Throughout her father's illness, Sara strengthens her connection with her father by nursing him back to health: "Day by day, I won his confidence and a sort of dependent affection" (289). Sara is also able to learn from her father during this time: "He told me legends of the Bible and explained the wisdom of the Torah" (289-90). Although during his illness Sara grows closer to her father, she does



not gain any respect for her stepmother until after her father is well. When she comes in one day and finds her stepmother putting Father's shoes on his feet, she loses some of her animosity: "I suddenly realized this woman I hated was necessary to him . . . . He needed a wife to wait on him. It came to me that if we tried not to hate her, to be a little kind to her, maybe she would be more faithful to Father" (291). When Sara begins giving her stepmother ten dollars a week, they lose their mutual hostility and find that although they will not become friends, they can get along for Father's sake.

When Sara brings Hugo Seelig with her to meet her father, she solidifies the bridge she has constructed between her past and her present, between the Old World and the New. Ferraro calls Seelig's "most important act as Sara's school principal" his ability "to reflect the worshipful appreciation Sara directs at him back to her father" (82). The respect Hugo and Sara's father feel for one another is apparent in their first exchange. Not only is Father impressed with Hugo's occupation, but he is also humbled by Hugo's desire to be taught Hebrew by Reb Smolinsky: "'Hebrew? An American young man, a principal, and wants to learn Hebrew? And you want me to teach you'" (293). Hugo's respect for Sara's father is evident: "'If a learned man like you would care to take a beginner like me'" (293). The idea of teaching Hebrew to Hugo Seelig not only

interests Father, but it also inspires in him an appreciation for the life Sara has chosen for herself:

"And yet my own daughter who is not a Jewess and not a gentile--brings me a young man--and whom? An American. And for what? To learn Hebrew. From whom? From me. Lord of the Universe! You never forsake your faithful ones." His old eyes widened with a glance of sudden understanding . . . "Even my daughter with the hard heart has come to learn that the words of our Holy Torah are the only words of life." (293-94)

Although Yezierska does not expound on Father's comprehension of what Sara has accomplished, the reader is left with the impression that Sara's father has seen himself in Sara's drive, ambition, and her ultimate achievement of the American Dream.

Certainly, Sara leaves this exchange between her father and Hugo with a deeper sense of compassion and respect for her father: "Then suddenly the pathos of this lonely old man pierced me. In a world where all is changed, he alone remained unchanged--as tragically isolate as the rocks. All that he had left of life was his fanatical adherence to his traditions" (296). Sara is able to embrace both her Father and her past and respect their roles in her future.

The novel's concluding sentences leave no doubt as to the worth of Sara's past in her present and in her future:

"Then Hugo's grip tightened on my arm and we walked on. But I felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn't just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was upon me" (297). Although the "shadow" that follows Sara and the presence of the "weight" of her ancestors carry negative connotations, Yezierska uses the words to convey to readers Sara's sense of responsibility to her past and the importance of the past in her future.

Sara rises from the dirty tenements of the Lower East Side because of her tenacious following of the American Dream. She not only learns early in her life what will make her happy, but she develops and follows a plan to achieve her goals. Because she is able to return to her family and respectfully adapt her past with her present, Sara fully realizes the American Dream.

### Conclusion:

If the traditional definition of the American Dream is, as Thomas Jefferson wrote, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, then Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yezierska challenge and narrow the definition of the Dream from the Jewish immigrant perspective as, most significantly, the pursuit of happiness. In his introduction to Yezierska's novel Red Ribbon on a White Horse, W. H. Auden reflects on Jefferson's "curious statement in the Preamble to the Constitution about the self-evident right of all men to the 'pursuit of happiness'" and defines happiness as follows: "To be happy means to be free, not from pain or fear, but from care or anxiety. A man is free when (1) he knows what he desires and (2) what he desires is real and not fantastic" (11). Jefferson does not argue that each American is entitled to specific tangible things, instead he concludes that in order to reach the American Dream--in order to be happy--one must first define what will make him or her happy, and then he or she must actively pursue that goal.

In their novels, both Cahan and Yezierska explore the concept of Tefutza, or personal freedom, as the means by which to pursue happiness. Tefutza, the Hebrew word that Hayim Greenberg defines as a positive description of American assimilation, and which he says "carr[ies] overtones of meaning like expansion, growth, and prosperity" (235), is what Jake and Sara work toward throughout both Yekl and Bread Givers.



In developing the concept of the American Dream, both Cahan and Yezierska show that the degree of Tefutza attained depends on the focus maintained by a character. Whereas Jake, Cahan's main character, balances the past with the present, Sara, Yezierska's protagonist, develops a more positive view. Cahan is pessimistic about the attainability of the American Dream, showing in Yekl that Jewish immigrants find it difficult to balance the past with the personal freedom promised by the future in America. Conversely, Yezierska, in Bread Givers, provides an optimistic view of the Jewish immigrant's ability to realize the importance of the past as the immigrant struggles toward happiness in the future.

Jake neither gains personal freedom, nor takes on the qualities of Tefutza through his struggles. Instead, Jake's apathy and lack of accountability toward his dreams creates a fantastic quality that ensures his failure. Jake is at first happy; as a new immigrant in Boston, Yekl's narrator explains, Jake talks about his wife and son "frequently and . . . enthusiastically" (24). However, once Jake moves to New York, his wife and son become a distant and unclear memory. Ultimately, with his divorce from Gitl, Jake completely loses his connection to the past. Ironically, the novel concludes with Gitl closer to the goal of Tefutza. And through her son and her observance of traditional behavior, she has an equally close tie to her past. While

Cahan seems to be a proponent of the concept of Tefutza, he demonstrates the negative consequences of a loss of balance and focus on the American Dream.

Sara, who is not content to allow inaction to dictate the course of her life, does experience the effects of Tefutza. She grows both mentally and emotionally; and with each goal achieved, she moves closer to, and finally reaches, the American Dream. It is important to note that Sara, who at one point during the pursuit of happiness abandons her family, finally learns the importance of her family and her past for her future and struggles throughout the remainder of the novel to be accepted by them without sacrificing Tefutza. Yezierska's successfully applies the concept of Tefutza as she shows the importance of one's past in attaining personal freedom.

Cahan and Yezierska demonstrate agreement with Auden's two criteria of freedom, and the criteria are applicable to the concept of Tefutza as well. Neither Cahan nor Yezierska denies the importance of the role of heritage in discovering personal freedom. But Cahan and Yezierska choose to show opposing perspectives and their consequences regarding the pursuit of happiness, just as Jake and Sara choose different vehicles to attain the American Dream.

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