

NEGOTIATING HOME AND IDENTITY IN EARLY 20th CENTURY JEWISH-AMERICAN NARRATIVES



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Jewish-American Narratives**

POLITECHNIKA KOSZALIŃSKA

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Introduction

The Jewish presence on the American continent did not start at the turn of the twentieth century. The first Jewish settlers who arrived in colonial America were the Sephardic Jews, who “came to America not from one country or culture but from many” (Sowell 69). When in 1492 a royal decree expelled Jews from Spain, some of them became converts to Christianity in order to remain there, whereas others sought new settlements in Portugal, Holland and other places. Since “British policy in the American colonies permitted Jews greater freedom than in most of the rest of the world” (Sowell 76), America became their common destination: “more Jews were later settled in the United States than in any other country in the world, more even than in Israel” (Sowell 76). At the time of the American Revolution there were about 2000 Jews in the colonies.¹ Between 1840 and 1880 America witnessed the first wave of Jewish immigration, mainly from Germany, which increased the Jewish population in the United States to “over half a million” (Sowell 77). The second wave, which came between the 1880’s and 1924, consisted of East European Jews, who enlarged the Jewish presence in America by about 2.4 million people.

At the beginning of the twentieth century American Jews had more literary spokespeople, both male and female, than any other ethnic group. Whether it resulted from their great numbers, or from the inherent Jewish reverence for knowledge, the fact is that the Jewish-American literary representation had no match among any other immigrant group. Although most of the authors I have gathered here were forgotten shortly after their initial success, and while contemporary critics denounced their works as typical representations of ethnic realism, current criticism re-reads the texts, highlighting both their incisive rendition of class and gender issues, and their original value as the forerunners of the Jewish-American literary tradition.

The choice of writings to be discussed, though limited by the scope of this publication, aims at presenting a variety of voices which appeared in the immigrant debate, as well as the diverse literary strategies which were employed to convey the authors’ ideas. The selection, which is presented according to the chronological order in which the works were published, illustrates the development in rhetorical argumentation, and stresses the pivotal

¹ For a brief history of Jews in America see Thomas Sowell, *Ethnic America. A History* (Basic Books: the United States, 1981) 69-99.

moments in the discussion concerning the Jewish immigrants' assimilation. In no way should my discussion be considered conclusive; I see it rather as a brief introduction to the topic, which suggests problems for further analysis, rather than one which provides definite answers. When examining a number of crucial points essential to the works in question, I became aware that they forward arguments which, in a contemporary context, remain as valid as they were when the books were first published. Thus, the value of such a discussion may be seen in its applicability to the current national and ethnic discourse, in the course of which one can see that neither has the scope of the problems changed significantly, nor have the answers become easier. The modern world wrestles with the problems of legal and illegal immigration on an unprecedented scale; whether on economic, political, or religious grounds, the geographical dislocation of ethnic groups and their ensuing challenge to negotiate a new identity in an alien environment, sets off a whole range of problems related to religious intolerance (Muslims in Europe), labor exploitation (Filipino and Indonesian workers in the Middle East), and assimilation (the Turkish Diaspora in Germany). Therefore, early Jewish-American immigrant narratives, which are deeply embedded in American social history, may not only offer pleasant and instructive reading, providing an insight into the nature of immigration, but may also be found an informative instrument in current national and literary debates.

My main analytical tool in the discussion is a literary approach, which involves a critical reading of the texts. However, as the political and social background to the mass Jewish immigration to America at the turn of the century is essential to the understanding of the texts, my secondary tool is historical criticism. A combined approach, I believe, will broaden the critical perspective and complement the textual analysis by offering insights which will facilitate the reading of the novels.

The Statue of Liberty, a French gift to the American people commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the American Revolution, which has become a symbol of the spirit of America, bears an inscription from a sonnet entitled "The New Colossus" by a Jewish-American immigrant, Emma Lazarus. Lazarus (1849-1887), whose mentor was Ralph Waldo Emerson, was one of the first successful Jewish-American authors and achieved prominence in the 1880's as a literary champion of the Jewish people. Shaken by the pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe, which resulted in thousands of Jewish refugees seeking haven in America, Lazarus became an ardent activist for uniting the exiles under the banner of Judaism. Since the idea of America as an immigrant haven had not yet become part of the American consciousness, and as mass immigration ignited anti-immigrant sentiments, Lazarus wrote literary responses to the growth of anti-Semitism in America. Although she drew inspiration from her

Jewish heritage, she saw herself mostly as an American, not an ethnic, writer. Even though Lazarus believed America to be a new home for expatriated Jewish immigrants, she also supported the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In 1883, she donated her sonnet to an auction at New York's Academy of Design "In Aid of the Bartholdi Pedestal Fund," but it was not until 1903, sixteen years after her death, that the poem's words were immortalized on a plaque placed on the Statue's pedestal:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" (Chametzky 106)

The poem invokes Lazarus' admiration for the ideals of ancient Greece alluding to "the brazen giant of Greek fame" – the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, whereas both the beacon of light, which represents a "world-wide welcome" to the weary, hungry, and downtrodden, and the figure of the "Mother of Exiles," which the Statue personifies, symbolize the national policy of America as a refuge for immigrants. Lazarus' golden door metaphor, just like Israel Zangwill's later metaphor of the melting pot, became a national icon of American ethnicity. It was the privilege of a young, American woman of Jewish origin to become the spokesperson for the whole immigrant body, past, present and future, whose presence underlines a fundamental characteristic of America as a settler-colony. The poem mythologizes and idealizes America by presenting it as the biblical Promised Land, where all problems disappear and people live happily ever after. Combined with the mother-like figure of the Statue of Liberty, the two elements – the text and the Statue – blend into a vision of America as a transcendental, maternal figure embracing all the poor who seek refuge in her arms: the ultimate symbol of human safety and familial warmth, the most cherished memories of any happy childhood. In its public image, America came to represent a safe haven for the oppressed, a land of opportunities for hard working entrepreneurs, and a home of justice for the underprivileged – in short, the American Dream. Lazarus' verses illustrate the scale of genuine optimism of those who embarked on the immigrant journey, inspiring them with the mental encouragement they would need so much in their everyday struggles.

However, there is a downside to this image as this optimistic and inviting view of America turned out to be a lie for those who did not pass literacy tests, or doctor's examinations at Ellis Island or Angel Island, or for those who,

having been successfully admitted into the country, failed to live the American Dream: the details are missing from Lazarus' vision so as not to distort the imagined reality of her poem. What the poem shows is how native-born Americans wanted their country to be seen in the eyes of the world. It is an interesting observation, in view of the author's ethnic background, that Lazarus adopted a white, male, protestant Anglo-Saxon ideology, which signifies her appropriation of the "consent" ideology, thus disengaging her from her underprivileged, immigrant status, and allowing her "to pass" as an American. Therefore, the reading of the poem differs depending on who its implied reader is: an American audience, for whom the poem carries a poetic message, which testifies to the myth-making capabilities of their country; the prospective immigrants, for whom it is ideological propaganda aimed at supplying the workforce required by the developing industry; and, finally, a textual critic who reveals the author's own reward in advancing her social status through the authority of an authorship which reflects the dominant order. In view of American immigrant policy, though, the optimism and enthusiasm of Lazarus' poem have more often been mocked and satirized than endorsed. Notwithstanding, it still offers an enduring point of reference for any immigrant debate.

All authors of early Jewish immigrant narratives struggle with their identities as Jews and as immigrant Americans; thus, the main purpose of the literature of the period is the mediation between obligations to the Jewish ancestry and the assimilative requirements of modern, multi-ethnic, American society. The authors cope with the problem in a variety of ways ranging from praise of complete assimilation (Mary Antin), the proposal of ethnic exchange by way of dissolution in the *American Crucible* (Israel Zangwill), the undermining of the benefits of successful assimilation, in material terms, by pointing to its drawbacks (Abraham Cahan), the highlighting of the value of education, in the assimilative process, especially for female immigrants (Anzia Yezierska), or the foregrounding of the worker's revolution as an alternative route to escape the destitution of the ethnic ghetto (Michael Gold).

Although the works provide a realistic representation of early twentieth-century urban America, one would look in vain for racial and religious diversity: the narratives are confined to two milieus: the ethnic ghetto, which is home to East European immigrants, many of whom are of Jewish origin, and, merely to highlight the contrast, white mainstream middle-class America. The reason why Jewish immigrant narratives avoid the issues of African-Americans – their ghetto neighbors – may be explained by their own uncertain status as probatory-whites or near-whites, but "identification as a Jew did not constitute an obstacle to identification as an American in the same way as identification with blackness did" (Rottenberg, *Begging* 95). During the first half of the

twentieth century Jewish-American authors were careful to maintain a distance between Blacks and Jews, an association which could hinder the Jews' "passing" as white. Similarly, the narratives in question avoid mentions of Native Americans or Chinese Americans, so as not to be included in the same reference group, and, consequently, to advance their inclusion in the category of white Americans. Moreover, Blacks served as the common Other for both the white Jews and Gentiles.

Another common feature of the narratives discussed in this volume is their use of autobiographical modes of expression. Semi-autobiographies, fictional autobiographies, and life narratives focus on what is local and marginal, as opposed to the global, restoring to personal narratives a form of authority which challenges the constraints of the dominant authority. K.J. Weintraub enumerates the following functions of autobiography, which is "centered upon a [...] self aware of its relation to its experience," these are: "self-explication, self-discovery, self-clarification, self-formation, self-presentation, self-justification" (824). As autobiography blends life and fiction, it narrows the gap between the academic and non-academic study of literature by virtue of being accessible to both. The use of the autobiographical genre by Jewish immigrant authors points to their successful acquisition of the American ideology of "consent" – I am borrowing Werner Sollor's terms – which is characterized by the adoption of an independent self, embodied by the personal pronoun "I," which becomes the focus of the narrative; a strategy which also signals the author's disengagement from the communal Jewish "descent" ideology. Thereby, the act of writing an autobiography, for those authors, is not only an exercise in self-discovery, or a tribute to the multitudes of nameless Jewish immigrants populating the Lower East Side in New York, but an attempt to "pass" as Americans.

Since early Jewish immigrant narratives are strongly rooted in American history, I believe their literary analysis should be augmented by a brief assessment of the socio-historical background of the period. Literary accounts, though lacking in the accuracy and objectivity of historical documents, nonetheless, are a valuable source of information about the early twentieth-century Jewish-American community, which is revealed in the choice of topics and the characterization of protagonists reflecting the then current social and political debates. The mass immigration of Catholics and Jews from southern and Eastern Europe, from countries such as Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Romania and Russia, which started in the 1880's, changed the ethnic character of the immigrant body, and initiated a national discussion about both the immigrant and "the Jewish Question." By the 1920's the Jewish American population had swelled to more than three million, and the Lower East Side had become the biggest ethnic ghetto in New York. The American public's anxiety was triggered by the sheer numbers of newcomers, especially as they had had

little previous representation in the United States. When immigrant groups of diverse ethnicity became more noticeable, the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, who were the country's dominant group, began to question their right to American citizenship. The popular fear was that the newcomers would unbalance the country's social structure by introducing too many lower-class workers, males, and older people, for whom it was too late to assimilate. The eugenics movement gave the conservative faction pseudo-scientific tools to argue for the curtailment of immigration. Thus, the immigrants were "pigeonholed, [improved] if possible, and [dismissed] if not" (Dwyer 108). The proponents of eugenics advocated "social engineering" (Dwyer 108), which was understood as bettering society by, more or less, scientific means; hence, the introduction of intelligence testing to the immigrant checking routine since the supporters of the movement feared that social pathologies are hereditary. "During the period between 1890 and the 1930's, both US law and nativist rhetoric easily used findings of the eugenics movement to construct immigrants as deformed, diseased, and deviant" (Dwyer 108). This propaganda fostered the exclusion of the immigrant groups already residing in the U.S., and gave rise to the introduction of acts such as the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which closed the American gates to further East European immigration. The introduction of a quota system favored the old immigrants from Great Britain, Germany, Ireland and Scandinavia over the East European ones, whose culture and habits were deemed foreign and inferior to the prevailing Anglo - Saxon model.

The Jews, who had often escaped pogroms arising from religious and racial intolerance, constituted the immigrant majority. In contrast to the first wave of Jewish immigration, which took place between the 1840's and 1880's, which involved mainly well educated and relatively affluent Western European Jews, the second wave, that of East European Jews, which occurred between the 1880's and 1924, included poor, uneducated, and Orthodox immigrants, for whom a journey across the Atlantic was a leap into the next century.

[T]he marginalized social, economic, and political position of the new immigrants was reflected in the way in which they were contrasted with the 'old immigrants' of Ireland, Germany, and Scandinavia by restrictionist groups, a phenomenon which itself reflected the increasing economic and political power of the groups comprising the old immigrants" (Carlson 75 qtd. in Abu-Laban 26).

Hence, with their lives overturned and their old ways challenged by American modernity, the "greenhorns" had to negotiate their own place in the

dialogue between other immigrant groups and native-born Americans, a task performed either by the appropriation of the dominant rhetoric or by a premeditated distancing from other ethnic groups, through preserving a distinct language and culture and the continued observance of religious ceremonies. That is why the new arrivals mostly kept together in close-knit communal groups, which, by their familiarity, provided a sense of security, at the same time, though, diminishing their chances of smooth and prompt assimilation. For this reason, in the eyes of mainstream Americans, Jewish immigrants were seen as a ghettoized mass, which inhabited New York's "cloak-and-suit belt," exhibiting little prospect of assimilation. The image of the ghetto as a dangerous and exotic place where native-born Americans did not venture, became a metaphor for the Jewish social and moral condition. Jewish clannishness, which "manifested itself partly in socialist agitation whose purpose was to disrupt the American economic and political system which the Eastern Jews were incapable of fully comprehending" (Ebest 109), fostered their estrangement from the America of "the other half." By their progressive adversaries Jews were generally seen as Bolsheviks who bolstered socialist organizations and criticized the cruelty of capitalistic enterprise. The early immigrant narratives, for example Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money*, critique these assumptions: "these stories argue that the spiritual poverty of the ghetto was neither a product of nor emblematic of Jewish personality. Instead it was an American product to which Jews were subjected" (Ebest 112).

The literature of the period supplies differing accounts of the Jewish ghetto, ranging from the shocking descriptions of the deplorable conditions in Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890), through the curious optimism of Hutchinson Hapgood's *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902), and, finally, to the sentimental melancholy of Henry James' *The American Scene* (1907), which borders on contempt when the author painfully observes his country as having been "polluted" by the influx of immigrants. A different portrayal of the same locus results, however, from the writers' varying social status and their distinct ethnic affiliation, as well as their endorsement of a particular ideology: progressive or conservative. It also reflects the conflicting points of view in the ongoing political and public debate, which interrogated the ways to incorporate the sundry immigrant groups into the cohesive American body politic. The diverse, thereby, complementary literary accounts, present the complexity of immigrant representation, which is under constant pressure of adjustment, a process which challenges the boundaries of ethnic identity. As a consequence, "[t]he 1920s were pivotal for the process of deracializing Jewishness and the morphing of Jewishness from a racial category into something that would later be articulated as ethnicity" (Rottenberg 135).

Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* (1908) offers one in a series of artistic solutions to the problem of the influx of immigrants who were coming to American shores at the turn of the twentieth century. Contrary to the exclusionist views concerning immigration, which argued for a closing of American borders to new arrivals, Zangwill sees neither a threat in their numbers, nor a problem in their foreign ethnicity. Instead, he sees the American future in all its ethnic diversity, regarding its potential as enriched and reinforced by immigrant blood. However, in order for his concept to work, both natives and aliens would have to come together and allow for the exchange to happen: Zangwill's choice of a place for such an encounter is the American Crucible. The author's idea won instant favor with the disempowered immigrant groups, as "[m]ost members of the disadvantaged minorities see the melting pot (or the American Dream) as a promise of their right to get ahead, both economically and socially" (Hirschman 415). To avoid a direct confrontation with the sons and daughters of the Founding Fathers, little does Zangwill comment on the native-born American reaction to his foreign ruminations, the fact being he was an English Jew.

Yet another thought which occupied Zangwill concerned the way in which to incorporate, yet not lose in the process, the concept of Jewishness in his scheme. As he was convinced of Jewish uniqueness, he believed that the American character would benefit from exposure to Jewish influences. A critical analysis of the play illuminates the author's awareness of the range of problems his theory interrogates: idealism versus realism, ethnic diversity versus the nation's unity, assimilation versus cultural pluralism, racial and religious prejudice versus tolerance, past versus present, and private versus public. Although Zangwill's play failed to deliver definite answers, it offered a spring board for the ongoing national debate.

While the scope of my analysis of *The Melting Pot* is limited to looking at the play as a text, not as a theatrical performance, I am nevertheless aware of the important role the theatre played in Americanizing immigrant audiences of diverse ethnicity. The theatre-going experience educated immigrants in various theatrical productions: minstrel shows, vaudevilles, dramas, comedies, melodramas, American Shakespearian productions and farces: "[a]s audiences came to appreciate new theatrical entertainments, they came to conceive of themselves in new social terms" (Kraus 14). In consequence, "[w]hat began as taste in the theatre extended outward; recognizing one's place in an audience was one step toward recognizing one's place in the culture at large" (Kraus 14). Theatre became a vital site of American socialization; in Joe Kraus' words: "Whatever may have succeeded or failed on the stage of *The Melting Pot*, the real show was happening in the audience" (15).

The continuing viability of the melting pot metaphor also results from its capacity to hold a broad spectrum of theories encompassing both conservative and progressive views on immigrants' assimilation. Its versatility makes it an especially useful vehicle for discussions about the nature of national identity in a modern, multi-cultural context. "The melting pot symbol transforms a fractious past into a seamless future, enabling a vast array of readings of what the future might hold" (Abu-Laban 39). The melting pot metaphor refers to a work in progress, whose final product is located in a vaguely defined future, and hence the concept eludes precise definitions; the potential of diverse readings is what renders this enduring metaphor viable for literary discourse.

Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912), which is an apotheosis of assimilation, illustrates the process which involves shedding the immigrant past and never looking back – only then, Antin argues, can a "greenhorn" become an American. The youthful and optimistic account of a bright and hardworking Jewish girl invokes tropes common to immigrant narratives: departure, passage, arrival, and assimilation. The Biblical allusion of the title suggest that, in the author's eyes, the experience of immigration is something positive and desirable; through "rebirth" an immigrant can create a new identity, which is dissimilar to the one he used to don. The employment of the past tense throughout the work signals the author's disengagement from the experiences of the Old World, and thereby the intellectual distance which is created adds authenticity and credibility to what is a radical transformation. The two parts of Antin's life narrative, which are set off by means of positive and negative images, represent the contrast between the daunting East European past, and the promising American future. The author chooses education as a viable means for the protagonists' assimilation, thereby showing the way in which the pursuit of secular education facilitates the protagonist's smooth assimilation. The positive effects of the process are further rewarded with psychological and material gains. Since the protagonist's aim is to "pass" as American, she follows the American ideology of "consent," to borrow Werner Sollors' terminology from *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Dissent in American Culture* (1986). Thus, in order to accomplish her task, she readily internalizes the conventions of the dominant culture: she willingly surrenders her Jewish ancestry to the power of American stereotyping. Moreover, Antin represses her femininity more closely to identify with the white, independent, male voices which, for an immigrant, are synonymous with the dominant order. The desire to become an American does not cloud her awareness of the difficulties deriving from her ethnic and religious limitations. Antin's narrative focuses on the gains which come with successful assimilation leaving the losses mostly unspoken. An assimilated immigrant may benefit freely from the ample opportunities the new country offers, but, through hard work and diligence, she can also prove her worth in the

eyes of native-born Americans. By portraying immigrants who are a valuable addition to the social fabric of American society, the author intends to disavow the fears voiced by those Americans, who started to feel a growing concern about the Jewish “pollution” of America. *The Promised Land* also offers guidance to the newcomers by providing a literary manual which helps the ‘greenhorns’ maneuver through the meanders of assimilation. All in all, the fundamental message, which Antin’s life narrative promotes, is that

[e]ducation is a key indicator of achievement in the socioeconomic hierarchy and is also a resource (investment) that influences subsequent social and economic mobility. For minorities and immigrants, schooling is seen as the primary step toward full participation in American society (Hirschman 403).

While Mary Antin’s protagonist chooses the pursuit of education as a way to facilitate her Americanization, Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) signals that a man can achieve success, and thus assimilation, through a successful involvement in business ventures. As Cahan’s protagonist participates in the garment industry, an activity which gives him social prominence through ownership and authority, his rising material and social status foster his assimilation. In fact, the choice of garment production is not coincidental since it goes back to the Jewish *shtetl* life in the Pale of Settlement. Since Jews were forbidden to seek employment outside the Settlement and were denied ownership rights to farming land, Susan Glenn, in *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (1990), claims they had to resort to alternative means of employment like commerce and handicrafts. In addition, strict religious laws prevented them from wearing clothes that were not “kosher,” (i.e. mixtures of wool and linen), thus compelling pious Jews to order made-to-measure garments. In time, Jewish tailors were catering not only to “kosher” tastes but became sought after by Gentile clients (19-20). As the time of the Eastern European Jewish immigrant influx to America coincided with the development of the ready-made garment industry between the 1890’s and the 1910’s, skilled Jewish immigrant workers “brought this experience with them to America, and along with southern Italian immigrants, replaced the Irish, English, German, and Swedish women and men who had dominated U.S. clothing production before the 1880’s” (Kvidera 1143). They found immediate employment in the workshops mostly owned by their German-Jewish brethren, who had come in the 1840’s, and by that time had successfully established themselves in American industry. The familiarity of shared Jewish ethnicity attracted the new arrivals who kept to their own kind, a fact which, however,

did not prevent the exploitation of their labor: American Capitalism had no respect for a common ancestral heritage. Connected by the network of factories, sweatshops, contractors, and subcontractors, often run by members of extended families, Jewish immigrant workers from Eastern Europe constituted an important part of the labor force (Glenn 90-93), and those “who disembarked in New York were geographically at the heart of the American ready-made garment industry” (Stubbs 160). Jacob Riis notes a close relationship between the demand of American industry for cheap immigrant labor, and the immigrant’s strategy for survival, which depended on how soon he could start working: “Every ship-load from German ports brings them to [the entrepreneur’s] door in droves, clamoring for work. The sun sets upon the day of the arrival of many a Polish Jew, finding him at work in an East Side tenement, reading the machine and ‘learning the trade’ ” (98).

For male immigrants, like David Levinsky, success is measured in terms of their ability to enter the public sphere of business, in contrast to female immigrants, who were confined to the domestic sphere – a mark of their limitation due to the gender roles they were expected to perform. Levinsky’s female counterparts in *The Promised Land* and Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers* (1925) acquire their access to America, not through production – which is a male attribute of social dominance – but through the consumption of consumer goods; they must buy and wear ready-made garments to remake themselves in the American fashion, a performative change, which facilitates their assimilation. Similarly to Antin’s protagonist, Levinsky must shed his Jewishness in order to learn American ways, which is not an entirely painless task. But his success at assimilation becomes a source of anguish rather than comfort; at this point Antin’s and Cahan’s visions separate. Neither the strategies of the American Melting Pot nor complete assimilation succeeds in alleviating Levinsky’s melancholy, which casts a gloomy cloud over his old age. Although, for David Levinsky, the American Dream has come true, and his from-rags-to-riches life story resonates with the universal, immigrant desire for financial success, still he feels unfulfilled because, somewhere on the way to American success, he has lost his sense of identity. Uprooted from his native Jewish culture by the experience of immigration and later assimilation, a self-centered character like Levinsky’s, cannot find a home in America, so he internalizes his ethnicity; his restlessness signals that a Wandering Jew has resumed his quest. However, his disturbing attempts at repressing his past identity and internalizing the dominant one leave him more alienated. Hence, in self-defense, he puts on a “socially constructed mask” (Weber 740), a the strategy which happens to be only a temporary aid because a mask cannot be a substitute for a fragmented identity in need of reconstruction. Abraham Cahan’s novel reveals a key aspect of the immigrant experience, namely that, “the costs

of out-greening [...] with a vengeance, expos[e] how utterly bereft of social and psychological foundations the out-greener is” (Weber 739).

Anzia Yezierska, like Mary Antin and Abraham Cahan, was an immigrant realist who portrayed Jewish-American, urban life at the beginning of the twentieth century, with a special focus on the immigrant woman’s experience. Contrary to Mary Antin’s unobstructed and smooth version of the process of assimilation, Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers* shows how her protagonist encounters various obstacles, resulting either from her ethnicity or gender, on the way to becoming “a person.” What is intriguing in Yezierska’s literary account, though, is the way she perceives the essence of assimilation; contrary to Antin’s position, she claims that there is no need to cut off one’s ethnic ties in order to assimilate. Yezierska’s conception of immigrant self-identity is not based on a mutually exclusive antithesis – American versus Jewish – but rather on the dialectic dialogue between the two. While Antin’s “rebirth” welcomes a new identity in its completeness, Yezierska’s understanding of the process involves the birth of a hybrid identity, which does not relinquish the Old World for the New, but tries to bring the two together. What is more, “Yezierska’s model of hybridity [...] encompasses gender as well as ethnic identity” (Harrison-Kahan 417). Thus, it grants a female character the right to tell her story. Yezierska’s fiction seeks to alter the meaning of the stereotypical images of a greedy, uncouth, and racially inferior, Jewish immigrant not by refuting those images, as they did exist in American society, but by “[embracing] them, [annexing] them into her work, and then re-interpreting them in the ways that acquitted the Russian Jews of responsibility for them” (Ebest 118); hence, the topics of class struggle in her fiction.

Although the financial dimension of Sara’s success cannot measure up to that of Levinsky’s (he is a millionaire entrepreneur, whereas she graduates to become a teacher on a state salary) in both cases the progress towards assimilation is rewarded with material gains, a fact that supports and validates the American Dream myth. The American assimilative experience, however, leaves neither of the protagonists genuinely happy: Levinsky is disillusioned both with America and with his life, while Sara enjoys her higher social status but realizes that she will never be free from her ancestral burden. What differs between the two accounts, though, is that Sara reclaims her ethnicity by reaching out to her father, and by feeling responsible for “her people,” however confused she is about her own future. Cahan’s protagonist, on the other hand, lingers in a self-imposed solitude pondering where his life went wrong. Yezierska’s liberating strategy enables her protagonist to find a home beyond her own self, a home which she rebuilds from the bits and pieces of her immigrant experiences and the hopes vested in an American life.

The above-mentioned narratives illustrate different paths towards Americanization and the various strategies of social mobility which were available to the protagonists in respect of their gender: the female characters like Mary and Sara escape the ghetto poverty and the oppression of an orthodox home through the door of secular education, whereas the male protagonists embark on a business career. Both male and female characters seek social advancement through inter-marriage, as, for example, in such novels as Emma Wolf's *Other Things Being Equal* (1892), Ezra Brudno's *The Tether* (1908), Anzia Yezierska's *Salome of the Tenements* (1923), Ludwig Lewisohn's *The Island Within* (1928), Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* (1957), and Fannie Hurst's *Family* (1960). In consequence, these avenues of acculturation are also responsible for the characters' acquired status, which reflects the social pattern of the dominant culture. A look at the quality of language they use reveals further discursive differences. Antin's language is oratorical, adorned with Biblical and literary allusions because mastering American idiom validates her ability to "pass," in her own eyes and, more importantly, in the eyes of the American public. Yezierska's language, on the other hand, which is a mixture of English and Yiddish idiom, signals the author's growing self-awareness about the importance of her ethnic roots. The language experiments in immigrant dialect make Yezierska a harbinger of literary modernism: "she not only integrates Yiddish words into her English text, but also uses Americanized Yiddish idioms that distinguish her work stylistically" (Harrison-Kahan 419). Although not all American Jews were comfortable having Yezierska for their spokesperson, as she was chastised for the unfavorable portrayal of the Jewish Diaspora, her popularity gave her a visibility on the American literary scene few other Jewish authors could enjoy.

Michael Gold's novel *Jews Without Money* (1930) documents the picturesque but tough life of the New York Jewish ghetto at the beginning of the twentieth century. Through the lens of an impoverished Jewish immigrant family, Gold portrays the suffering and misery of the working class under American capitalism. His narrative argues that the working class experience is not peculiar to ethnicity (his immigrant characters come from all over Eastern Europe) but it provides a common cause that unites the underprivileged from a wide mixture of backgrounds: workers' revolution. As the pressures of poverty draw people to crime, and traditional Jewish principles lose their value, Gold's narrative points to an alternative to immigrants' social empowerment and inclusion, other than theses forwarded by the previously mentioned authors – allegiance to communist ideology. Since the Jewish leftist literary tradition is generally characterized by "the abrogation of both Jewish particularism and assimilation to bourgeois society" (Wald 176), its ideological literary supporters regarded their Jewishness in terms of the international workers' movement, and

advocated “class unity to extirpate anti-Semitism” (Wald 176). Thus, Gold’s novel furnishes yet another strategy of assimilation, which transcends ethnic and religious borders locating itself in the working class background of the recipients. By foregrounding the significance of the group’s working class status, the author makes ethnicity invisible; the aim of the discursive design is to prevent racial and religious conflicts among immigrant groups of sundry ethnicity. Gold’s narrative contests the reductive image of the immigrant ghetto, thereby, validating the economic and social importance of the working class. In the workers’ movement, his protagonist prophesies the real force which will change the future of America: the dream being to make it a country of social justice and economic prosperity. Gold’s fervent, anti-bourgeois rhetoric, by virtue of employing drastic imagery and language full of hate – “kike,” “Yid,” “wop,” and “Nigger” – testifies to the immigrant’s dehumanizing alienation from the American mainstream. The fatal episode, which involves a shooting in the ghetto street, shows clearly how the experience of immigration alters the perception of Jewish values: in the Old World, the Jews were targets of racial and religious intolerance culminating in the pogroms, and thus the notion of violence was related to Jews being victims and sufferers at the hands of their Gentile oppressors. In America, however, Jewish gangsters kill other Jews, and the wealthy Jewish capitalists exploit and deceive poor Jewish laborers. Thus, the distinction between a perpetrator and a victim, the Gentile and the Jew respectively in the Old World context, is confused. Hence, a new framework of interpretation for Jewish immigrant experience is called upon, and Michael Gold’s work answers the call. *Jews Without Money* does not assume, though, that in America, Jews suddenly start to exhibit a proclivity to criminal behavior; what it posits is that the American capitalistic system enslaves and corrupts innocent immigrant minds leaving them no other alternative. The provocative and oxymoronic title, *Jews Without Money*, challenges the public stereotype of a rich and cunning Jew, and testifies to the existence of the Jewish poor – a the strategy which aims at Gentile readers, who are informed about the diversity of the Jewish Diaspora, as well as at the working class audience, which develops a kinship to the deprived Jews, accepting them as one of their own. Gold’s novel presents a counter discourse to the 1920’s as depicted by F.S. Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, and shows the other America – the country of the underprivileged and the disempowered. Even though the two representations do not overlap, they complement each other, revealing the dynamic nature of the social construct, which epitomizes the complexity of the American society of the period.

Early twentieth-century Jewish-American immigrant narratives provide a multihued picture of life in the Jewish ghetto, which is both a response to and a representation of an important moment in the history of American immigration.

The stories of immigrant struggle offer a personal perspective, which questions “stereotypes [of the ghetto life] recorded variously in the work of reformers, journalists and, somewhat later, sociologists” (Wald 56). Such Jewish-American authors as Mary Antin, Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska and Michael Gold describe various paths towards assimilation, and signal the difficulties which arise when an immigrant must adjust his or her Old World ethnic and religious identity to an American context. Although the avenues of acculturation they advocate differ considerably, and the reversals in fortune mark the progress from a “greenhorn” to an American, all the protagonists share an unrelenting belief in the opportunities offered by the New World.

1. Natives and Aliens: Jewish New York in the Eyes of Turn-of-the-Century Writers

The Jewish Quarter of New York is generally supposed to be a place of poverty, dirt, ignorance and immorality – the seat of the sweat-shops, the tenement house, where “red-lights” sparkle at night, where the poor are queer and repulsive. Well-to-do persons visit the “Ghetto” merely from motives of curiosity or philanthropy; writers treat of it “sociologically,” as of a place in crying need of improvement. (Hapgood 5)

At the turn of the 20th century New York was witnessing a steady flow of immigrants, especially from Eastern Europe, among whom many were of Jewish descent. Propelled by the lack of economic opportunity, religious persecution and the great social upheavals of the 19th century, such as the Industrial Revolution, overpopulation and urbanization, East European Jews embarked on the arduous journey across the Atlantic to the American Promised Land. From 1820 to 1924, when the Johnson-Reed Act restricted immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, Jewish immigration reached levels it had never done before and would never do again. “During this period there was an almost hundred-fold increase in America’s Jewish population from some 3000 in 1820 to as many as 300 000 in 1880” (Library of Congress Information Bulletin). Most of them settled in big cities like New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore where they clustered in districts close to the city centers. They lived in tenement houses, spoke Yiddish, initially joined the working class and successfully built a network of social and cultural organizations. Using occupational and educational avenues to achieve middle-class status, they arduously worked their way into the mainstream of American society.

New York’s Ellis Island became the gateway for the new arrivals and, according to Rischin, “by 1900 they constituted over 76% of the city’s

population (07). Situated in the heart of New York, the Lower East Side became the center of the Jewish population with a distinctive way of life: street peddlers with pushcarts shouting in Yiddish, the smell of herrings, and the congested tenement houses with poverty-stricken inhabitants. Although not only Jews lived in the quarter but also Italians, Germans, Poles, Ukrainians and Irish, the Lower East Side came to represent the Jewish ethnic group just as Harlem was associated with the African-American population of New York. The new immigrants' way of life was often an imitation of the life they lived in the country of their origin, and they were largely dependent on the social structure of the ghetto since "the other" America was inaccessible to an average tenement dweller. Likewise, it was an exotic place to native-born Americans, who rarely ventured into its streets.

Before Henry James visited a Jewish ghetto in New York and Abraham Cahan wrote a story about a young immigrant, there had been two important publications in the study of the immigrant quarters: Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890) and Hutchins Hapgood's *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902). Each of them presented a different image of the Jewish ghetto: Riis stressed the poverty and filth in order to attract the sympathy of public opinion in the hope of social reform, whereas, Hapgood's account uses the techniques of the traditional travel narrative, which portray the Jewish ghetto neighborhoods not as hopeless slums, but places rich in intellectual and cultural life amid the material poverty. As Hapgood's portrait is colorful and picturesque, inspiring curiosity in its readers, Riis's is gloomy and miserable. Influenced by the new forms of journalism established by Joseph Pulitzer, who encouraged journalists to explore the depressed areas of the city in an attempt to capture "the other side" of urban life, which was unknown to the average middle-class reader, Jacob Riis exposed the appalling poverty of the overcrowded, unsanitary tenement houses, their filth and diseases, he argued, being responsible for moral decay and crime.

Jacob Riis was born in Denmark and in 1870 emigrated to the United States because he "believed that America offered opportunity to those who embodied the virtues of hard work, obedience to the law, thrift, sobriety, and familial solidarity" (Schwartz 21). His personal experiences, first as a homeless, unemployed immigrant, and later, as a police reporter and a self-taught photographer, gave him an insight into the unsanitary immigrant lodging houses and propelled his conviction of the need for the social reform. *How the Other Half Lives* is a phototext which combines realistic photography with the author's comments. Cindy Weinstein explains Riis's decision to include photography in his work by claiming that "[p]hotographic realism, for Riis, was a hybrid form which combined the greater reliability of visual representation with the heightened persuasiveness of the image" (196). The invention of the

flashlight made it possible to take photographs in dark places which had earlier been earlier inaccessible, and thus the proverbial murkiness of ghetto life becomes illuminated both in a metaphorical and a literal way. Recording his experiences, Riis recalls the initial difficulties with the use of the flashlight when he “[tried] to take a flashlight picture of a group of blind beggars and manag[ed] to set fire to the house” (25).

By exposing ghetto life to public scrutiny, Riis hoped for action on the part of the richer America, as ignoring the problem of increasing immigration might cause a potential threat to the American middle-classes. Although his American identity was acquired, he represented American middle-class reformers who, like other intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century, were influenced by Darwinism and the eugenics movements. Progressive reformers “looked to government regulation (of housing, the work place, and so forth) and in some cases to redistribution of income as the keys to lessening poverty”(Schwartz 22). As poverty was associated with demoralization, the work ethic was regarded as the main route out of destitution. That is why the progressives aimed at character-building by means of creating “a moral environment for the poor” (Schwartz 22), which involved assistance and support rather than preaching and indiscriminate charity.

One of the criticisms of Riis’s book was that his “photographs, not tenement life at all, produce the problem of deindividualization that he then wishes to reform”(Weinstein 209) In fact, the captions under the photographs do not specify individuals but refer to anonymous masses, which answer the stereotypical descriptions of a typical Jew, Chinese or Italian. Hence, the question of their representation arises, which is additionally mediated through the lens of the photographer. In fact, Riis’s book rather obscures than clarifies the problems of racial identification, which, nonetheless, reflects the existing, uninterested approach of the middle-classes towards the immigrants, probably best rendered in the enigmatic title of the book – “the other half.” Riis’s racial essentialism is manifested in the following passage, which refers to the ghetto Jews:

The great mass of them are too gregarious to take kindly to farming. And their strong commercial instinct hampers the experiment. To herd them in model tenements, though it relieve the physical suffering in a measure, would be to treat a symptom of the disease rather than strike at its root (99).

One can see, however, the author's confusion as to the causes of the immigrants' poverty; he is not quite sure whether to blame the ghetto destitution on the race or on the environment:

The causes that operate to obstruct efforts to better the lot of the tenement population are, in our day, largely found among the tenants themselves. This is true particularly of the poorest. They are shiftless, destructive, and stupid; in a word, they are what the tenements have made them (207).

A zealous social reformer, Riis strongly objected to charity claiming that "undiscriminating charity is worse than none at all," because it "degrade[s] and pauperize[s] where true help should aim at raising the sufferer to self-respect and self-dependence" (19). Instead, he advocated the creation of healthy, public spaces in form of parks and playgrounds, as opposed to overcrowded and suffocating tenement houses.

His articles and photographs, which showed the squalid living and working conditions in the ghetto and the suffering of the least fortunate tenement dwellers, played an important role in the campaign to improve the material conditions of the urban slums. Although his ubiquitous ethnic stereotyping and skepticism towards the mental capabilities of some ethnic groups, such as the Chinese, Italians and Jews, resulted in criticism of his work, his pioneering photography documented the history of American immigration and inspired social change. *How the Other Half Lives* targeted the New York middle and upper classes, which were then unaware of the plight of the immigrants, and led to a wider public knowledge of and compassion for the ghetto residents. Acting than as a mediator between the working classes and the upper classes, Riis encouraged the latter to take an active role in improving the lives of their less privileged citizens. Moreover, his account of the New York slums started a series of studies of the urban poor. Writers such as Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, William Dean Howells, and Hamlin Garland explored in their works the problems of American cities and their inhabitants.

Quite a different picture of the New York ghetto is presented by Hutchins Hapgood in *The Spirit of the Ghetto, Studies of the Jewish Quarter in New York* (1902), where the author records the ferment and bustle of the Lower East Side with excitement and a sense of discovery. In the opening lines of the preface to the first edition, Hapgood challenges the bogus opinion of the Jewish quarter of New York that it "is generally supposed to be a place of poverty, dirt, ignorance and immorality – the seat of the sweat-shop, the tenement house, where "red-lights" sparkle at night, where the people are queer and repulsive"

(5). At the same time, he asserts that his motives for visiting the Jewish ghetto are not philanthropic, sociological or induced by sheer curiosity, which is true of the majority of well-to-do Americans, but motivated rather “by virtue of the charm [he] felt in men and things there” (5). Although he is a Gentile, his portrayal of the ghetto avoids antisemitic bias and tends to depict “the characters, lives and pursuits of certain East-side Jews with whom he has been in relations of considerable intimacy” (5) with a large dose of sympathy.

In subsequent chapters of his book, Hapgood enumerates various stages of immigrants’ assimilation into American society, which start with the learning of a few English words such as “window,” “all right,” “policeman,” and buying new, American clothes. Then, a greenhorn becomes a sweat-shop tailor or a push-cart peddler working his way into financial stability. Assimilation, however, does not mean a rejection of the old values. Hapgood’s ideal is to form an American persona “consistent with the spirit at the heart of the Hebraic tradition” (38). The mutual insurance societies and committees to support the poorest meet these requirements, as they go well with Progressive ideas, on the one hand, and the Talmud teachings about caring for the poor, on the other. By comparing generations of immigrants, Hapgood discusses the problems of cultural adaptation. In Russia, it was the father who supported his son until he was married; in America, the roles are reversed, and the son becomes his parents’ interpreter and protector. A young boy who “sells papers, blacks boots, and becomes a street merchant on a small scale” (28), makes an important contribution to his family’s finances. Consequently, entrepreneur, immigrant children become more independent than their less adaptable parents, who often flounder through the intricacies of the New World.

Hapgood stresses the importance of the Yiddish press which helped to extend “the intellectual horizon of the Jew beyond the boundaries of the Talmud, and has largely displaced the rabbi in the position of teacher to the people” (178). In spite of ideological differences between the conservative, socialist, and anarchist press, periodicals like Abraham Cahan’s “Forward” taught the immigrants American ways of alleviating the pains of assimilation. As the American educational system lacked a religious element, which was so crucial in the Old World, “heder” becomes less important to Jewish students. The secularization of the Jewish mind results in a greater independence of thought as well as skepticism, which widens the gap between traditional parents and Americanized children. The *shtetl*’s aspirations for having a rabbi son become substituted by the educational opportunities of a professional career; hence the proverbial Jewish doctor, lawyer or banker. The theatrical life in the ghetto not only preserved the Yiddish language and customs, but often satirized them, especially the orthodox ones: “the ‘greenhorn’ laughed to scorn and the rabbi held up to derision” (13).

But most interesting and picturesque for the author are the intellectuals of the ghetto: writers, poets, singers, actors, journalists, scholars, playwrights, and artists, as they are “the most educated, forcible, and talented personalities of the quarter” (39). They are responsible for the intellectual ferment, which attracts Hapgood so much, for spreading the ideas of universal brotherhood, and adding freshness to the American melting pot. After attending a lecture or a theatrical performance, they meet in cafes “where excellent coffee and tea are sold, where everything is clean and good, and where the conversation is often the best” (90). Over coffee and cake, young, Jewish men become “intoxicated with the excitement of ideas” (90) as for hours, they discuss “politics and society, poetry and ethics, literature and life” (90). Innumerable boys’ debating clubs, ethical clubs and literary clubs infuse young Jews with the desire and energy for acquiring knowledge, which consequently, results in the triumphant “Ghetto boy’s growing Americanism” (37). Hapgood foresees the advantages of the process he is describing, and claims that once their assimilation is completed, the immigrants will be a valuable asset to the structure of American society.

Presenting colorful stories of working class life and picturesque inhabitants, Hapgood describes ghetto life without sermonizing and moralizing, but with a well-meaning interest. In contrast to Riis’ ethnocentrism, he stresses the benefits of New York’s cosmopolitan climate arguing that multiplicity defines the American mind. Observing the individuals within the crowd rather than the indistinguishable masses, he notices the signs of cultural acceptance and adaptation. Seen through the lens of the immigrant other, his impressions create sympathy towards the ghetto inhabitants as the ones who enrich American culture, especially when they favor “piety and wisdom” over “riches, talent and power” (23). Fascinated by the intellectual vitality of the otherwise poverty-ridden neighborhood, Hapgood believes that the ghetto artists and writers will update the stale atmosphere of the New York literary establishment, and will become a valuable addition to American society.

When Henry James returned to New York in 1904, after more than 20 years of absence, he found himself in an unfamiliar environment. Between 1884, his last visit to New York, and 1904 the city had changed its image and developed into a metropolis. The Gilded Age transformed New York City’s skyline in accordance with economic progress: “tall buildings...[and] multitudinous skyscrapers” (60) were erected with great haste. Immigrants made the city a multicultural venue, whose streets exhibited a variety of races, languages and cultures. Although a native New Yorker, such changes in the fabric of the social structure made Henry James wonder about the true nature of an American. His position was paradoxically both inside and outside early 20th century New York. Although he was born there, he found it difficult to associate himself with the new corporate and economically successful city populated with “the vast

numbers of their kind...from whatever ends of the earth" (48). The time spent in Europe had given him additional space to negotiate his attitude to the new reality constructed during his absence. I would argue that James's perceptive impressions of immigrant New York are nevertheless conflicting: criticism is mixed with an awareness of the developing notions of American identity, the need to accept the inevitable changes and expectations for a new quality to arise from the American melting pot. In comparison, Abraham Cahan in *The Rise of David Levinsky* presents a stark contrast between the backwardness and poverty of the East European *shtetl* life and the apparent affluence of the New York streets in order both to familiarize the American public with the problems of assimilation and to show the immigrants' daily struggle to adapt to a new environment.

What first attracts James's attention is the affluence of the German Jewry: "[T]he huge new houses" with "smart, short lawns" and other architectural details which only "confessed to their extreme expensiveness" and which were "affirming their wealth"(5). "Nothing but the scale of many of the houses and their candid look of having cost as much as they knew how. Unmistakably they all proclaimed it – they would have cost still more had the way but been shown them" (5). Such dwellings reaffirm their inhabitants' financial success, making them proud through announcing it to the world. However, what, according to James, they do not have is "their justification;" they are still lacking "character...[and] identity." The buildings' vulgar opulence seems to assert that "expensive as we are, we have nothing to do with continuity, responsibility, transmission, and don't in the least care what becomes of us after we have served our present purpose"(6). For all the architectural beauty "the crudity of wealth did strike him with so direct a force"(5) that the houses' ostentatious affluence evokes a feeling of contempt rather than admiration. The scene makes him think of "great white boxes...with the silvered ghostliness (for all the silver involved)" (5) which are empty of any valuable content, be it human or material, the air of "ghostliness" reflecting their transience. Paradoxically, the houses are worthless to Henry James because their inhabitants sustain no long-lasting and appreciable tradition, nor pass any valuable message to future generations. Confronted with such manifestations of wealth, which bear little resemblance to good taste and refinement, James longs for the New York of his youth, when the streets had "value," "charm" and "a mild and melancholy glamour," when one could feel the "moral and social value [...]of the Fifth Avenue heritage" (35). The nouveau riches, "new and heedless generations"(34), who so ostentatiously manifest their financial success, come and go with the turbulent flow of the economic market, often not leaving a mark that would last longer than their bank account.

JAMES'S VISIT TO THE DENSE, IMMIGRANT NEIGHBORHOODS OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE is the pretext to redefine his conception of national identity in line with the dichotomy 'us-Americans' versus 'them-immigrants,' 'norm' versus 'the ethnic Other.' On entering the neighborhood, he is immediately overwhelmed by the number of "the fruit of the foreign tree as shaken down there with a force that smothered everything else" (46). The immigrants "swarm" with "the cheerful hum of that babel of tongues" (46) in "trolley-cars stuffed to suffocation" (35). What one sees is "the endless vista of a clogged tube," (35) and "a row of faces, up and down, testifying, without exception to alienism unmistakable, alienism undisguised and unashamed" (48). New York streets make James feel isolated and alienated although, paradoxically, these feelings are mostly ascribed to the immigrants rather than the natives: James deconstructs the two terms showing their changing dynamics. What is more, he observes that all these newcomers are at home now, however short their stay in the United States has been. "Foreigners as they might be...they were really more at home, at the end of their few weeks or months or their year or two, than they had ever in their lives been before" (48). This readiness, on the part of the recent immigrants, to accept the new land as their own and claim American citizenship, is what puzzles and worries James. He recognizes a threat to the dominant American culture embodied by the masses of immigrants bringing their own languages, customs and culture, and whose uncontrolled influx may shake the civic foundations of the country and destabilize it. Similarly, the myriads of exotic Jewish shops, which cater to the immigrants' needs, are seen not as a sign of entrepreneurial spirit, but as the intended appropriation of the city territory. The Jewish ghetto is a world within, rarely frequented by non-Jews and, therefore, strange and possibly dangerous to an average American.

The memory of the extremely densely populated Yiddish quarter evokes in James the likeness "of a great swarming, a swarming that had begun to thicken infinitely." He continues "[T]here is no swarming like that of Israel...and the scene here bristled, at every step, with the signs and sounds, immitigable, unmistakable, of a Jewry that had burst all bounds"(51). On top of the crowd there are children who "swarmed above all – here was multiplication with vengeance" (51). The Jewish multitude makes him think of animals, "snakes or worms", whose justification lies only in the quantity, not the quality, of their being as "when cut into pieces, [they] wriggle away contentedly and live in a snippet as completely as in the whole" (51). James overlooks the vitality and endurance which accompany the immigrants' struggle and concentrates only on their alarming numbers. Analogically, the high birth rate among the Jewish population has its purpose, which is the sole preservation of their race; "they were all there for race, and not, as it were, for reason" (51). The "ant-like population" (52) of the tenement houses reminds James of "the spaciouly

organized cages for the nimbler class of animals in some great zoological garden...with a little world of bars and perches and swings for human squirrels and monkeys”(52). The denizens of the Lower East Side signify for James “the Hebrew conquest of New York (51). The animal metaphors dehumanize the anonymous Jewish crowd, denying its representatives the unique and individual features of human beings. Instead, race becomes its distinct characteristic, which, in contrast with White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans, and in accordance with post-colonial rhetoric, makes them the underprivileged Other.

Although the visit to the Jewish ghetto was not a pleasant experience for James, he, nevertheless, softens his criticism when he observes the modernization of the neighborhood: iron fire-escapes on each building, the electric light, the telephones, the public garden “suggest the distance achieved from the old Jerusalem” (51). The visit to the East Side cafes furnishes James with hope for the future. He finally realizes that “the Yiddish world was a vast world, with its own depths and complexities” (53). Although present Jewish immigrant life is overwhelmed by poverty and humility, as they are caught “at an early stage of their American growth,” (53) James sees the potential in the Jewish men of letters whom he meets discussing matters over coffee and cigarettes. The fact that they exhibit “the sublimity of good conscience...a protrusion of elbow never aggressive...comparative civility” (53) suggests “the various possibilities of the waiting spring of intelligence” (53). James suspends judgment and wonders how these few intellectuals might influence the rest of the Jewish community: “How new a thing under the sun the resulting public would be?”(53) He is especially anguished in his predictions of what will happen to his beloved English, and certain that “we shall not know it for English,” (54) as the “sordid, squalid and gross” (52) immigrants will appropriate it, thus taking his America away.

New York revisited poses a more fundamental question to James about the nature of the developing American identity. James calls the newcomers “aliens” distancing himself and, at the same time, affirming his privileged position: “Who and what is an alien, when it comes to that, in a country peopled from the first under the jealous eye of history? – peopled, that is, by migrations at once extremely recent, perfectly traceable and urgently required,”(48) and he continues: “Which is the American...which is *not* the alien...and where does one put a finger on the dividing line”(48). As Gert Buelens argues:

Indeed, James’s own “native” status is a rather questionable one. He often labels himself the “restored absentee,” a cognomen that reminds the reader of his scant right to claim the country of his birth as truly his and of the near-

interchangeability of his own identity with that of the
“aliens” (14).

James also exhibits the more radical conviction that assimilation is not always a peaceful process, and hence sometimes requires “a mechanism working with scientific force” (49) to make foreigners “colorless,” which means devoid of their distinctive ethnic characteristics. As history has shown, it takes more than “fifty doubts and queries” (48) to dispel James’ sense of cultural dispossession, which has become the crucial issue for 20th century American Studies.

James’s anti-Semitic opinions of the Jews were not isolated. Theodore Dreiser and other intellectuals, who not only come from working-class Christian homes, shared his critical views. The anti-Semitic rhetoric was used to blame Jewish-controlled banks for the bankruptcies of the western farmers and the hardships of the Depression. Populist political leaders of the 1890’s employed the same strategy which perpetuated “the stereotype of the Jew as ruthless urban entrepreneur” and “an unscrupulous exploiter of the unwary” (Pizer 4). Theodore Dreiser, who was already a renowned writer, published a play in 1919 set among Lower East Side Jews, *The Hand of the Potter*. Although the play was written in 1916, it was not produced until 1921, and it was one of the first literary works, written by an American writer, which was devoted entirely to matters Jewish. The story tells of a generational conflict between traditional parents and their Americanized children, with a controversial twist as “the oldest son of the thread peddler Aaron Berchansky, suffers from a hormone-induced sexual deviancy which leads him to attack young girls” (Pizer 5). No wonder that Dreiser’s play met with a mixed reception, and the author was accused of anti-Semitism. Importantly, the debate which followed the publication of *The Hand of the Potter* reflected typical arguments used in similar discussions about the nature of anti-Semitism at the beginning of the twentieth-century.¹

At the beginning of his literary career, Dreiser expressed sympathy towards the Jewish immigrants asserting that “[t]he Jew is not a vulgar, grasping materialist whose shady commercial practices pollute the national ethos but an artist and poet in all his endeavors”(Pizer 7). One can easily find echoes of Hapgood’s enthusiastic claim that Jewish intellectual ferment enriched the listless, American society. In spite of their seeming “Orientalism”, which differentiates Jews from the people of western nations, Dreiser believed that they could be assimilated and bring a new quality to the fabric of American

¹ For more information on the debate see Pizer, 1-23.

society. Unfortunately, the social consequences of the deepening depression of the 1930's called for a scapegoat, and the Jews were right at hand. Already towards the 1920's, Dreiser's opinions about Jews became more radical. When he revisited New York, after having spent three years in California, he expressed in a letter to a friend a similar dissatisfaction with what he saw in the streets as Henry James had done upon his return from England: "N.Y. to me is a scream – a Kyke's dream of a Ghetto. The lost tribe has taken the island" (Elias 405) Donald Pizer notices, however, that "Dreiser's tendency throughout his life [was] to speak more critically about the Jews in his personal correspondence than in his public statements" (Pizer 8). In many later interviews, one may notice the contempt with which Dreiser refers to the Jew as an international banker controlling world trade, the pushy Jew, the oversensitive Jew, and the Jew asking for special favors. Dreiser's argument that Jews are more prone to biological deficiencies than other races helped to perpetuate the stereotype of the "degenerate" Jew. The self-centered Jew, he insists, always retains a distance from other nations; "he maintains his religious dogmas and his racial sympathies, race characteristics, and race cohesion as against all the types or nationalities surrounding him wheresoever" (Elias 437). As the Jew, Dreiser explains, is unable fully to assimilate, he is therefore persecuted: "Jews drift to where they can 'share in and take advantage' of what nations have to offer; they are always outsiders and as such can expect to be persecuted" (Pizer 12). Dreiser attributes the vices of Jews to their racial characteristics, expressing little optimism as to the success of their assimilative attempts. In consequence, since the Jewish problem resists a plausible solution, there is only a small step leading to the idea of Jewish extermination. With the Nazi party rapidly gaining popularity in Germany, the anti-Semitic tones voiced in America were fuelled by nativist and fascist groups. 1933, which marked Adolph Hitler's coming to power, witnessed a growing resentment toward the Jews both in Europe and the United States, which culminated in the Holocaust.

Abraham Cahan is one of the first Jewish-American writers who brought the picturesque and exotic neighborhood of the Lower East Side to American attention through his novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917). To an educated American eye the title bears a resemblance to a popular novel by William Dean Howells *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) as both works tell the story of a successful social rise with a bitter-sweet touch. Cahan's aim was to familiarize the American Gentile world with the immigrant Lower East Side, to re-humanize its inhabitants in American eyes thus building a path to mutual acceptance. As Abraham Cahan, owing to his journalistic career, knew how to Americanize his fellow Jewish immigrants, he also knew how to portray the Jewish ghetto for the first time to an average American reader. His literary

account both legitimizes and affirms the immigrants' presence on American soil.

That is why David Levinsky, the eponymous hero of Cahan's book who settles in the Lower East Side, sees the place in an optimistic light, which is not diminished by "the unfriendly voices [of the immigration officers] with a spirit of icy inhospitality that sent a chill through [his] very soul (60). The newcomer is "literally overcome with the beauty of the landscape (58), "the magnificent verdure of the Staten Island, the tender blue sea and sky, the dignified bustle of the passing [ferries]" (59). Overwhelmed by the "gorgeousness of the spectacle" (58) before his eyes, he compares it to a divine revelation unfolding itself like a dream to a man in a trance. These images, which appeal to the sublime, confirm the myth of the immigrant American dream. They also attest to the truth of "the many millions of letters that pass annually between the Jews of Russia and their relatives in the United States" (63) in which the successful ones boast about their financial gains, while the failures remain largely silent about their situation. By the virtue of contrast to what life was like back in Russia: "It was all so utterly unlike anything I had ever seen or dreamed of before," (59) they promise a second chance for a better life.

The first glimpse of the hectic city makes David think of an urban "jungle" with trains hurtling overhead and active street life around him. Where James sees merely the congestion of people, noise and the clamor of unidentified voices, Levinsky observes individuals within the crowd who exhibit "more self-confidence and energy, larger ambitions and wider scopes, than did the appearance of the crowds in [his] birthplace" (63). They are better dressed "[t]he poorest looking man wore a hat (instead of a cap), a stiff collar and a necktie, and the poorest woman wore a hat or a bonnet" (63). Even the policeman "looked like some uniformed nobleman" (61). When he sees an evicted tenement family sitting on the pavement, he remarks that their furniture would be a sign of prosperity in the Old World, not poverty like here. On further observation, the crowds of lower Broadway impress him as "a multitude of counts, barons, princes;" (62) only the hustle and bustle in the streets does not comport with their noble appearance, he concludes.

Levinsky's story develops according to the optimistic version of the immigrant narrative: he meets a rich Jew who supplies him with new American clothes, buys him dinner, pays his rent for the next month and gives him some money to start a peddling business. Coincidence or not, they meet in a synagogue, the first place Levinsky turns to to pray and look for hospitality. He was a Talmud Scholar at home and, although he has to "trim his sails to suit new winds" (69) and find another way to earn his living, his visit to the House of God is an omen of his future good fortune. As the story develops, the "greenhorn" becomes an Americanized Jew who fully appreciates the

opportunities which America offers: general education, mastery of the English language, Yiddish theatre and Hebrew literature – things which were not available in his native Russia – but above all, business opportunities for hard-working entrepreneurs. Levinsky engages in a typical trade for Jewish East European immigrants – the garment industry – and after twenty-five years becomes a mogul of the cloak trade celebrating his success in the Waldorf Astoria.

Levinsky's story is an ironic example of a Jewish immigrant's successful assimilation into American society, which counterbalances the unmitigated optimism of Mary Antin's autobiography *The Promised Land* (1912). The concluding words of Cahan's novel interrogate the nature of financial success as the protagonist realizes that there is something missing in his life: "I can never forget the days of my misery. I cannot escape from my old self. My past and my present do not comport well" (372). Although Cahan's novel perpetuates the idea of an immigrant's American Dream, it also educates his compatriots by giving words of warning: "America is no Russia. There is no pity here, no hospitality" (66). America is not a "land of gold;" a man must make a living here. Presenting the daily struggle to survive in an unfamiliar environment and the cultural and psychological forces driving Jewish immigrants through the hardships of assimilation, Cahan makes the immigrant's experience more accessible to the American mind. The evoking of compassion and empathy results in mutual understanding and acceptance and thus bridges the gap between aliens and natives. Furthermore, Cahan's novel dispels James's and Dreiser's fears about the inability of immigrants to blend into American society by arguing that immigrant culture enriches rather than pollutes the American scene.

The authors, I have chosen to discuss, present New York's East Side at the turn of the century from different points of view and for various purposes. Jacob Riis, by means of middle-class rhetoric, portrays the poverty and misery of tenement life, and the "huddled masses" in need of social reform. His muckraking comments on an underprivileged part of American society are designed to draw public interest to the problems of the ghetto. The same place, however, acquires an air of optimism and promise in the eyes of another social commentator, Hutchins Hapgood, who is more sanguine and enthusiastic about the immigrants' assimilative abilities. This dual identity of the ghetto is partly caused by the fact that both authors focus on different aspects of the place: Riis on its physical reality, Hapgood on its unique character. Henry James, in turn, expresses concerns common to the American, Anglo-Saxon, upper-classes: on the one hand, nostalgia for the New York of his youth, which was more racially homogeneous and refined, and on the other, uncertainty as to the future of American identity, which must accommodate the flow of immigrants coming to

the United States from all corners of the world. For Abraham Cahan, the Lower East Side is the background against which he presents his hero's dilemma, which is connected with the costs of assimilation. The backwardness of the eastern European *shtetl* life is initially contrasted with urban modernity. When the greenhorn's enthusiasm is gone, the ghetto becomes the scene of the immigrant's struggle to make his American Dream come true. Cahan, contrary to previous writers who erased individuality by talking about masses and anonymous crowds, concentrates on one man's fate, which makes his fictional account more appealing to readers.

The discourse of social exploration, cultural ethnography and literary analysis allows access to a singular aspect of the multidimensional structure which is society. It may seem that James' New York, inhabited by wealthy, "white" and predominantly Christian citizens, has little in common with the poverty of Riis's and Cahan's immigrant Lower East Side, but both represent a dynamic structure in progress, which is American society. Only through a multifaceted lens, which demands new frameworks of interpretation, can one attempt to approach the problems evoked by large scale immigration. The ethnic diversity of American society is one of its distinctive features and the constant flow of immigrants poses similar questions to those which bothered Henry James over a century ago. As much as historical changes substituted Jewish immigrants with Asian or Hispanic ones, and economic progress eliminated sweatshops, replacing them with industrial estates, the mental costs of immigration are still immeasurable. The extent of this problem can be seen in the ongoing public interest in how ethnic and racial identities are formed and transformed under changing social, economic and historical circumstances.

2. The Making of a New American, or the Solution to the Problem of Immigration Through Dissolution: Israel Zangwill's *The Melting Pot*¹

America is God's Crucible, the Great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming! [...] Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians – into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American. (Zangwill 3)

Israel Zangwill's family experienced immigration, like all the other authors I have decided to discuss. However, Zangwill's haven became England, not America. Therefore, the inclusion of an English Jew in this anthology is based not on the geographical location shared with the other authors, but on the theme of his influential play, *The Melting Pot* (1908). Zangwill's major contribution to the immigrant debate in the United States lies in providing an apt metaphor for immigration. His eponymous play located the discussion about what it means to be an American not within historical and political discourses, but among the masses of immigrants who arrived in the New World at the turn of the century. In fact, Zangwill's metaphor recognizes America primarily as a nation of immigrants, a fact which has become crucial in the further development of the country. Thus, an English Jew is the author of one of the key concepts related to twentieth-century American social history. Although initially the melting pot referred only to America's self-definition, it later came to represent global currency and now serves in discussions of multiethnic societies generally.

Israel Zangwill was born on February 14, 1864 into a family of Jewish immigrants from Latvia. After the family moved from Bristol to London, like many other Jewish, immigrant children, he attended the Jews' Free School in Spitalfields, where he received education both in religious and secular studies.

¹ My analysis looks at *The Melting Pot* as a literary text, not a theatrical performance.

Zangwill's progress was so good that he obtained a scholarship. Next, he studied for a degree at the University of London, where he earned a B.A. with triple honors. During his studies, he took up a teaching job at the Jew's Free School, first, as a pupil teacher, and later as a member of the regular staff, but, following a disagreement with the school authorities, he resigned. When Zangwill devoted himself to literature, he soon grew to become one of the most outspoken spokesmen for, not only Jewish, emancipation: he was "an important male suffragette who frequently spoke and wrote on behalf of the Women's Social and Political Union and other suffragette groups" (Rochelson 306). Throughout his literary career he contributed to various magazines, in which he humorously commented on current events. A meeting, in 1895, with Theodor Herzl converted him to Zionism, and thus he became an enthusiast for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. However, in 1905, he broke with Zionism to shift his sympathy to the Jewish Territorial Organization, which campaigned for the creation of a Jewish homeland outside Palestine. In 1903, he married Edith Ayrton, a non-Jewish writer and political activist. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 rekindled Zangwill's interest in the establishment of a Jewish State and the transfer of Arabs out of Palestine. However, his constantly changing perspective on Zionism and dedication to politically themed dramas caused him to encounter a great deal of criticism, which was partly responsible for the decline in his literary reputation. As a dramatist, he was often chastised for using the stage as a pulpit to argue social and political causes.

Israel Zangwill published *Children of the Ghetto: A Study of a Peculiar People* in 1892, in which he vividly portrays the poverty-stricken, Jewish quarter of London's East End, a work which instantly shot him to fame. In the same year, he published *The Big Bow Mystery*, which was one of the earliest "locked room" crime novels. Although he contributed to general literature with such novels as *The Master* (1895), and *The Mantle of Elijah* (1901), his reputation lies mainly with his Jewish ghetto fiction: *The King of Schnorrers* (1893), a satire on the relationship between rich (Sephardim) and poor (Ashkenazi) Jews; *Ghetto Tragedies* (1893); and *Dreamers of the Ghetto* (1898), the latter including essays on famous Jews. Zangwill was a prolific writer who, apart from novels and dramas, published poems, dramatic sketches, and translations of the medieval Jewish poets. The varied body of his work, which includes non-Jewish as well as Jewish topics, testifies to his desire to be seen not only as an ethnic writer, but also as a writer who could render Jewish themes as part of general human interest. Israel Zangwill died in 1926 in Midhurst, West Sussex.

Although Zangwill was a writer of great range and versatility, he is mostly remembered for his eponymous play *The Melting Pot*, which opened in Washington D.C. on 5 October 1908. President Theodore Roosevelt, who was

in attendance at the Columbia Theatre, expressed his satisfaction at the end of the performance: "That's a great play, Mr. Zangwill, a great play!" Moreover, President Roosevelt later agreed to have a revised edition of *The Melting Pot* (1914) dedicated to himself: "In respectful recognition of his strenuous struggle against the forces that threaten to shipwreck the great republic which carries mankind and its fortunes, this play is, by his kind permission, cordially dedicated." Partly due to the President's endorsement, the play at first generated favorable reviews, but later critical reception was mixed: while *The Melting Pot* was praised for evoking "human sympathy, charity, and compassion" (201)², for being full of wit and purpose, and for providing "an entertaining and serious examination of American culture" (Kraus 3), it was also criticized for "theatrical exaggeration" (199); "critics called it formally flawed, a play that simply did not work" (Kraus 3) – "romantic claptrap" (199). In addition, a review in *The Times*: "As a work of art for art's sake, the play does not exist" (201)³ denied the play aesthetic merit. Unperturbed by criticism, the author, in an afterword to the 1920 edition, optimistically felt his play to have been "universally acclaimed by Americans as a revelation of Americanism" (216).

Another factor responsible for the mixed reception of Zangwill's play was the audiences' backgrounds: native-born Americans looked at the play "objectively and considered it on its purely theatric values" (Kraus 5), while, "the immigrants and sons of immigrants, particularly of Jewish blood, may [have found] its theme of personal, subjective application" (Kraus 5). Joe Kraus, however, offers a different explanation for the conflicting reception of the play arguing, "that it played before an America that was renegotiating the aesthetic conventions of theater as one means of articulating what it meant to be American at all" (3-4). *The Melting Pot*, he further argues, "appeared on the scene at a moment when the American theater world ceased to accept heterogeneity in its productions and, more subtly, ceased to accommodate difference in its audiences" (4). Hence, the critics found fault with the play's transgressing "the newly forming standards of theatre as high art. In its use of vaudeville-like ethnic stereotyping and flag-worshipping, its reliance on the sentimental form, and its simultaneous seriousness" (Kraus 11). "So far as the New York critics were concerned, there was no room for a hybrid production like *The Melting Pot* in the serious American theater" (Kraus 8). All in all,

² Israel Zangwill *The Melting Pot. Drama In Four Acts* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920)

<<http://www.archive.org/stream/meltingpotdramai00zanguoft#page/no/mode/2up>> .

All references are to this edition and are cited by page within the text.

³ For a discussion of the reception of Zangwill's play see: Joe Kraus "How *The Melting Pot* Stirred America: The Reception of Zangwill's Play and Theater's Role in the American Assimilation Experience." 1999.

[1]oo political to be literature, and yet too literary for political analysis, *The Melting Pot* has appealed to neither of the disciplines traditionally assigned to the study of politics and literature – political science and English literary criticism” (Abu-Laman, Lamont 23).

The Melting Pot, which is set in early twentieth-century New York, chronicles a complicated love affair between two Russian émigrés: a Jewish composer, David Quixano, and an aristocratic, Christian, anti-revolutionary, Vera Revendal. David leaves Russia in the wake of the Kishinev pogroms, during which he loses his entire family. Immigration to America does not, however, soothe his pain, which is constantly evoked by the memory of the massacre. Vera, in turn, has had to leave Russia because of her involvement in anti-Tsarist circles. When they meet and fall in love, the young man is a gifted but poor musician, who is working on a symphony, and Vera is a social worker helping newly-arrived immigrants. On hearing about her forthcoming marriage, Vera’s father is summoned by an American friend and arrives in America with a view to become reconciled with his daughter and prevent her marriage to a Jew. In Baron Revendal, David recognizes the Russian officer who supervised the slaughter of his family; the shocking truth prompts his decision to break with Vera. At the conclusion of a violent exchange, Baron Revendal admits his guilt and leaves, whereas David, who abandons thoughts of revenge, finds solace in music and successfully completes his symphony entitled “The Crucible.” His oeuvre conveys the idea that the world’s ethnic variety should melt and thus prevent racial and religious conflicts. The play ends with the young lovers reconciled and sharing a kiss, which symbolizes their and America’s prosperous future. Looking at the play, one can easily notice how Zangwill updates the Romeo and Juliet plot, changing the feuding families into Jews and Christians in order to accommodate the contemporary American scene.

According to the afterword of the 1920 New York edition, the idea of the play “sprang directly from the author’s concrete experience as President of the Emigration Regulation Department of the Jewish Territorial Organization, which, founded shortly after the great massacres of Jews in Russia, [would] soon have fostered the settlement of ten thousand Russian Jews in the West of the United States” (198). Zangwill believed that the conditions offered to Jews in the U.S. were without parallel, America being a country “in the making” (96). Jewish assimilation in countries like Holland or Turkey was impossible because “[t]hey were old civilizations stamped with the seal of creed. In such countries the Jew may be right to stand out” (97). America, however, is “this new secular Republic” (97), where “little Jews will grow American” (53), and will help to build the country’s future. This fact influenced Zangwill’s artistic agenda to such an extent that his main achievement lies not in the artistic quality of the play, but in its main tenet, which is an attempt to combine essential

Jewishness with the requirements of a modern, multi-ethnic society, which America had become by the turn of the twentieth century. Put another way, Zangwill's play presents a model of assimilation by means of which Jewish immigrants might secure their place in American society. The play is also addressed to native-born Americans, who are assured that immigration does not pose a threat to the unity of their country. The title *The Melting Pot* gave Americans a persuasive metaphor for what their country was at the time of the heated immigration debate, which concerned the issues of ethnicity and examined the nature of patriotism. Zangwill's prophetic vision of "America [as] God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming!" (33) adds an artistic voice to the debate. To validate the Jewish presence in the American Crucible, the author uses religious rhetoric by means of which he weaves a connection between Jewish immigrants and America. David, like his Biblical predecessor, believes that he is "the prophet of the living present" (147), "the apostle of America, the prophet of the God of our children" (179). Arguing with Quincy, a native-born American, David recalls the Pilgrim Fathers who "came straight out of [Jewish] the Old Testament" (87), an allusion which legitimizes the Jewish presence on American soil. A self-ordained prophet who speaks on behalf of the Jewish community, David takes on God-like power when he "raises his hands in benediction over the shining city" (185), thus presenting the Jewish cause as an element of a broader, spiritual framework, which will finally enrich the human race and challenge the suggestion that it is merely an instance of one ethnic minority group working its way up in American society. Rather than evoking the familiar "Promised Land" discourse, Zangwill's play refers to America by its modern characteristic – the country of immigrants. Unlike Mary Antin, who claimed that Jewish immigrants must shed their past to be able to assimilate, Zangwill's vision does not presuppose who must change and to what extent. Instead, by employing the figure of the melting pot, the author signals that the cauldron will indiscriminately hold all ethnic groups: "Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians – into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American" (34). Thus, the resulting ethnic amalgam, which presumably will incorporate native-born Americans, whom the author has problems to accommodate, will produce a quality distinct from the input: "the real American" (34) who "will be the fusion of all races, perhaps the coming superman" (34).

In the afterword, the author explains the complexity of his metaphor: "[t]he process of American amalgamation is not assimilation or simple surrender to the dominant type, as is popularly supposed, but an all-round give-and-take by which the final type may be enriched or impoverished" (203). In the struggle between the immigrant past and the American present, the metaphor bolsters the

claim “[t]hat in the crucible of love, or even co-citizenship, the most violent antitheses of the past may be fused into a higher unity” (204). The author asserts his consistent belief in American potential, which is contrasted with the corruption of Europe: “to suppose that America will remain permanently afflicted by all the old European diseases would be to despair of humanity, not to mention super-humanity” (204). Whether it is the problem of religion, race, gender, economic standing, or intermarriage – “it is only when a common outlook has been reached, transcending the old doctrinal differences, that intermarriage” (209) will work – all the problematic issues peculiar to the Old World will disappear in the “purging flame” (185) of the melting pot. The product of the melting pot will be blended beyond recognition, and, therefore, become indistinguishable in terms of culture, religion, and ethnicity.

As Zangwill’s prophecy about the nature of American society is located “in the seething of the Crucible” (33), which is “roaring and bubbling” (184), one may assume that the process of building “the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God” (185) is still in progress. What Zangwill’s vision posits is that America’s potential is not in its early history but rather in its future, which belongs to the nation of immigrants who will add a distinctive value to the fabric of the country: “What is the glory of Rome and Jerusalem, where all nations and races come to worship and look back, compared to the glory of America, where all races and nations come to Labor and look forward! (185). Consequently, the last words of the play are addressed to “all ye unborn millions, fated to fill this giant continent” (185), reaffirming the author’s vision in which the American society of the future will regenerate the whole human race.

A brief survey of the trope of the “melting pot” as a code for Americanness will reveal the multilayered context crucial in illuminating the meaning of the play. The idea of the melting pot can be traced to *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, in which he tackles the question: What is an American? Crèvecoeur’s answer employs the idea of the mixing of the races and prophesies for this new nation a great future:

He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world (Gordon 190-191).

In an 1845 essay, Ralph Waldo Emerson, expresses a similar idea, in which he uses the figure of the melting pot:

Well, as in the old burning of the Temple at Corinth, by the melting and intermixture of silver and gold and other metals a new compound more precious than any, called Corinthian brass, was formed; so in this continent – asylum of all nations – the energy of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles, and Cossacks, and all the European tribes – of the Africans and of the Polynesians – will construct a new race, a new religion, a new state, a new literature, which will be as vigorous as the new Europe which came out of the smelting-pot of the Dark Ages, or that which earlier emerged from Pelasgic and Etruscan barbarism. *La Nature aime les croisements* (Emerson qtd. in Sherman, 1921, xxxiv).

Although Emerson did not incorporate Native Americans into his vision, he did include people of color, which was quite revolutionary at that time.

John Quincy Adams, the Secretary of State in 1818, in a letter to Baron Von Fürstenwaerther expresses his uncompromising attitude to the problem of immigrants:

They [the immigrants to America] come to a life of independence, but [also] to a life of labor – and, if they cannot accommodate themselves to the character, moral, political and physical, of this country with all its compensating balances of good and evil, the Atlantic is always open to them to return to the land of their nativity and their fathers. To one thing they must make up their minds, or they will be disappointed in every expectation of happiness as Americans. They must cast off the European skin, never to resume it. They must look forward to their posterity rather than backward to their ancestors; they must be sure that whatever their own feelings may be, those of their children will cling to the prejudices of this country... (Gordon 187).

Not only does John Quincy Adams pose strict conformity as a model of assimilation, but he also forces the immigrants' unconditional compliance with the character of the country.

Frederick J. Turner, in 1893, noticed the importance of the frontier in immigrant history: “[i]n the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics” (22-23). Turner imagines the American frontier like a catalyst, which triggers ethnic cross-fertilization. Confronted by the hardships of everyday life, immigrants, who come from different ethnic backgrounds, must suspend their mistrust and start to cooperate in order to foster mutual understanding and facilitate their adaptation to the harsh conditions of life. As a result, a new blend of cultures appears – not completely assimilated but acknowledging the benefits of mutual assistance. Although Turner’s theory allows a diverse immigrant component to take part in the assimilative process, the content and the form of the model for immigrants’ assimilation still remains Anglo-American.

In contrast to John Quincy Adams, Horace Kallen claimed that it was wrong to demand from immigrants that they shed their familiar, lifelong culture and history for admission to American society. In a two-part article “Democracy versus the Melting Pot” (18 Feb. 1915 pp.190-194 and Feb. 25 1915, pp.217-220, in Gordon 199), Kallen envisions American society as “the cooperation of diverse cultures” or a “federation of national cultures” within an economic and political framework. Kallen’s theory was a defensive strategy for “unassimilative” ethnic groups, which he called “the symphony of civilizations”; American society is presented as a symphonic orchestra with different instruments – ethnic groups – each playing its part. Although Kallen called for “cultural pluralism,” he excluded people of color, and challenged Zangwill’s idea of assimilation on empirical, rather than ideological, grounds. In Peter D. Salin’s words: “‘ethnic federalism’: official recognition of distinct, essentially fixed ethnic groups and the doling out of resources based on membership of an ethnic group” (2). The emergence of cultural pluralism was linked to the prominence of political and economic thoughts like Progressivism and the New Deal, which advocated economic and cultural rights for minority groups.

Robert E. Park and E. Burgess (1921) represent the Chicago School tradition of sociology, which grew from liberal and progressive roots. They do not view assimilation as a homogeneous process but as “the cycle of the racial relations” (735) which goes through four stages: contact, competition, accommodation and assimilation. Assimilation, the final part of the cycle, can be understood as a process in which one ethnic group takes on the cultural and structural characteristics of another group, or becomes part of the common

culture. The exchange leads to the group's acquisition of the target identity, in the eyes of self and others. As a result, the assimilating group becomes socially indistinguishable from the dominant pattern of the society. The passage of time facilitates the process of assimilation making the interpersonal relations among the immigrants dominant over the interpersonal competition among different ethnic groups. Park believed that, as soon as the diverse ethnic groups assimilate, racial differences would be erased from American society.

The ethnic revival of the 1960's and 1970's found resonance in the study of Daniel Moynihan's and Nathan Glazer's *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963), which concluded that most ethnic groups, instead of gradually assimilating into American society, have maintained their distinct identity to an astonishingly high degree. This claim was later questioned by Herbert J. Gans, who argued that ethnic groups do not simply assimilate, but adopt "symbolic ethnicity," either through noticeable social mobility, or by becoming a marginalized and underprivileged part of American society: "a type of nostalgic regeneration of the love and pride for their country of origin and its traditions; something they experience sentimentally but do not include in their daily lives" (12). From the point of view of multiculturalism, the melting pot theory is seen as oppressive to the immigrant groups, whereas assimilationists see it as advantageous to the government.

A closer look at Zangwill's characters reveals how the author combines the particularity of Jewishness with the general problem of immigration. David is presented as a Jewish immigrant who has escaped the Russian pogroms. His musical skills, however, differentiate him from other immigrant Jews, mostly poor and uneducated, who were coming to American shores in their thousands. Although Mendel's household is not rich, its members do not suffer from hunger: there is enough money to employ a live-in domestic help, and both Mendel and David earn money doing what they can do best – teaching and playing music. Even when David decides to find his own lodging, the audience is not informed of any financial worries on his part. The modest but self-sufficient Quixano household is in no way representative of the desolate world of the Jewish Lower East Side, and the physical labor of its exploited denizens. Not having been burdened by exhausting work and the daily round of survival, David "keep[s] faith in America" (98) and truly believes that all cultural and religious divisions will disappear in the American melting pot. His views are somewhat naïve as he assumes that all immigrants are instantly ready to shed their native heritage in order to embark on the road to Americanization.

David is presented as an over-sensitive and, sometimes, hysterical character. The stage directions describe his erratic behavior: "He ends almost hysterically" (53), "He writes feverishly" (51), "He throws down his quill and jumps" (52), "Half-sobbing" (53), "Heartily" (49), "Ecstatically" (41), "Mystically exalted"

(41), "Getting hysterical" (90). He is portrayed as a feminized male who borders on madness when reminded about the Kishinew pogroms. This un-American behavior, which stands in contrast to the cool and aloof Anglo-American manner, is stereotypically described as Jewish, and marks him as a member of that ethnic group. His exaggerated emotionality can be attributed to his artistic nature and the traumatic memories of his youth, or it may be read as a manifestation of his true belief in America: with child-like trust he accepts American ideals.

David's name⁴ – Quixano – points to Sephardic origins, possibly a more easily assimilable Jewish group as suggested by their opposition to the poor, uncultivated, and orthodox Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern European. As both David and Vera – a daughter of a Baron – come from the privileged and presumably, more refined parts of society, their final reconciliation is made possible. Just like Vera's, David's views are socialist, which is manifested in his sensitivity to the tragic fate of the poor: when Quincy offers him a chance to produce his symphony "in his wonderful music-room" (82), David refuses saying that rich Americans like Quincy "kill [his] America" (86) by spending money on pleasures, whereas "the same night women and children died of hunger in New York!" (85). Showing his awareness of social injustice in America, David condemns the rich for: "undoing the work of Washington and Lincoln, vulgarizing [their] high heritage, and turning the last and noblest hope of humanity into caricature" (87). While composing his symphony, David's dream is "to play it first to the new immigrants – those who have known the pain of the Old World and the hope of the new" (141), even though he realizes that "[t]he immigrants will not understand [his] music with their brains or their ears, but with their hearts and souls" (141). Putting idealism over reality, the belief in an American future over doubt in human progress is his philosophy. *The Melting Pot* shows how David learns his American lesson: "God tried me with his supreme test. He gave me heritage from the Old World, hate and vengeance and blood, and said, 'Cast it all into my Crucible.' " (179). In the course of the play, his unabashed confidence in America is confronted by a tragic truth from his own past, when his feelings towards Vera are put to the test by the discovery of her father's role in the annihilation of his family. Yet, the hopefulness of the final pages of the play implies that his success, although painful, is not impossible.

As Jewish identity is inherited maternally, the figure of David's grandmother, Frau Quixano, represents the essence of Jewishness. When her

⁴ Y. Abu-Laban and V. Lamont identify David's surname as a reference to the figure of Don Quixote. See Werner Sollors. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 70.

husband dies in Russia “the children left her – went over to America or heaven or other far-off-places-and she was left all penniless and alone”(47). Then, Mendel invites her to come to America and live with him. Portrayed as an Orthodox Jewess, with the wig of a married woman and black clothes, she is the keeper of a traditional Jewish household, observing the Shabbat and Jewish holidays and presiding over a kosher kitchen. That is why she despairs when she sees that Mendel and David “must go out to earn [their] bread on the Sabbath” (24). As she speaks only Yiddish and hardly ever goes out, she is unaffected by the benefits and drawbacks of assimilation: America seems to her an alien world which is kept distant, behind closed doors. Therefore she looks with suspicion at the rare visitors. The fact that she wakes up “with a sense of horror and gazes dazedly around” (36), implies a feeling of alienation from the kind of life she has to live, and from the place where she has to stay. “Cursed be Columbus” (22); she repeats the common immigrant curse, expressing deep-rooted skepticism: “How can anything possibly go well in America” (21). Frau Quixano does not share David’s optimism about America for she notices how Jewishness is being dissolved in the American Crucible. Whenever she appears, she dons an expression of sorrow and sadness; she often sobs and cries, and her black clothes intensify the aura of melancholy around her. The world she grew up in is gone and America is a strange land, which she will never get to know: Frau Quixano is the voice of the passing generation of uprooted immigrant grandparents who are too old for Americanization: “she sits all the livelong day alone – alone with her book and her religion and her memories” (48). Both Mendel and David show a great deal of respect to the elderly lady, and when David decides to leave her household in order to pursue his own career, he does so secretly to avoid hurting her feelings. He has to do this as his assimilation would otherwise be hindered by people such as his grandmother, who cling to the old ways.

David’s uncle, Mendel, although with a large dose of skepticism, has found a niche in America: he earns his meager living giving piano lessons and playing at dance halls. When the boy escapes the pogroms, his uncle takes care of him and becomes a substitute for his slaughtered family. Mendel is the voice of reason in the Quixano household, and a link between the Old World of his mother, and David’s naive infatuation with American potential. They represent two different outlooks on life: unobstructed, youthful idealism and realism resulting from life experience. Contrary to David’s dream-like nature, Mendel is the one who remembers “what is wanting in the house” (43), and that “[t]he rent isn’t paid yet!” (43). Where David envisions the immigrants populating the tenement houses as being happy, for the sheer reason of being in America, Mendel remarks insightfully that “[Settlement work must be full of tragedies” (26). Thinking rationally, Mendel tempers David’s belief in the healing power

of music, when David describes "the cripples waltzing with their crutches" (28) and boasts that "[e]ven the paralysed danced" (28) to his music, Mendel concludes in a matter-of-fact manner, that "in reality [he] left them as crooked as ever" (29). In order to protect David from disappointment, he often has to cool his enthusiasm: "Don't exaggerate, David" (28), "you needn't get so excited over it" (53), "Yes, yes, David. Now sit down" (31), "Calm yourself David" (36), "Hush! Calm yourself!" (97), he pleads "putting a pacifying hand on his shoulder and forcing him into a chair" (53). Acknowledging David's artistic sensitivity and the memory of the tragic events he had witnessed, Mendel does not take him seriously, but treats him like a child in need of parental protection. Mendel is also a Jewish ancestral voice reminding David why he cannot marry Vera: "it is the call of our blood through immemorial generations" (95). Witnessing David's secularization, he accuses him of being "false to [his] race" (98), and chastises him for "[casting] off the God of [their] fathers!" (98). Contrary to David, Mendel realizes the importance of the past: "[w]e must look backwards, too" (97), and is skeptical of David's exalted declarations of American patriotism: "[s]pare me that rigmarole" (98). He does not share David's enthusiasm for a Jewish future in America, claiming that "[t]he Jew has been tried in a thousand fires and only tempered and annealed" (96); in other words, he doubts whether the American Crucible will suffice to melt the ancient Jewish race. However, Mendel's paternal love for David overcomes his religious reservations for, above all, he wants to see his nephew happy: "I'd rather see you marry [the Gentile] than go about like this" (165): familial love overrides his racial and religious prejudices.

Quincy Davenport, who is a major native-born American character in the play, is presented as a caricature of an idle, arrogant, American millionaire, who mimics the ways of the European aristocracy. Described as "aping the air of a European sporting clubman, [Quincy] gives the impression of a coarse-fibred and patronizingly facetious but not bad-hearted man, spoiled by prosperity" (59). Being an heir to a family involved in heavy industry – his father "burns coal" (60) – he is wallowing in the pleasures his money offers: he "[a]lways travel[s] on [his] own yacht" (60) and he was "married in a balloon" (84). His attempt at seducing Vera, in spite of the fact that he is still married to another woman, implies his faithlessness and lightweight conduct.⁵ The real reason for his courtship: "to marry her is the only thing I have ever wanted that I couldn't get" (113), reveals his devious motives. While describing his failing marriage,

⁵ According to Joe Kraus, President Theodore Roosevelt asked Zangwill to alter one line in his play, the one referring to Quincy's alleged promiscuity: "Roosevelt was reportedly disturbed enough at the general implication that Americans favor divorce" (8).

he claims to have fallen “a victim to [his] love of music” (67), while his wife – “a comic opera star” (67) – is referred to as “that patched-and-painted creature, [...] the old witch” (67). Little does he value the sancticity of matrimony, having more faith in the power his money exerts: as a compensation for divorce, he “will run a theater for her” as “she’s mad to get back on the stage” (108). Divorce is not a problem, as he remarks self-confidently: “You forget, Baron, we are in America, and the law taketh away” (108). His light treatment of the law is also evident when he admits, that the persecution of Blacks does exist in America, only “[n]ot officially” (111). What Davenport really wants in life is a wife of “the right breed – the true blue blood of Europe” (68), a match that would elevate him to the position enjoyed by the old, aristocratic European families. For that reason, he “live[s] in America only two months in the year, and then only to entertain Europeans who wander to these wild parts” (84). In his conversations, he condemns American vulgarity and praises European sophistication: the concerts that he organizes are fashioned European manner with “silks in imitation of Venetian nobility” (85). Giving preference to “the Medici gardens of Rome” (102), he derides New York’s Central Park for exhibiting “modern sculptures and menageries” (102), and boasts to David that “[he]’ll have an Italian prince and a British duke to hear [his] scribbling” (84). Davenport’s money enables him to indulge his love of music and buys him the services of the world’s famous orchestra conductor, Pappelmeister, whom he “keep[s] for [his] guests only” (63). Unfortunately, the shallowness of Davenport’s musical education is revealed when he fails to appreciate Pappelmeister’s talent, by asking him to perform a low-brow comic opera, a wish which the dismayed musician caters for only once a week.

“Despite his wealth, therefore, Davenport lacks the genuine American sensibility that Pappelmeister appreciates, and that David embodies” (Kraus 10). In view of the cultural hierarchy which the play fosters, Davenport’s lack of cultural sophistication positions him lower than the poor but aesthetically sophisticated immigrant composer. A native-born American, Davenport stands as the antithesis of everything David, a Jewish immigrant, represents. Davenport wants to recreate European ways in America: “with her comic-opera coronets and her worm-eaten stage decorations, and her pomp and chivalry built on a morass of crime and misery” (87), while David sees America as an opportunity to open a new chapter in human development, without repeating the Old World mistakes. When Davenport reiterates a nativist slogan: “We’re going to stop all alien immigration” (112), it is counterbalanced by the solemnity of David’s prophetic words: “There shall come a fire round the Crucible that will melt you and your breed like wax in a blowpipe” (88); by carrying a direct threat to Americans akin to Davenport, Zangwill’s protagonist argues that, at

his moment, the future belongs to immigrants, who will make better use of American opportunity.

Vera is a mature and independent woman who shapes her own destiny. In Russia she was a revolutionary fighting against Tsarist oppression; in America, she is a social worker helping newly-arrived East European immigrants: “[i]n Russia I fought against the autocracy [...] [h]ere I fight against the poverty” (119). Asked by her baron father to return to Russia, she willfully gives up her privileged social position for the benefit of control over her own life: “a woman who has once heard the call will always be a wild creature” (119). What draws David and Vera to each other is not exactly carnal desire, at least not on his part, but the sharing of the same principles: they are soulmates rather than lovers. Vera, however, sees in David not only a companion for ideological discussions, but a potential father of her children; when she enquires about his future salary – “[e]nough to keep a wife and eight children!” (136) – her blushing indicates that such a thought must have crossed her mind. David, on the other hand, seems to be oblivious of such mundane matters as earning a salary: “He looks dazed from Vera to Pappelmeister,” (144) only to reject the offer of a payment, saying, that he will perform “[f]or the honor of playing in [Pappelmeister’s] orchestra!” (144). Vera doubts whether David really wants to commit himself so she confronts him, but his evasive answer: “Not love you? I don’t understand” (144), does not dispel her worries. Subsequently, when she demands: “I want you to love me first, before everything” (145), with a petulant shade in his voice, he assures her of his loyalty, rather than love: “considering I should owe it all to you” (146). The way they are depicted: “[h]e sits down, she lovingly at his feet. Looking up to him” (145), implies her total devotion to him. She loves him with a womanly love, whereas he idealizes her by calling her his “guardian angel” (145) – a rhetorical figure that robs her of her femininity, as angels are asexual beings, and reaffirms his own fragile condition in need of constant appreciation. When she exclaims: “I am so happy,” and asks him wistfully: “You are happy, too?” (147), he answers: “I am dazed – I cannot realize that all our troubles have melted away” (147), as if being unable to feel contentment, unable to utter the words she has been waiting for. David appears to be lost in his own thoughts, not quite comprehending what is going on around him, a position which diminishes his credibility as her potential partner. By way of explanation, he attributes his fear of happiness to his Jewish nature: “We Jews are cheerful in gloom, mistrustful in joy. It is our tragic history” (147).

David is presented as a being detached from reality, a feminized⁶ character who lives in the world of music. Throughout the play, he is referred to as a “terrib[ly] shy” (74) but “handsome youth” (27), a “poor boy” (23) who “roar[s] with boyish laughter” (56), and does things with “boyish eagerness” (29); even when he looks at Vera it is “with boyish reverence and wonder” (27), just like the way “he throws his arms boyishly round his uncle” (94), who asserts that “he is only a boy” (89). He is presented not as a mature male but as an adolescent who still looks at the world through the eyes of an innocent and trusting child. By denying his masculinity, the author makes him appear more sensitive and vulnerable – a true artistic soul. But, at the same time, Zangwill portrays the young protagonist in such a manner as to suit his aesthetic vision of an ideological idealist, which renders him less believable. David admits that: “[t]he love that melted me was not Vera’s – it was the love America showed me – the day she gathered me to her breast” (96). Apparently, it is not a woman’s (Vera’s ?) “breast” he is talking about, but, by metonymy, he is evoking an asexual and symbolic figure of the mother country, which is epitomized by the Statue of Liberty. Similarly, when Vera “draw[s] his head to her breast,” (146) it is described as a motherly gesture, and when they meet after a longer silence, she “looks at him with maternal pity” (176). The lack of sexual tension between the two characters enhances their relationship, relocating it from the realm of carnality to the sphere of the symbolic, a strategy which serves to authenticate the universalism of the play’s message. It also indicates that their relationship will not produce offspring of a human variety. Instead, freed from parental worries, they can devote all their energy and enthusiasm to helping the needy and pursuing their socialist ideals: David gives charitable concerts for the Crippled Children’s Home, and Vera organizes concerts for the poor tenement dwellers. The way the characters prioritize social work over personal desires makes them not only desirable members of American society but also shows their concern about the welfare of other immigrants, not only those of Jewish origin. Foregrounding their devotion to the communal effort, Zangwill shows how idealism transcends ethnic and religious borders, making a positive contribution to the amelioration of the lot of the poorest part of American society.

The ending of the play is ambiguous, though, and expresses the author’s uncertainty as to the protagonists’ future. What unites David and Vera is not a passionate love, but a shared history of immigration and the realization that the past must be put behind them: “[p]erhaps that is the secret of our people’s

⁶ The Dillingham Commission viewed “assimilation as a feminized process, in which women in the home and in the settlement agencies played a central role” (Abu-Laban, Lamont 28).

paralysis – we are always looking backward” (164), speculates David, adding firmly that “the ideals of the fathers shalt not be foisted on the children. Each generation must live and die its own dream” (147). America offers such a possibility to millions of immigrants. The process, however, is not painless: “Those who love us must suffer, and we must suffer in their suffering. It is live things, not dead metals, that are being melted in the Crucible” (146). The feeling of anguish is not only inherent in the Jewish experience, the play claims, but accompanies the process of immigration and assimilation regardless of race, religion, and location. To furnish this pain with significance, the couples’ final kiss acquires a symbolic quality: “I will kiss you as we Russians kiss at Easter – the three kisses of peace,” (183) says Vera. There is no feeling of lovers’ intimacy for she kisses him “as in ritual solemnity,” (183) and the moment is accompanied “by the Cathedral music from ‘Faust’ ” (183). To prolong the sanctity of the moment, “they stand quietly hand in hand” (184) pondering a vast New York panorama.

The change of perspective broadens the play’s implication by shifting it from a solitary, Jew meets Gentile, affair to a universal message addressed to the multitudes of immigrants “com[ing] [to America] from the ends of the world” (184). It is not only their own future David and Vera see in this vista, but the future of America portrayed as the grand plan of God, to which they are ready to devote their lives and their love. Neal Larry Schumsky sees in the play’s conclusion an emphasis on the difference between the concepts of Judaism as a people and as a religion: “As a distinct people, Zangwill hopes to see Jews enter into the melting pot. As an ethnic tradition, however, Zangwill hopes to see it influencing and indeed converting America” (Schumsky 36). Joe Kraus, in turn, notes the plot’s inconsistencies and claims that “the contrived reunion of David and Vera at the end of the play is a requisite of the sentimental form that governs the play” (13). The focal point of the play’s denouement, however, is the fact that David is ready to reject his people’s ethnic bias, which forbids Jews to intermarry. Traditional Judaism insists on the ethnic homogeneity of the Jewish race, and the institution of marriage is one of the most important instruments to ensure it. By declaring his love to a Gentile woman, David consciously refuses to follow the traditional path of Jewish Orthodoxy and declares his willingness to take part in the assimilative process, even if the latter involves losing part of his distinctive ethnicity.

Zangwill’s play offers numerous strategies by which the protagonists must negotiate their assimilation between the pull of their Jewish past and the luring prospects of an American future: David and his uncle live “in a non-Jewish borough of New York” (2) because Mendel “has to be near his theatre” (48), thus securing a job and earning wages takes precedence over maintaining his ethnic ties. Clothes are a common immigrant marker of assimilation and

disguise: when we see Mendel for the first time, he has “a fine Jewish face” (2), and he is wearing “a black skull-cap, a seedy velvet jacket, and red carpet-slippers” (2), but when he receives visitors, he changes into a “Prince Albert coat, and boots instead of slippers, so that his appearance is gentlemanly” (13) and he passes for an American. Kathleen notices on a Sabbath day the varying degree to which the members of David’s family are assimilated, with the youngest being the least: David’s grandmother “won’t even touch the candlestick,” (6) his uncle Mendel “will be blowing out [his] bedroom candle, though [he] won’t light it,” (6) whereas David “will light his and blow it out too” (6). Such cultural diversity among household members deriving from a common ancestry, illustrates the dynamic complexity of Jewish assimilation and, in Kathleen’s eyes, “undermines the legitimacy of their Jewish identity, making their rituals appear arbitrary and meaningless” (Abu-Laban 33). Mendel, who is cognizant of the inevitability of Jewish secularization, expresses his doubts as to the future of Judaism in America: “Who can remember about Purim in America?” (57). By analogy, when he mentions the Sabbath and a synagogue, David refers to them as “those old things” (42), declaring his distance from his Jewish heritage and asserting his acquisition of the American way of thinking. By appropriating the country’s symbols: “when I look at our Statue of Liberty” (32), David identifies himself as an American. The funny episode, in which Mendel and David trick Frau Quixano into using an elevator on Shabbat: “tell her dropping down is natural – not work like flying up” (169), illustrates that they are not serious about Jewish religious customs.

Zangwill’s play demonstrates how Jewish and American symbols can exist side by side: the Quixano house has a “columned veranda in the Colonial style” (2), which refers to the American colonial past. There is “a Mezzuzah” (2) nailed on the door, but there is a “Stars-and-Stripes pinned” (2) over the door. The walls display a “Mizrach” and “Jews at the wailing place” (2) together with pictures of Wagner, Columbus, and Lincoln. The choice of titles and authors reveals David’s and Mendel’s extensive knowledge of European literature: “Shelley and Tennyson [...] Nietzsche next to the Bible [...] “History of the American Commonwealth,” “Cyclopedia of History,” “History of the Jews,” with the apparent absence of Russian books. Other bookshelves contain “mouldering Hebrew books” (2) as well as “brightly bound English books” (2). The two images, reinforced by the characters of Mendel and David respectively, point to the two divergent issues crucial to any immigrant discourse: past and future. The “mould” signals both the wisdom and antiquity of Judaism, and its inability to adapt to modern times, which sentences this ancient religion to gradual oblivion. On the other hand, the “brightness” of the English books indicates their novelty and modernity: they are signs of a prosperous American future. “The whole effect is a curious blend of shabbiness, Americanism,

Jewishness, and music" (2), concludes the author. A household containing a library gives information about its inhabitants: their appreciation of education, their open-mindedness and middle-class aspirations, which, to American eyes, are desirable features for any aspiring immigrant group.

The most successful, if unexpected and humorous, example of assimilation is furnished by the character of an Irish Catholic maid who, towards the end of the play, internalizes the Jewish culture. Yasmeeen Abu-Laban and Victoria Lamont discuss the three steps by means of which Zangwill illustrates her assimilative strategy: "first she cultivates her capacity to identify emotionally with the other in the figure of Frau Quixano" (33-34); next, out of compassion towards the elderly lady, she urges Mendel and David "to observe Purim" (34); and finally, she appears speaking Yiddish castigating Mendel and David "for their lax observance of traditional Jewish rituals" (34). Intended as comic relief, with the Irish maid "wearing a grotesque false nose" (56) to celebrate Purim, "Kathleen's transformation foregrounds the extent to which assimilation implies the radical contingency of ethnic identity, suggesting that Kathleen's internalization of a Jewish identity is preceded by her *performance* of Jewish ritual" (Abu-Laban 34).

By juxtaposing Jewish and American attributes, Zangwill asserts their indisputable relevance in the process of assimilation. As long as he promotes the Jewish necessity to assimilate, he also declares that its product is "a curious blend," which indicates that neither is the process entirely smooth nor are its results completely predictable. Zangwill's assimilationist vision mirrors the contemporary racial debate but excludes people of color. In one instance, Baron Revendal compares the persecution of Jews in Russia to the lynching of African-Americans in America: "Don't you lynch and roast your niggers?" (111), thus presenting both Jews and Blacks as victims of racial prejudice and intolerance. In other words, in a European context Jews become Blacks of Russia. As Jewish immigrants were working hard to pass as white, an assertion questioned, for example, by nativists, they could not risk being associated with groups of color. Therefore, drawing literary parallels between Jews and African-Americans was a risky task, which Zangwill must have realized because in the afterword, he expresses his skepticism as to the success of Black assimilation: "the negroid hair and complexion being, in Mendelian language, 'dominant,' these black traits are not easy to eliminate from the hybrid posterity; and in view of all the unpleasantness, both immediate and contingent, that attends the blending of colors, only heroic souls on either side should dare the adventure of intermarriage" (206). Although he further notices the fact of the "spiritual miscegenation which, while clothing, commercializing, and Christianizing the ex-African, has given 'rag-time' and the sex-dances that go to it, first to white America and thence to the whole white world" (206), Zangwill excluded Blacks

from his concept of the melting pot and contrasted their case with that of the Jews who, he claims, “may be Americanized and the American Judaized without any gamic interaction” (206).

The way, in which Zangwill promotes linguistic diversity in America, is exemplified by his use of the English language. His characters are recognizable by the way they speak: Kathleen, the Irish “maid-of-all-work,” (3), with her brogue, represents an Irish-American voice: “I tould ye I was lavin’ at wanst. Lat you open the door yerself” (7). Her speech signals her impoverished background, scant education and the fact that she is not to be taken seriously. The job of domestic servant was a way to earn wages for unskilled and uneducated young immigrant girls and constituted an essential contribution to their, typically large family’s, income. There was, however, little chance that the girl’s social status would ever improve. Frau Quixano, who speaks only Yiddish, with no command of English: “Wos schreist du? Gott in Himmel, dieses America!” (3), represents the generation of “grandparents” who are beyond the possibilities of assimilation, whereas, Mendel and David, having become more assimilated, demonstrate a command of standard English, although David’s is tainted “with a slight German accent” (27). When David addresses his grandmother, in order to be understood, he uses a combination of Yiddish and English: “Es ist gor nicht, Granny – my clothes are thick” (167). Vera, as an educated Russian aristocrat, speaks flawless English as a sign of her privileged social status, which is synonymous with her smooth assimilation. A visitor from Russia, Baroness Revendal, speaks a mixture of English and French: “Ach, oui. Quel dommage, vat a peety!” (108) – French being the language of the European aristocracy and a mark of the socially privileged. Her English, on the other hand, is heavily accented: “[o]ur Ambassador vonce told me ze Americans are more sentimental zan civilised” (111). Not in the least is she embarrassed by her heavily accented speech since it demonstrates her intellectual distance both to the language and the country. The French language and clothes “in the height of Paris fashion” (102) affirm her conviction of her cultural superiority, which is equivalent to the old European aristocracy’s derision of the American nouveau-riches. By employing different social varieties of English, Zangwill’s play reflects the idea of American diversity on the level of language. In the portrayal of the Jewish-American immigrant family, one can see the difference between domestic Yiddish, heavily inflected English and a mixture of both and public discourse, which is synonymous with the progress of the character’s assimilation. Consequently, speech is a vital marker of the speaker’s social position; *vide*, the French language, which is identified with the European aristocracy, or the mispronounced and ungrammatical English, which signals a character’s working class background. Zangwill’s strategy endows his characters with distinctive and representative

voices, which make the plot more interesting and the cast of characters more believable. In view of extensive immigration, however, the author's efforts met with criticism with regard to the pollution, and the endangered dominant position, of the English language: "They speak in heterogeneous dialects, Yiddish, Irish, German, French, and Russian; and the auditor is left to infer that the future language of America must still be stewing in the Melting-Pot and will ultimately steam forth anything but English" (Hamilton 1909, 434 qtd. in Abu-Laban).

In *The Melting Pot*, the author uses the concept of "music" to facilitate the protagonists' recognition, understanding and mutual acceptance. The universal language of music, by virtue of being unhindered by ethnic and religious concerns, offers a common platform for David's and Vera's acquaintance. When Vera "picks up the huge Hebrew tome," (19) she feels "overwhelmed by the weight of alien antiquity," (19) but when she notices printed music, "Mendelssohn's Concerto, Tartini's Sonata in G minor, Bach's Chaconne," (19) she no longer feels uneasy: the familiar and unbiased concept of music provides a common bond between a Christian and a Jew. When Mendel hesitates: "what true understanding can there be between a Russian Jew and a Russian Christian?" (41), his doubts are dispelled by Vera's "interes[t] in [David's] music," (41) as well as by David's remark: "What understanding? Aren't we both Americans?" (42). Both David and Vera, although for different reasons, discount their Russian past as a potential source of mutual understanding; as an alternative, they find America a place where such a liaison is possible. Vera believes that the universal medium of music will foster an understanding between her antisemitic father and Jewish friend: "He shall bring his violin and play to you [...] David will smooth [father's frown] out with his music as his Biblical ancestor smoothed that surly old Saul" (127). During the confrontation between Baron Revendal and David, it turns out that the latter does not seek revenge: when David's "arm droops and lets the pistol fall on the table [...] his hand touches a string of his violin, which yields a little note" (160). Thus, the sound of music reconciles an oppressor with a victim by putting their tragic past in perspective: "it all ends in music after all" (128), concludes Vera. Music awards the myth of the American Dream with its true meaning, which is revealed in Quincy's remark that David's success at Sinfonia Americana would mean "fame" and "dollars. Don't forget the dollars" (79). As a native-born American, Quincy appreciates the importance of material rewards as much as spiritual ones; thus, music becomes a vehicle for linking American materialism and Jewish idealism. Zangwill's play posits the therapeutic value of music, which is claimed to alleviate the hardships of everyday life for the tenement dwellers and crippled children, offering them a moment of respite. Vera also

believes in the healing power of music: “perhaps – all the terrible memory will pass peacefully away in his music” (38).

Zangwill employs the concept of music to establish a cultural hierarchy: the native-born American millionaire, Quincy Davenport, possesses much less artistic sensibility than the impoverished, Jewish musician David. Although Davenport can buy the services of the famous German conductor, Pappelmeister, and even owns his own symphonic orchestra, his taste in low-brow comic opera signals his lack of genuine aesthetic awareness, which is synonymous with American culture. “For Zangwill,” Kraus claims, “high culture is not necessarily the purview of the privileged but rather something that is open to genius wherever genius happens to emerge – but it shows a cultural hierarchy dictating proper and improper ways to entertain ” (10). What is interesting is that, Zangwill constructs his cultural hierarchy in such a way that it works against economic and social hierarchy, thus making a new avenue for assimilation available to gifted immigrants like David. Lastly, Zangwill uses the trope of music to make a statement in the debate over art for art’s sake: Vera asks Quincy to help David for no other reason than “for art’s sake” (80), and David preaches the importance of authorship: “I am the only connoisseur, the only one who knows” (178) refusing “neider de clapping nor de criticism” (174) because “[t]hey are equally – irrelevant. One has to wrestle with one’s own art, one’s own soul, alone!” (174). Invoking the nineteenth century slogan of Aestheticism, which emphasizes the autonomous value of art and the importance of the intrinsic artistic quality over didactic, moral, political, religious, and utilitarian purposes, the author makes a statement which argues for the doctrine of art for art’s sake.

The desire to make it in America constitutes another thread that unites Vera’s and David’s characters: for Vera, it is to maintain her independence from her father and build her own future; while for David, it is to succeed as a musical composer, neither undertaking being more than remotely possible in their native Russia. Therefore, to highlight the difference between the gloomy European past and the bright American present, Zangwill uses typical immigrant rhetoric based on contrast: Europe is portrayed as a land of “weeping millions” (31), who are hungry and oppressed, living in “the starving villages of Italy and Ireland, [in] the swarming stony cities of Poland and Galicia, the ruined farms of Roumania, [and] the shambles of Russia” (32), whereas America is depicted as “the place where God would wipe away tears from off all faces” (31), and where immigrants living in tenements are “happy” (30). The images of Europe bring to David tragic memories of his past: “the death-March” in Kishinev in which his family was massacred: “[b]efore his eyes, father, mother, sister, down to the youngest babe, whose skull was battered in by a hooligan’s heel” (37). Europe is presented as “a failure” (87) of humankind with

net palaces and peerages [...] outworn toys of the human spirit" (87). The Jewish immigrant's recollections of Europe are, however, different from the way rich Americans see the old continent: "They look back on Europe as a pleasure ground, a palace of art" (90), whereas David "know[s] it is sodden with blood, red with bestial massacres" (90). Another difference between the old continent and America is shown through the figure of Baron Revendal, who articulates European prejudices and despises American democracy: "[b]ut surely no gentleman would sit in the public car, squeezed between working-men and shop-girls, not to say Jews and Blacks" (106). The clash between negative images of intolerant and class-ridden Europe and the promises vested in democratic America facilitates the protagonists' disengagement from their past and fosters their trust in an American future: "the only hope of mankind lies in a new world. [...] in the land of to-morrow" (87).

Zangwill's play illustrates, however, that America is not quite rid of racial and religious conflicts. The play provides examples of Jewish stereotypes and prejudices: Kathleen takes Vera for a Jewess because she "looked a bit furrin," (11) to which an outraged Vera answers: "I, a Jewess! How dare you?" (11). When Vera learns that David is a Jew, she is dazed and deems it impossible as she reflects that "[h]e had such charming manners" (12). Similarly, on meeting Vera, Mendel is surprised: "I never thought a Russian Christian could be so human" (40). Vera admits that she "was brought up to despise [David's] race," (92) and, therefore, "[she] was never absolutely sure of [her] love for [David]." What lies at the core of her uncertainty, she contemplates, is: "a nameless uneasiness, some vague instinct, relic of the long centuries of Jew-loathing, some strange shrinking from his Christless creed" (154). Having received an extensive education, Vera is knowledgeable in Jewish matters: she refers to "old Saul" (127), knows that "Rubinstein was a Jewish boy-genius" (127), and aptly repeats "the words of Ruth, thy people shall be my people, thy God my God" (154), a fact that enables her to understand the Quixano family better. The native-born American, Quincy Davenport, reacts with horror when he realizes whose house he has found himself in: "Miss Revendal, you don't mean to say you've brought me to a Jew!" (72). He likewise declares that: "No Jew's harp in my orchestra. I wouldn't have a Jew if he paid me" (73), not knowing that Jews are the composers of all the comic operas he enjoys so much. The weight of his anti-Semitic stance is diminished by his jocular manner: when Vera suggests sending David to Germany, he jokingly replies: "I'll send as many Jews as you like to Germany. Ha! Ha! Ha! [...] I'd even lend my own yacht to take 'em back. Ha! Ha! Ha!" (76). Baron Revendal enunciates stereotypical prejudice towards Jews: "The Jews are the deadliest enemies of our holy autocracy and of the only orthodox church. Their Bund is behind all the Revolution" (110), and goes on to enumerate a whole list of grievances towards the Jews:

[t]hey ruin our peasantry with their loans and their drink shops, ruin our army with their revolutionary propaganda, ruin our professional classes by snatching all the prizes and professorships, ruin our commercial classes by monopolising our sugar industries, our oilfields, our timber trade” (112).

Likewise, his aristocratic wife repeats the common platitude: “[z]ey are ze pests of ze civilization” (107). Baron Revendal offers a solution to the Jewish problem in Russia: “One- third will be baptized, one-third massacred, the other third emigrated here” (112). His words echo a current debate relating to the numbers of Jewish immigrants arriving in America from Russia, and explain the origins of Jewish persecution, whose climax was the pogroms. While Zangwill’s play promotes the American Crucible as a way to solve religious and racial dilemmas, Mendel questions the viability of the concept claiming that: “the Jew is hated here [in America] as everywhere” (97).

By way of conclusion, the metaphor of the melting pot, although not invented but popularized by Israel Zangwill, has since become a commonplace of American political discourse. *The Melting Pot* (1908) appeared at a pivotal moment for America when the public was engaged in a heated debate on the issue of mass immigration from Eastern Europe, and American skepticism as to their assimilation was growing. What ensued was the Johnson-Reed Act (1924), which restricted immigration annually to quotas based on 2% of the number of each nationality residing in the United States at the time of the 1890 census, that is, prior to the great influx of Italian and Eastern European immigrants. In consequence, small quotas for Eastern Europeans, the so called New Immigrants, restricted immigration from this part of the world, in favor of British, German, and Scandinavian immigrants, the ones most similar to the desirable Anglo-Saxon, Old Stock American, model. As late as October 3, 1965, the McCarran-Walter Act set aside quotas based on national origin and replaced them with other criteria, thereby allowing for immigration from all regions of Europe as well as from other continents (Archdeakon 175, 207).

Horace Kallen criticized writers of Jewish origin, such as Mary Antin, Israel Zangwill, and Jacob Riis, for putting Americanization over promoting their Jewishness. He advocated cultural pluralism, which advanced counter-metaphors for the “melting pot” such as a “rainbow coalition,” a “gorgeous mosaic,” a “salad bowl,” and a “kaleidoscope” (Salin 3). All these concepts involve two fundamental requirements: that ethnic minorities “should never have to [...] give up any of their original cultural attributes,” and that “there never can or will be a single unified national identity that all Americans can

relate to” (Salin 3). Antin’s and Zangwill’s idea of ethnicity is not of a rigid nature, as they hold that one can willfully and successfully transform oneself into an American and thus enjoy the social advancement and sense of stability that assimilation brings in its wake. Kallen, on the other hand, perceived assimilation as a threat to Jewishness, so he advocated cultural pluralism to prevent hyphenated Americans from assimilating. Although both Antin and Kallen shared Jewish backgrounds, their differing views on assimilation may be attributed to their distinctive social and economic status: Kallen came from an affluent family of German Jews and benefited from the best of American education, whereas Antin came from a poor, immigrant family and had to work hard to escape the constraints experienced by underprivileged minorities.

Zangwill’s play presents a model of assimilation which is a vehicle for Jewish Americanization. In the ensuing critical debate, the very purpose of assimilation was questioned: whether the extinction of distinct ethnicity, in order to produce a man of the future, was possible and desirable, or whether the author simply exaggerated the norm-imposing capability of American culture. Zangwill’s idea of the American Crucible does not presuppose the existence of a transcendent, culturally unified, American identity, which is to be imprinted on ethnic minorities. Rather, the play creates the impression that assimilation depends entirely on the will of immigrants, with the native influence overlooked, as if not valid in the process, the common assertion being that assimilation, given time, takes place automatically. In fact, it is the natives’ consent or rejection which largely decides on the success or failure of the group seeking assimilating. For that very reason, the path to American success requires the adoption and internalization of the dominant Anglo-Saxon pattern; thereby, the process reinforces its privileged position in American society. According to Salin “American assimilation owes its power to four unique aspects of American society: 1) the liberal, universalist ideas embedded in the U.S. Constitution; 2) the universal commitment to an economy built on market capitalism; 3) the density and redundancy of organizational life – governmental, political, religious, social, economic, and philanthropic; and 4) a persistent, society – wide infatuation with modernity and progress” (6). The melting pot theory rationalized the essence of Americanization by positing that it would prompt the minorities’ assimilation and eradicate radical ideologies from America. If the perceived threat is anti-Semitism, then, assimilation, Zangwill’s play argues, is a way to prevent Jewish persecution. Although immigrants were considered necessary for America as they helped to colonize the west and worked on the construction of roads and in the mining industry, their desirability was strictly connected with their assimilative abilities, and that is why Zangwill’s melting pot includes white ethnics and excludes people of color. Rejecting the progressive social views and the ideological hegemony of

social Darwinism, the melting pot became a symbol for a liberal vision of American society, at the bottom of which lies a belief that racial and religious divisions will disappear in the modern, industrial society. The text's employment of bipolar concepts like assimilation and segregation, integration and marginalization, acculturation and cultural pluralism, crucible of cultures and ethnic ghettos illustrates the complex dynamics of Zangwill's work, which strives a the balance between the nation's unity and the ethnic diversity of its people, an issue still crucial and problematic for any multi-ethnic society.

3. A Celebration of Assimilation: Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*

I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. I am the youngest of America's children and into my hands is given all her priceless heritage, to the last white star espied through the telescope, to the last great thought of the philosopher. Mine is the whole majestic past, and mine is the shining future. (Antin XI, 250)

Mary Antin (1881- 1949) was among the many thousands of Eastern European Jews who immigrated to the United States in the 1890s. Born in Polotsk in the Russian Pale of Settlement on June 13, 1881, to Israel Pinchus and Esther (Hannah Hayye Weltman) Antin, Maryashe Antin was the second of six children. For a brief period in her childhood, while the family business flourished, the children studied under private tutors. When in 1891 Israel's serious illness left the business in ruins, he, along with hundreds of thousands of others, set off to seek his fortune in America. While their mother shouldered the burden of caring for the family alone, Antin and her elder sister found themselves apprenticed out to work. After three long years, their father had managed to save enough to send for his wife and children. In the early spring of 1894, Esther Antin and her children left Polotsk for Boston. Fleeing oppression and discrimination in Tsarist Russia for a life of personal freedom and financial opportunity, the Antin family embarked on their private exodus from the bondage of Eastern Europe to the promised land of America.

Antin's autobiography is in part based on her earlier publication *From Polotzk to Boston* (1899), which was her first account of the voyage to the United States. Written in Yiddish, this collection of letters to her uncle was then translated into English. As the mastering of the English language was an integral part of the autobiographical narrative of transformation, *The Promised Land* was written in English and published in 1912, after excerpts had appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* from October 1911 to March 1912. The work tells of

her childhood in a Russian *shtetl*, her emigration to America, and her spiritual re-birth as an American citizen. "I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. Is it not time to write my life's story?" (1) Antin asks rhetorically in the Introduction. The book celebrates the promise of America, contrasting the abundant opportunities of the United States with the economic and cultural oppression faced by the Jews in Europe. The book sold almost 85,000 copies over the next four decades, making the author an instant celebrity. Despite its rosy picture of the American dream and praise of unabashed assimilation, *The Promised Land* was one of the first books to present the stark realities of the immigrant experience to an American audience in English.

The beginning of the 20th century witnessed a considerable rise in Jewish-American autobiographical writing by women. Among many sociohistorical factors which contributed to this phenomenon were the cultural withdrawal from the Victorian idea of "true womanhood" and women's involvement in movements such as the campaigns for female suffrage and the expansion of educational and professional opportunities. With the changing role and the rising status of American women, Jewish women recognized their own needs, and some decided to record the ongoing changes by means of autobiographical narratives. Additionally, they addressed questions concerning the relationship between Jewish, American and female identities.

Life in the *shtetl* did not always afford Jewish women the consciousness of the self which would facilitate their personal development. The new opportunities for education and social advancement in America highlighted the contrast between the Old World and the New, making the women authors sensitive to the changes in progress. As the writing process involved releasing oneself from the Jewish communal perspective, it, in turn, aided the process of self-discovery and emancipation. As Jews began to assimilate, many decided to chronicle the metamorphosis: Elizabeth Stern *My Mother and I* (1917), Elizabeth Hasanovitz *One of Them: Chapters From a Passionate Autobiography* (1917), Hilda Polachek *I Came a Stranger: The Story of a Hull-House Girl*, Lillian D. Wald *The House on Henry Street* (1915), Rebekah Kohut *My Portion* (1925), Harriet Lane Levy's *920 O'Farrell Street* (1947), and Sophie Ruskay *Horsecars and Cobblestones* (1949), to mention but a few. The writing process was a way to come to terms with the ambiguous relationship between Jewishness and Americanness. Together with the novels by Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, Sidney Nyburg, Ludwig Lewisohn and Michael Gold, these novels mark the beginning of the Jewish American literary tradition.

The value of *The Promised Land* lies not only in the fact that it provides a unique record of the writer's own life presented against the background of the history of Jewish immigration to the United States at the end of the 19th century, but, more importantly, in its aim to familiarize the American public with the

exotic culture of the Jewish ghetto and to demonstrate to an average, middle-class, American reader that the turn of the century influx of East-European immigration was nothing to be afraid of for the newcomers would be a valuable addition to American society. That is why the author eagerly explores the myths surrounding the Jewish ghetto, like using the blood of murdered Christian children at the Passover festival, the accusations that Jews were responsible for the murder of the Christian God, or the proverbial Jewish greed for gold. To make her writing more accessible to English-speaking readers, Mary Antin includes a Jewish-American glossary, with a pronunciation guide, which explains Yiddish words and Jewish customs. The book argues that immigrants do not pose a threat to American values¹ and neither do they take away jobs but, instead, that they contribute to the country's economy and culture. Antin's book is an attempt to dispel the growing public concern about immigrants and to demonstrate that assimilation can be a smooth process which works to everybody's advantage. By emphasizing the thoroughness of her own assimilation, which is the victory of a young person's will to shape her own destiny, she paves the way towards assimilation for nameless others who will follow in her footsteps.

Antin's novel presents a model of assimilation which is total and complete. The fact that since the 1800's social science had shifted its focus from biological theories (Charles Darwin) towards more culture specific issues (Margaret Mead) had an important impact on the theories of assimilation. The belief that ethnic groups are biologically distinct, which explains their diversified behavior, and that some are "naturally" more advanced than others (Herbert Spencer) was questioned by the growing importance attached to cultural influences, which account for the differences between various ethnic groups (Franz Boas). Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess understood assimilation as "interpretation and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life" (735). Antin's narrative explores the race-relations cycle: contact, competition and conflict, accommodation, and assimilation (Robert Park). The last is the ultimate goal for every successful immigrant. Ethnicity was thus seen

¹ Charles W. Redding and Edward D. Steel discuss the following ideas which make up the American Value System: puritan and pioneer morality, the value of the individual, achievement and success, change and progress, ethical equality, equality of opportunity, effort and optimism, efficiency, practicality and pragmatism, rejection of authority, science and secular rationality, sociality, material comfort, quantification, external conformity, humor, generosity and considerateness, and patriotism. "The American Value System: Premises for Persuasion." *Western Speech*. Spring 1962, Vol. 26 Issue 2: 89-91.

as a social stigma which should disappear in the American “melting pot.” This is why Antin’s notion of assimilation involves shedding her Jewish immigrant past and, through diligence and determination, becoming a fully-fledged American. Therefore, assimilation is not a sudden flash of consciousness or a leap across the cultural divide, but a long evolutionary process, with no guarantee of final success. Antin’s novel presents a desirable scenario, enumerating the steps that must be undertaken: acquiring new language skills, changing diet, buying new clothes, gaining access to education, coming to terms with memory and nostalgia, adapting religious rules to a new environment, and changing family and communal ties.

The protagonist of Antin’s novel distances herself from her traditional family to highlight her success at Americanization. She adopts a similar strategy while depicting her fellow immigrants. None of her poor tenement neighbors or classroom friends seems worthy of her attention, and nor do they exhibit a comparable determination to learn American ways. Antin portrays her protagonist as an exceptional character among the masses of greenhorns drowned in destitute and misery. The way she describes life in a tenement house suggests her scorn and detachment: “That guttural, scolding voice, unremittent as the hissing of a steam pipe...That blubbering and moaning, accompanied by an elephant tread...feeble whining [of the] scabby baby on the third floor, fallen out of bed again, with nobody home to pick him up” (290). The narrator takes on the role of the (not-so-objective, in view of the choice of words) observer, who poses as an outsider. Indeed, the choice of words like “sordid” and “the greasy alien” belongs to the repertoire of those Americans who indulge their anti-immigrant sentiments. Put in the mouth of the narrator, who is herself an immigrant, such words signify her willful detachment from her ancestral community. Antin’s strategy, by means of which she distances herself from her Jewish past, aims to embrace the point of view of her potential American readers, for whom a Jewish ghetto was an alien place. Therefore, subjected to the demands of her authorial strategy, Antin’s text is not an authentic representation of early twentieth-century immigrant life, but, rather, tries to recreate an average American response to such a representation.

Antin’s story presents the questionable argument that successful assimilation requires the shedding of her Jewish past, which involves separation from both her family and her immigrant neighbors. “It is painful to be consciously of two worlds,” (3) Antin writes and while deliberately choosing America as her home. Michael P. Kramer claims that “Antin so ‘thoroughly internalized the dominant culture’s vision of the ethnic and foreign’ and allowed ‘that culture to prescribe modes of narration, stances toward authority, and plots and morals’ that *The Promised Land* seems to lack *any* alternative, protesting voice. *The Promised Land* leaves no room, it is argued, for Jewish difference”

(126). As the protagonist does not regard her ancestry as the only source of values and inner strength, rejecting its burden becomes an indispensable condition for her successful rebirth as an American. Her Jewishness is no obstacle in the process of assimilation as is demonstrated in the narrative. After the initial examples of anti-Semitism, which she attributes to “the cruel centuries” of Christian oppression, Antin, as well as the rest of her family, later approves of her sister’s modeling for a painting of the Christian child and appreciates the goodness of the Morgan Chapel missionary work which helps the slum residents. In her view, “assimilation is not capitulation to a higher race but the fulfillment of one’s own racial destiny”(Kramer 143). This spiritual change from bitter animosity to tolerant co-existence is not only another step in the process of her assimilation, but a solution to the wider problem of anti-Semitism. By marginalizing her Jewishness and making it peripheral in the process of her Americanization, she claims that “assimilation, with its attendant loss of Jewish cultural heritage, is [nevertheless] the heritage of many American Jews” (Kramer 124), as later Jewish-American history shows.

The concept of memory or, more precisely, the sense of continuity, is crucial to any discussion about immigrant experiences. Antin’s novel proposes a strategy which denies the past and concentrates on the present, advancing a model of assimilation popular at the beginning of the 20th century. “A long past vividly remembered is like a heavy garment that clings to your limbs when you would run;”(8) an immigrant must free himself from the burden of his memories in order to make room for a new identity to be constructed, and thus assimilation is an effort to make time continuous. As long as he dwells in the past, the process of assimilation will be hindered. As much as Mary is certain what being an American means, even more certain than her fellow Americans, she cannot escape the nostalgia for her childhood memories in Russia, which manifests itself in the descriptions of the taste of cherries, poignant Jewish rituals, the color of red dahlias and the panoramic scenes of her native Polotzk. Yet, her recollections are not always supported by evidence, as she herself admits: the remembered dahlias turn out to be poppies.

In the chapter “I Remember” she purposely chooses those memories which “recaptured the spirit, not the facts, of her experience” (Shavelson 171) and which help her create her narrative persona. She is aware of the fact that her “father and mother could tell [her] much more that [she] has forgotten, or that [she] was never aware of, but [she] wants to reconstruct [her] childhood from those broken recollections only”(79). The ownership of her memory gives her control over the narrative. “In doing so, Antin underlined her double position in the text as both author and subject, insisting on the interpreted, constructed nature of the tale she was telling about herself”(Shavelson 170). Moreover, the selective and subjective combination of facts and fiction was a strategy to

answer the expectations of the American audience the story was addressed to, not just a way of documenting an immigrant life.

The entry into the English language “enables her to cross the boundaries for it gives her a voice and provides her with a space wherein she emerges anew as an autonomous, liberated and secular woman” (Isci 7). The elevated style of her prose imitates turn-of-the century American writing proving that she has mastered the language well enough to be placed among other American writers of her times. Demonstrating her knowledge of the European literary tradition, she asserts that the process of assimilation, in her case, is thoroughly successful and she is no longer a hyphenated American. The narrator implies a completion of the internalization of the new tongue: “I am not sure that I could believe in my neighbors as I do if I thought about them in un-English words” (208). Through the medium of an acquired language, she successfully constructs her public self releasing herself from her mother’s kitchen. One may recognize the connection between literacy and morality in immigrant conversion narratives: “Learning English is portrayed as an inherently moral act, and learning to read and write is a transformative experience that makes Antin a better (more assimilated) person”(Dayton-Woods 87).

The ability to communicate in English sets her out on a journey to explore America, but “mastering a second language will only make a difference if rhetors have at least a possibility of making successful identification with influential groups having access to social goods such as credibility and authority” (Butler 58). As long as “praising English was, in 1912, one way for immigrants to ‘act together,’ and to become symbolically consubstantial with ‘born Americans’ ”(Butler 72), mastering the language may be a step to inclusion and empowerment on condition that the native society is willing to share a common language with the immigrants. When Antin declares her fervent love for the English language and the new country, it acquires another meaning when one thinks of the Jewish history of displacement: “Naturalization with us Russian Jews, may mean more than the adoption of the immigrant by America. It may mean the adoption of America by the immigrant” (218). Then, “[t]his reciprocal relationship stands as the culmination of the melting-pot experience” (Crumpton Winter 35). The figure of the Wandering Jew, which may suggest Jews’ inability to settle down and assimilate, in Antin’s narrative is transformed into the figure of the assimilated Jew.

Following the paradigm of assimilation promoted by *The Promised Land*, Mary visits a “wonderful country called uptown,” where, in a dazzling beautiful palace called a “department store” ,(149) she exchanges her “hateful homemade European costumes which pointed [immigrants] as ‘greenhorns’ to the children on the street, for real American machine-made garments,” (149) in a symbolic erasure of communal *shtetl* handicrafts and immersion in the mass production

and consumption of industrial America.² She becomes the model of an attentive pupil praising the opportunities of the American schooling system: “The public school has done its best for us foreigners, and for the country, when it has made us into good Americans” (Antin 212), and breaks Jewish dietary laws, which was not particularly difficult as it was her father who urged the family to give up Orthodox Jewish Religion “for only by freely sharing the life of our neighbors could [they] come into [their] full inheritance of American freedom and opportunity”(Antin 236).

Molly Crumpton Winter sees the ham-eating scene as the climax of Antin’s assimilative process, the moment when “the demands of assimilation become invasive on personal, inherited, and private levels” (48). Antin vividly remembers the dinner to which she was invited by her beloved teacher Mrs. Dillingham: “I ate, but only a newly abnegated Jew can understand with what squirming, what protesting of the inner man, what exquisite abhorrence of myself” (Antin 196). Not only does Mary consciously break with her ancestral heritage, but her decision to eat as much as she can reflects the zealotry with which she pursues her aim to become American: thus “the two paths of her life, the inherited and the self-determined, [...] converge in this one symbolic gesture” (Crumpton Winter 48). Consequently, she substitutes her Jewish religious heritage with a new born patriotism comparing George Washington to David.

The Promised Land is divided into two distinct parts: Part I, which describes the hardships of *shtetl* life, and Part II, which praises American ways in order to affirm the family’s decision to immigrate. The Old World was built strictly along ethnic lines between Jews and the non-Jews, with the former suffering injustice, intolerance and persecution. Jews could not travel freely, young Jewish men were compelled to serve in the Russian army leaving nobody behind to look after the abandoned families, and many were killed during the pogroms. Although Antin mentions certain sympathetic neighbors, on average, “it was easier to be friends with the beasts in the barn than with some of the Gentiles” (22). Religious differences were aggravated by “long-haired priests” (23), who would urge the peasants “to sharpen their axes against [the Jews]” (33). Everyday life involved constant cheating and juggling, as “the cheapest way to live in Polotzk was to pay [bribes] as you went along” (64). Since the relations between Jews and the outside world were tense and based on injustice, they sought refuge in the colorful culture of their ancestors. Hence, the author provides detailed and vivid descriptions of Jewish culture: weddings, Sabbaths,

² For a discussion of the material manifestations of Mary Antin’s assimilation through consumption see Babak Elahi. “The Heavy Garments of the Past: Mary and Frieda Antin in *The Promised Land*” College Literature 32.4 (Fall 2005).

religious ceremonies, day-to-day family life, and the intricacies of the social hierarchy. This sphere was not accessible to the Gentiles and Antin acts as a native informant who enlightens a primarily white mainstream audience providing general information about the alien culture in order to make it more comprehensible. Her descriptions invoke the exotic Other, which attracts readers' attention and arouses their curiosity.

Antin's authorial voice criticizes the old Jewish ways which favor boys' education: "After a boy entered heder [religious school] he was the hero of the family... [he] must have shoes; he must have a plate of hot soup though the others ate dry bread"(32-33). As for a girl, "it was enough if she could read her prayers in Hebrew, and follow the meaning of the Yiddish translation at the bottom of the page" (107). Similarly, the author questions the value of the traditional roles assigned to Jewish women: in the Eastern European *shtetl* "a girl's real schoolroom was her mother's kitchen" (107), whereas in America, both sexes enjoy equal opportunities. Shavelson notices that the author "identified women's oppression with Judaism" and "[h]er response to it was to reject Judaism and construct her identity in the text according to Western male models" (172). To avoid controversy, Antin does not engage in the discussion as to whether the Western model allows women enough freedom of expression or not.

In the Eastern European Jewish tradition, a woman's role was to enable a man to pursue religious scholarships, which was the most desirable occupation for any pious Jew. That is why a Jewish woman released her husband from domestic chores and helped to provide the family's income. In America, Babak Elahi claims, "Mary and Frieda reproduce this gendered division of labor with Mary taking on the male role. Mary will become the young scholar of a secular American faith as well as the consumer of ready-to-wear American clothes, while Frieda will produce, literally, the vestments of this new faith"(35). There is a stark contrast between Frieda, who reproduces the Old World ways by remaining in "her mother's kitchen," making her own clothes, marrying young and starting a family, and Mary, who chooses her own career. The act of purchasing the ready-made fashionable American clothes is an important step in Mary's assimilation. It also highlights the civilizational gap between the traditional world of Eastern Europe, in which clothes are sewn by hand in an old-fashioned manner, and the modern, American world, in which a woman can choose from a wide selection of the latest fashions, a gap whose bridging is not always a smooth process, despite what Antin's story might suggest.

While the first part of her narrative is constructed upon the opposition between the Jews and the Gentiles, and is abundant in examples of intolerance and Russian persecution of Jews, the second, American part, shows no such controversy between immigrant Jews and American Gentiles. A sharp

distinction between the hardships and intolerance the Jews suffered in Russia and the freedom and opportunity of America, which Antin elucidates by setting the two worlds in opposition, suggests that a Wandering Jew may have finally found a place to stay where the rights of American citizens have superseded anti-Semitism. In spite of their poverty and uncouthness, Antin claims, Jews may become better Americans than other immigrant groups because they really appreciate what America offers. The rhetorical strategy of presenting Russian and American Gentiles in clear opposition serves to support the author's assimilative vision, however weak and questionable it artistically is. In order to pass a clear message about who is "good" and who is "bad" to her American audience, Antin adapts her narrative to achieve her aim, even at the expense of the story's believability.

In her reading of Antin's novel, Magdalena Zaborowska³ points to another implication of the division between the Old and the New world, which "serves to elicit two [sexual] incarnations of the heroine" (68-69). While the images of the Old World abound in the sensuous descriptions of smells, tastes, foods, colors, and Jewish women who are portrayed as being used to each other's bodily presence in the public baths, America is presented as a "strangely sanitized and sterile" (70) place. In the American context, the human body is mentioned "only in the educational context of the social work" (70), and Antin's account of her adolescence reveals no traces of her struggles as a gendered and sexual being. Instead, the narrator concentrates on the protagonist's progress at education and assimilation; no boyfriends, no dates or "puppy loves," which would divert her attention from the selected path. In order to fit Anglo-Saxon standards of morality, Mary must suppress her sexuality and, by promoting her intelligence and rational thinking, dispel any allusions to her person as a potential sexual challenger to American women, and cunning temptress of American men. "If she wants to become an American, she has to counter the stereotype of the Jewish woman's inadvertently sexual nature; she has to renounce her ethnic identity – which is linked to "Oriental" carnal longings – for the sake of embracing the spiritual values of the work ethic and the ideology of self-reliance" (Zaborowska 137). Magdalena Zaborowska points at gender and sexuality, especially in case of female protagonists, as essential elements of the immigrant identity in its undergoing of the process of acculturation. Womanhood is both the source of the protagonist's strength in an assimilative struggle, and a hindrance, when the dominant conception differs

³ For a discussion of M. Antin's *The Promised Land* and A. Yezierska's *Bread Givers* as gendered narratives see M.J. Zaborowska *How We Found America. Rereading Gender through East European Immigrant Narratives*. The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill & London: 1995, 39-113.

from the ethnic one. “By setting up exotic Old World sensuality against New World repressive sophistication [Antin] shows how an ethnic woman is always oppressed, how she is trapped between two incarnations that either construct her as primarily sexual or deprive her of this part of her identity” (70).

The concepts of the Jewish homeland and the newborn spirit of nationalism are evoked by the usage of Biblical imagery: “The Exodus,” “The Promised Land,” “Manna,” “The Burning Bush.” The protagonist herself admits: “we were destined to seek our fortunes in a world which even my father did not dream of ...” (172). In this way Antin’s novel perpetuates another epic of the Jewish people with America, not Palestine, as their Promised Land. This substitution is a step in the construction of her narrative when the ancestral past comes into dialogue with the demands of the immigrant narrative of assimilation. As the Puritan Pilgrim Fathers drew a parallel between their coming to America and the Biblical Promised Land, so Antin’s narrative traces a similar pattern of experience in the case of immigrant Jews and the American New World. The symbolic journey across the Atlantic evokes the crossing of the Red Sea, whereas the Biblical imagery highlights a common sense of religious mission. “The rhetorical visions of exodus, conversion, and new birth,” Dayton-Wood posits, reflect “the social gospel movement, which sought to apply the teachings – and the rhetoric – of Christianity to contemporary social problems” (86). By stating “I am the youngest of America’s children,” Antin not only places herself inside the American tradition, embracing it as her own, but, by asserting, “[m]ine is the whole majestic past, and mine is the shining future,”(364) she claims the right to shape the future of her new homeland. Her story acquires a well expressed aim which is to legitimize the immigrants’ claim regarding their shift from the category of aliens to that of natives. Susanne Shavelson argues that placing herself on equal footing in the text with Protestants, who at that time considered themselves to be the only “true” Americans, Antin acquires “the proper pedigree for membership in the society to which she sought entry. It was also an attempt to add her text to an American autobiographical tradition” (181).

Mary Antin as a writer embarks on a mission whose aim is not only to educate the American public about Jewish culture but also to respond to the nativist sentiments which were still thriving in American society at the beginning of the twentieth century. *The Promised Land*, thus, confronts those Americans who show prejudice and ethnic bias. Antin’s narrative dispels anti-immigrant attitudes by promoting the “theme of national pride, which reflected the patriotism popular at the time, [i]n response to the virulent anti-immigration sentiments” (Crumpton Winter 33). How challenging her task was is demonstrated by a brief review of the origins of American nativism. The term “nativism” is connected with the appearance of “Native American” parties like

the Know-Nothing Party of the 1850's, and later with the Immigration Restriction League of the 1890's, the anti-Asian movement resulting in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907. With the increase in immigration from non-English speaking European countries in the early 1880's, there was a growing feeling of resentment at the new arrivals.

Nativist activists attracted working class and middle class voters angered by the job competition from immigrants, the increase in crime, public drunkenness, and pauperism that accompanied immigration, the supposed pollution of the body politic by ignorant immigrant voters, and an assertiveness by Catholic clergymen that supposedly threatened the nation's Protestant values and institutions (Holt).

Occasional violent encounters between "native-born" Americans and immigrants led to riots; for example, in 1844, in Philadelphia, nativists battled Irish immigrants over the choice of a Catholic or Protestant Bible in the Public Schools. With the growth in Irish immigration to the United States in the years of the Great Famine in the late 1840's⁴ religious controversies escalated.

Among the political parties which were prominent on the American political scene during the late 1840's and the early 1850's, the Know-Nothing Party generated most controversy. Together with secret fraternities like the Order of United Americans, popular among middle-class gentlemen who were concerned about the social inferiority of immigrants, it had a platform which was to keep immigrants out of America, or, if they were already there, to keep them out of mainstream society. Another secret society, the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner, was formed in New York in 1849 and in 1854 adopted an official name – the American Party. In order not to reveal the details of the party organization to the general public, its members were instructed to answer, "I know nothing," when asked about the party platform. This cryptic answer and the secrecy surrounding its activities gave rise to many speculations.⁵ The basic premise of the party was a virulent stand against immigration and immigrants under the

⁴ See Ray A. Billington. *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism*. New York: Macmillan Co., 1938.

⁵ To read more about the origins of the Know Nothing Party see Paul F. Boller, Jr. *Presidential Campaigns From George Washington to George W. Bush*. New York: OUP, 2004, and Tyler Gregory Abinder. *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850's*. New York, OUP, 1992.

banner of “America for Americans,” preferably WASP-like ones.⁶ Its main targets were German and Irish immigrants, many of whom were Roman Catholics. Germans, who came after the failed revolutions of 1848, were identified with socialism and liberal movements, which were a threat to American values, and Irish immigrants, escaping the Potato Famine, were competition for the worst paid, unskilled jobs to native-born Americans. As the natives regarded alcohol to have a pernicious effect on the newcomers, they advocated limiting its sale. The Know Nothing activists called for a change in the law so that only immigrants who had lived in the United States for 25 years could become citizens and be able to vote. Likewise, they protested against non-native born Americans holding office. Professor Stephen Oates quotes Abraham Lincoln’s derogatory opinion of the party: “When the Know Nothings get control, it will read all men are created equal, except Negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics” (165), which reflected the general disapproval and distrust of such xenophobic political views.

Although they occupied the political extreme, the Know Nothings managed to generate some public response and in the 1850’s, under the leadership of James W. Baker, they ran candidates for office with, however, no significant success. In 1856 Millard Fillmore ran as the Know-Nothing candidate for president, but his whole campaign was a failure. At the same time, the Know-Nothing Party aligned itself with pro-slavery groups and, as the majority of its members came from the north-east, this only prompted its decline, so by the 1860’s the party was virtually extinct. Many of its members, especially from the north, joined a new party arising on the American political horizon – the Republican Party – whereas pro-slavery supporters joined the Democratic Party. As the nativist movement did not begin with the Know-Nothing Party, it did not really end there either, as prejudice against immigrants continued throughout the 19th century.

Marking boundaries and delineating its interest area, Antin’s novel establishes the genre of the Jewish immigrant autobiographical novel. One is, however, faced with the generic difference between autobiography and the autobiographical novel. It is difficult to fit autobiography within clearly defined bounds as most literature is a form of self-expression. Philippe Lejeune’s definition of autobiography: “a retrospective narrative in prose produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (139) is one such attempt. An

⁶ WASP – White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. The commonly used acronym originally referred to Americans of British, as opposed to other, descent. Nowadays, it is used to contrast early-arriving settlers from North-western Europe with the descendants of later immigrant groups coming from Eastern Europe and other parts of the world.

autobiography is an account of the life of a person, a kind of introspection, in which the narrating self is also the narrated one; the author, the narrator, and the protagonist share a common identity. Written from the first person singular perspective, autobiography is distinguished by subjectivity. The unique relationship between autobiography and an autobiographical novel, which is a borderline case between autobiography and fiction, produces a hybrid genre which encompasses the elements of both genres. According to Philippe Lejeune, internally there is “no difference between an autobiography and an autobiographical novel” (147). An autobiographical novel may parallel the author’s life but it adds fictional elements to make the narrative consistent. Autobiography requires a difficult distinction between fiction and non-fiction; however, a growing awareness of the self and the construction of authorial identity can be found in both. In an autobiographical novel the constructed self does not have to be a completely factual representation of the author’s self. Therefore, in view of the above, Antin’s narrative falls into the category of an autobiographical novel.

The choice of autobiographical discourse is not surprising as this rich mode of artistic expression allows one to combine a unique individual experience with a record of social history. Autobiography lends itself well to the rendering of the nuances of ethnic experiences, and it accounts for the historical and cultural milieu particular for this record. As immigration is inherent in geographical dislocation, autobiographical discourse embraces both the memories of the Old World and the unfamiliar immediacy of the New One in an attempt to arrange the pieces in a meaningful order. By doing so, it enables the re-construction of a new, stable identity from that which has been shattered by the traumatic immigrant experiences, located within the limits of an alien culture. “The bulk of *The Promised Land* is Antin’s attempt to turn this untellable story into a coherent narrative process,” claims Jolie A. Sheffer, adding that “[p]sychoanalytic critic Felman describes the treatment for traumatized subjects as learning to ‘testify – to narrate the traumatic events in order to regain a sense of agency, to rediscover ‘one’s own proper name, one’s signature’ ”(152). Writing an autobiography, Antin believes, will help her close the immigrant chapter of her life: “I take the hint from the Ancient Mariner, who told his tale in order to be rid of it. I, too, will tell my tale, for once, and never hark back any more. I will write a bold ‘Finis’ at the end, and shut the book with a bang” (9). As the story ends at that moment, one may only speculate whether the feelings of loss, separation and alienation, which come forward as principal in later immigrant narratives, also had an impact on her future life.

Yet, the ownership of the heroine’s narrative voice in Antin’s novel is a complicated issue. Although the female protagonist bears the same name as the author and uses the first person narrative, her story is a fictional autobiography

in that it has little to do with the real Mary Antin. The author states her own position claiming that “I have written a genuine personal memoir” (7) and then contradicts herself saying: “I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell” (6). There are two Mary Antins: Mary the narrator, already assimilated into American society looking back on the second narrator – a young, Jewish girl who lives through the most important experiences of her short life “uprooting, transportation, replanting, acclimatization, and development”(8). Antin constructs her autobiographical identity so that it may bridge the two selves: the narrated and the narrating one. “The assertion that the narrator and the protagonist are two different people allowed her to identify with the Americans for whom she was writing while telling them her immigration story” (Shavelson 169). By locating herself among American authors, whom she admires so much, Antin embraces the male rhetoric which legitimizes her place among them. She distances herself from her immigrant past and Jewish heritage because she believes that this as a *sine qua non* for successful assimilation. The distance thus achieved allows her to assert her final status as an American citizen, which is the ultimate goal of her narrative, rather than to identify with other Jewish women or the immigrant plight.

A way to bridge the distance between an immigrant narrative and American literary tradition is the adoption of the concept of individual achievement as crucial in the transformation of the autobiographical self. Antin’s friend Josephine Lazarus introduced her to the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance” and “Nature” (Shavelson 171), and the echoes of his teaching are visible in the portrayal of Antin’s heroine. But the only voice readers hear is Antin’s and other points of view are rarely introduced. Similarly, there is very little dialogue and the whole story is presented through Antin’s retrospection. Her belief that “[o]nce we are born we may create our own world if we choose” (172) is supported throughout the entire narrative. Her story is clearly one of individual achievement, and echoes the claim forwarded by Benjamin Franklin in his *Autobiography* that, given an opportunity, an individual can accomplish anything. By adopting Ralph Waldo Emerson, Benjamin Franklin, Jacob Riis and Horatio Alger as her models, she “reaffirmed the contested conviction that American selfhood resided not in race or ethnicity, but in the replicable, assimilable plot of the American success story” (Kramer 135). The belief in the power of the individual mind, which needs no company on the way to success, is reflected in her words: “What I chose instinctively to do I knew to be right and in accordance with my destiny. I never hesitated over great things, but answered promptly to the call of my genius” (296-297). Her self-assurance, which verges on arrogance, enables her to reject parental and religious guidance putting all her hopes in the abilities of the human mind. By choosing the first person narrative and autobiography as a mode of expression, Antin argues that

“the immigration question is not primarily political and sociological but psychological, not broadly cultural but narrowly, essentially personal” (Kramer 129). Thus, “constructed as a matter between the immigrant and herself”(129), assimilation is an experience rooted in an individual’s mind: unique, autonomous and not subjected to public scrutiny.

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s teachings on the value of the solitary individual against the corruption of society are also manifested in her treatment of the family and her fellow immigrants. Jacob Riis in *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890) and other writers of the Progressive era, note that the only good in slum life came from family values, which sustained the feelings of belonging and responsibility, offering a respite from the corrupt and immoral ghetto life. Antin, however, emphasizes her separation from the family, setting her successful assimilation against the failures of her family: her mother appears only within the limiting context of domestic chores, totally subjugated to her husband’s will; her father struggles to support the family; her older sister is sent to work in a sweat shop; and her brother and other siblings are hardly ever mentioned. Mary looks at the members of her family with pity but she never investigates the reasons for their less thorough accommodation to American life because their failures serve as a contrast to illuminate her own success. But however self-reliant she seems to be, Mary must rely on the support of her family: her father grants his consent to her further education, and her sister, Frieda, must work to collect the money for Mary’s tuition. Without their help, Antin’s “solitary genius” might have died amidst a pile of unpaid bills.

Constructing herself as an author, Antin puts herself at the very center of the narrative, the place usually occupied by male protagonists. The father as a patriarchal figure and the symbol of male authority, does not only exist in traditional Jewish families. No wonder that he is the member of her family she identifies most strongly with, even though America never delivers on its dream of prosperity to Israel Antin – his various business ventures generally fail, and he does not master the English language. Antin’s mother and siblings, on the other hand, get very little attention because they occupy secondary positions in the family’s hierarchy. A similar identification between masculinity and the dominant order existed in early twentieth-century American society, which was the addressee of Antin’s novel. Antin aspires to a privileged male role model in her textual construction, and thereby she perpetuates the social division between the gender lines. In both the Jewish and the American context Antin’s position as a woman and a female writer is underprivileged; hence the writing of an autobiography is a step towards the author’s emancipation. Put another way, the protagonist’s change of cultural milieu from Jewish Orthodoxy to American

docs not eliminate the fact that she must acknowledge patriarchal dominance, which is present in both.

Mary Antin in the “Introduction” stresses the importance of the collective experience over the individual one: “Although I have written a personal memoir, I believe that its chief interest lies in the fact that it is illustrative of scores of unwritten lives” (Antin xiii). Making her voice representative of others, she validates her own personal story and legitimizes the history of the whole generation of Jewish immigrants to the United States. Jolie A. Sheffer connects the shift in syntax with the disruptive quality of the immigrant narrative: “Antin’s autobiographical ‘I’ collapses into the family ‘we,’ until the family ‘we’ is indistinguishable from the collective ‘we’ of all the immigrants,” adding that “ [in] a text intent on claiming authorship and individual agency, this narrative collapse highlights the traumatic violence of immigration” (151). Mary Antin identifies herself not as a member of the Jewish community but as an independent individual on the way to assimilation, and all the experiences she describes, whether hers or her family’s, are subjected to serve the myth she is constructing for her readers.

One might question, however, how representative her fate was to that of an average, Jewish, immigrant woman whose voice was denied for a variety of reasons. When Antin’s father left Polotzk to look for business opportunities, he brought back home something more important “the ideal of a modern education,” (76) which originated from the secular ideas of the Haskalah movement. Resolved to live “the life of a modern man” (77), he started with his childrens’ education: “Fetchke and I were started with a rebbe, in the orthodox way, but we were taught to translate as well as read Hebrew, and we had a secular teacher besides” (78). There were also plans for higher education and, what was important for the integrity of the Antin family: “My mother was one with my father in all his plans for us. Although she had spent her young years in the pursuit of the ruble, it was more to her that our teacher praised us than that she had made a good bargain with a tea merchant” (78). Because of her modern father, Mary had a rare opportunity to get some education back in the *stetl*, which was traditionally only for the boys. When already in America, she is the one who pursues her dream of getting to college, at the expense of her older sister whose work pays for Mary’s tuition. Her parents, Reformed rather than Orthodox Jews, neither force an arranged marriage onto her nor confine her to her mother’s kitchen. Under the circumstances, her claim as to the representativeness of her story is more than questionable. On the contrary, one might argue that her modern upbringing, encouragement and her parents’ open-mindedness were the key factors which nourished her desires and gave her the strength to pursue her dreams.

Susanne A. Shavelson draws attention to the question as to whether Antin's novel is more "representational than representative" (165). "*The Promised Land* tells us much about Mary Antin the writer. Through her autobiography, she tried to ensure her place among American writers and intellectuals and establish beyond dispute her credentials as a 'real' American" (Shavelson 165). The author willfully distances herself from the "huddled masses" her story represents. By assuming the authority of the autobiographical voice, she places herself and her story in the center of the narrative. In identifying with her father and leaving her mother and sibling in the background, she recreates male authority, which justifies her claim to being a public voice on the one hand, and enables her to identify with the American literary tradition, on the other. "Paradoxically, Antin constructed her argument for acceptance into the brotherhood of American intellectuals by asserting the authenticity of her account of immigrant life as seen from the inside, while emphasizing her separation from it" (Shavelson 167). She places herself together with the audience of her novel, creating a distance from her Jewish and immigrant heritage. What is more, she is aware of what the American public wants to know; the knowledge which comes with assimilation. Antin intentionally manipulates her own story to suit her deeper purpose. Carefully avoiding even potential criticism of American ways so as not to inspire anti-Semitic sentiments, she stresses Jewish piety, the importance of family, and perseverance.

Mary Antin's autobiographical novel takes a stance in the discussion of immigrant literature by claiming that thorough assimilation should be a substitute for life lived in the hyphen between two cultures. Antin's heroine's zeal for Americanization, which smoothly transforms Mashke into Mary, praises its advantages to immigrants in the new country as well as stressing its benefits to American society. A young Jewish girl's account of youthful success asserts that immigrants may be a valuable addition to American society, that they may contribute to the society not only in a positive way but also "in a manner that becomes essential to the very fabric of what was considered to be America" (McGinity 13). Antin's identity as a successful and grateful newcomer to America infused her writing and implied that her future belonged to the American, not the Jewish, tradition. As much as Antin as a writer was in her time made into "an epitome of the immigrant chronicler, a recorder of the American myth of freedom and individualism, or into an egotistic foreign artist who dared to claim the new country without asking" (Zaborowska 57), Magdalena Zaborowska claims that "at the time when she was writing, Antin did not have any other choice but to participate in some of the 'paens' if she

wanted” (60) to be published at all.⁷ That is why, at its publication in 1912, *The Promised Land* was a huge commercial success and for many American readers came to represent a general, immigrant experience, especially welcomed for the fact that it depicted immigrant assimilation to American society as an uninterrupted and unobstructed process ending in the mutual satisfaction of both the aliens and the natives. Ruth R. Wisse, however, highlights the irony of Antin’s success as a writer claiming that “[s]he remained interesting to others, and to herself, not as the integrated American citizen she became but as the Yiddish-speaking child she had once been” (269).

The ideas of assimilation are not popular nowadays because they presuppose the existence of a dominant target culture, the acceptance of which involves shedding one’s distinct, cultural heritage. Mary Antin’s autobiographical novel favors the Melting Pot theory, which unifies and enriches, over the Salad Bowl theory, which sustains the ethnic diversification of American culture. Reflecting other 20th century voices, Antin believed that assimilation is a key to American citizenship, that the losses which occur in the process are inevitable and in no way diminish the successful outcome. Antin’s autobiography is the answer to the questions raised by the Dillingham Report⁸ and the Immigration Restriction League⁹: “*The Promised Land* portrays the tension of negotiating a path to citizenship in a society that often gave immigrants conflicting signals, and Antin’s positive tone comes from her pride in having come through this process to gain success in her adopted country” (Crumpton 30). Many critics see Antin’s autobiography as “naïve and unrealistic...as the story of a woman [who] too eagerly surrendered her past, her culture, her religion for the promise of America” (Rubin 298). Yet, the

⁷ For the discussion of Antin’s official and unofficial versions see Magdalena J. Zaborowska *How We Found America. Reading Gender Through East European Narratives*. The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill & London, 1995.

⁸ The US Immigration Commission, which operated between 1907 and 1911, issued a report to the US Senate which investigated immigration to the US at the beginning of the 20th century. Headed by Senator William Paul Dillingham, the Commission was formed in response to the growing political concern about the influx of immigration in the US. In conclusion, the Commission stated that immigration from southern and eastern Europe posed a threat to American values and should be reduced. Hence, immigration restriction acts followed: the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, and the National Origins Formula of 1929.

⁹ Founded in 1894, the IRL advocated a literacy test as a means to restrict immigration from Italy and eastern Europe. IRL members led a mass media campaign to alert the American public to the dangers of the flood of “new immigrants”, as opposed to the “old immigrants” who came from English, Irish and German stock. They claimed that the newcomers were unable to assimilate into American culture.

inconsistencies and doubts of the novel undermine to some extent the author's overall sense of contentment. Later Jewish immigrant novels, for example Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, would not be so enthusiastic about Jewish assimilation, and would measure the losses against the gains in an attempt to show the complexity of the process.

4. Disillusionment with the American Promised Land: Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*

I can never forget the days of my misery. I cannot escape from my old self. My past and my present do not comport well. David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher's Synagogue seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak-manufacturer. (372)¹

Abraham Cahan (1866-1951) was not only a prominent Jewish political and social activist in New York between 1890 and 1946, but also an excellent chronicler of the lives of Jewish immigrants who were flocking from Eastern Europe to the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. Pronounced by *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (2006) the most influential, early 20th century figure within the Jewish-American Lower East Side, Abraham Cahan familiarized the newcomers with the nuances of everyday American life, building a mental bridge between their Eastern European past and the American present.

Cahan was born in 1860 into an orthodox Jewish family in Podberezic, a hamlet near Vilna. His father was a primary school teacher (*melamed*), his grand-father was a *rabbi*, and his mother was a housewife. When in 1881, he graduated from the Teacher Training Institute in Vilna and started a job as a teacher in the small village of Velizh, he was already involved in the anti-Tsarist opposition, sharing its radical, socialist views. This involvement in revolutionary circles was dangerous and he feared for his life. Consequently, Cahan decided to leave Russia. He was fortunate to have escaped the pogroms

¹ Abraham Cahan. *The Rise of David Levinsky*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2002. All references are to this edition and are cited by page within the text.

which started in 1881, after the murder of Tsar Alexander II. On 5 June 1882, Cahan arrived in Philadelphia, and later settled in New York on the Lower East Side. He came at the beginning of the mass immigration of Russian Jews to the United States, which was triggered by the pogroms. In 1870 there were approximately 300,000 Jews in the USA, but by the 1920's the number had soared to over 3,000,000 (Hindus IX).

Cahan considered himself a radical Russian socialist in exile, rather than a typical Jewish immigrant who had arrived in America for religious and economic reasons. In order to survive he took a number of odd jobs and, at the same time, got involved in the socialist labor movement, soon becoming one of its leading activists. His engagement with and dedication to the labor cause resulted in the creation of the first Jewish-American trade union in 1884. At the same time, he was diligently learning English, attending evening courses at Chrystie Street School. After two years his English was so fluent that *New York World* published his article on Tsarist autocracy, and he got a job as an English teacher in an evening school for immigrants.

Cahan's journalistic career started when in 1886 he became a co-editor of the *Neie Tzeit*, the first American newspaper in Yiddish, which also promoted the socialist doctrine. Although the newspaper did not last long, Cahan gained a reputation as an efficient editor and author. In 1888 he began to edit *Die Zukunft*, which was addressed mainly to members of the Socialist Party, and two years later, in 1890, he became an editor of the Jewish workers' weekly *Arbeiter Zeitung*. Under the pseudonym "Proletariat Preacher," he criticized American capitalism, entertaining readers with Russian folk stories and Talmudic parables spiced with Marxist rhetoric. In 1897 Cahan helped to found, and from 1902 to 1946 was the chief editor of, the world's most popular Jewish newspaper in Yiddish, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, whose title was borrowed from a popular social-democratic newspaper published in Berlin. Although Cahan was the editor of the first issue published on 22 April 1897, he soon resigned because other journalists did not share his vision of the newspaper modeled on the "yellow press," a new journalistic format introduced by Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst.² At the same time Cahan lost his teaching post due to his involvement in socialist activities. Fortunately, Lincoln

² The contest between William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* introduced a new style of journalism to attract potential readers: "yellow journalism" applied to lurid publications that emphasized the sensational side of the news. Filled with large doses of crime news and sex scandals, highlighted by headline news and containing color supplements, the "yellow press" played an important role in molding American public opinion during the American-Spanish war of 1898-1901.

Steffens, a city column editor of the *New York Commercial Advertiser* offered Cahan a job as a police reporter, which he took, albeit reluctantly. Little did he know at that point how much insight the job would give him into everyday life on the Lower East Side. In 1902 Cahan went back to work at *Forward* and boosted its sales by means of adding real life stories at the expense of socialist propaganda. Unfortunately, such radical changes did not meet with the approval of the New York Jewish intelligentsia and Cahan had to resign from his job once again.

The same year, however, Abraham Cahan yet again returned to *Forward*, this time with the promise of independence in running the newspaper. He dedicated the next forty years of his life to *Forward*, making it the biggest foreign language newspaper in the United States. During its best year in 1924, *Forward* had more than 250,000 readers (Norton 2001). One of the main reasons for its success was the use of Americanized Yiddish, the language of the New York streets, which was easily understood by Jewish immigrants. The next step was to introduce a new column “Bintel Brief” (a packet of letters), to which the readers could send enquiries concerning their everyday problems in the new country. Furthermore, Cahan added an entirely new section dealing with sports news. *Forward* became a popular manual for Jewish immigrants, teaching them American history and culture as well as promoting the English language among the newcomers. “Bintel Brief” was a forerunner of the letters to the editor sections of popular glossy magazines – advice columns in the style of “Dear Abby.” In the 1920’s, the New York *Forward*, expanded by Boston and Los Angeles editions, became an oracle on matters of American life for newcomers. For the first generation of Jewish immigrants, it was often the only contact with the English-speaking world of their new homeland. As Cahan himself derived from a mixture of Jewish, Russian and American cultures, he became a guide to his readers, directing them through the meanders of the acculturation processes.

After the outbreak of the World War I, Cahan started a series of publications addressing the conflict in Europe. *Forward* officially condemned Germany’s military aggression and Cahan drew a parallel between Russian imperialism and German expansionism. In 1915, Cahan toured Germany and Austria as a war correspondent, which later gave rise to speculations about his being a spy. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, on the basis of the Espionage Act³, *Forward* was allowed to publish only official war news.

³ The Espionage Act of 1917 was passed in order to stop citizens from spying or interfering with military actions. The law extended the meaning of “espionage” to include the open expression of political opinions, without the revealing of any secret, by persons who had no connection with the enemy, as long as the expression of such opinions was construed as helping the enemy. The Act was intended to silence anti-war

Another wave of criticism of Abraham Cahan came as a result of articles in which he supported the communist revolution in Russia and its leader Vladimir Illich Lenin. It was only in 1923, when he went to visit Russia, that his eyes were opened to the true nature of Russian communism, and he withdrew his approval of Lenin's policies.

Between the wars Cahan traveled extensively: he took part in the first sitting of the British labor government in 1924, participated in the Socialist Congress in Marseille in 1925, and then visited Palestine in 1929. After World War II the popularity of *Forward* declined, mainly because Yiddish was being replaced by English among the Jewish immigrant Diaspora. A stroke in 1946 ended Cahan's journalistic career. He died in 1951 at the age of 91.

Abraham Cahan was a harbinger of the New Journalism, a literary trend which became prominent in America in the 1960's and 1970's, and which combined literary narrative techniques with the reporter's account of the facts in order to highlight the intricate connection between fact and fiction. According to *Historia Literatury Amerykańskiej XX Wieku*: "the representatives of the New Journalism presented readers with facts and commentary, at the same time providing them with entertainment specific to that which accompanies the reading of short-stories and novels [...] they thoroughly explained the origins of the events, tried to understand the characters' motives, and broadly informed readers about the internal dynamics of the affairs" (Salska 329). The aim of the new technique was to evoke readers' empathy towards the persons and events described, which was accomplished by means of arousing personal emotions.

According to the main representative of the New Journalism, Tom Wolfe, this may be achieved by a number of technical devices: "scene-by-scene construction, resorting as little as possible to sheer, historical narrative, lots of dialogue, a marked point of view within the story, often not that of the narrator but that of a character, reconstructed from tapes or interviews, or letters, or diaries, and the recording of details of 'status life' – the entire pattern of behavior and possessions through which people express their position in the world, or what they think it is, or what they hope it to be" (Wolfe 31-32). John Hollowell has added internal monologue and the complex characteristics of the protagonist to the list (Hollowell 25). Before Abraham Cahan became the author of one of the most important Jewish-American immigrant novels, he had resurrected the world of the Eastern European *shtetl* in his journalistic coverage, showing it as the background of the ethnically, religiously and socially diversified New York of the turn of the century. He portrayed immigrants who do not reject their ancestry but try to adapt to their newly found freedom, which

protesters and left-wing sympathizers, whose campaigns might hinder the conscription of the manpower needed for American participation in the war.

dwarfs rather than liberates them. Describing the Jewish immigrants of the Lower East Side, Cahan did not entertain the readers with dramatic details of tenement poverty and destitution, in order merely to arouse their pity, but rather concentrated on the larger problems of Jewish acculturation. The heroes of his newspaper reports and articles are ordinary people with whom readers may easily identify.

Abraham Cahan effectively started his literary career in 1895 when William Dean Howells praised his short-story *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, an abridged version of which appeared in *Arbeiter Zeitung*. *Yekl* is regarded as “the first novella written by an Eastern European Jewish immigrant in English” (Kent 128). Putting his faith in Cahan’s literary potential, Howells hailed him as “a new star of American realism,” and helped him find an American publisher for his first novel in 1896. As a matter of fact, Cahan’s novel had already been published in Yiddish, but Howells’ commentary: “which means it had not been published yet,” shows the marginal role of Yiddish in mainstream American literature (Kirk and Kirk 37). American editors had many doubts as to whether the average American reader would be interested in a story about Jewish immigrants from the Lower East Side. *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* was one of the first novels published in the United States about Eastern European immigrants which was written by an immigrant himself. The story portrays the radical transformation of a Jewish immigrant, Yekl Podkovnik, into a “real” Yankee, in line with the saying that one is not born but becomes American. The substitution of his Jewish name Yekl by the English James suggests the rejection of his native heritage, for the benefit of assimilation into American culture. The character of Yekl/James shows how the mother tongues, Hebrew and Russian in this case, lose their importance, becoming useless in the process of communication and, finally, turn out to be a source of the character’s shame and other people’s contempt for him. The native tongue’s only importance manifests itself in a transitional sense in the process of acquiring the language of the dominant culture, in order to become a part of it. Yekl’s/James’s abandonment of his Jewish religious heritage, his change of clothes and outer appearance, and his sudden interest in social dances are the visible signs of the character’s assimilation, which allows him to function better in American society. The spurning of his simple-minded and pious wife in favor of an Americanized Jewess confirms his desire to discard his Jewish past and become an American. The last pages of the novel, when Yekl/James is travelling on a streetcar to meet his bride to be, reveal, however, his doubts concerning his previous actions. Watching the crowds in the street, he has second thoughts regarding the appropriateness of his decision to turn his back on his Jewish past and embrace Americanization. His growing anxiety about the future is reflected in his desire that the journey should take as long as possible. By postponing the

moment of his marriage ceremony, he subconsciously wants to delay time because he does not know what to do next. The story arrives at a moral crossroads, leaving the readers with an open ending. Suspended between the memories of the Old World and the lure of modern America, Yekl's/James's questionings come to represent one of the main aspects of the immigrant experience explored in Cahan's fiction.

Although Abraham Cahan was aware of the fact that the balance between gain and loss, in respect of the problems of assimilation, is not always favorable to immigrants, he, nevertheless, believed in the need to assimilate: Jewish immigrants, he claimed, should consent to American values rather than try to mould them in their own fashion. When W.D. Howells placed his enthusiastic review of *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* in *New York World*, Cahan was officially acknowledged as a serious writer. However, in spite of the positive reviews and the author's rising popularity, *Yekl* was not a commercial success. In 1898 Cahan published a collection of stories *The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto*, which tackles the complex phenomenon of acculturation, and the feelings of loss and alienation which accompany the process, the leitmotif by which Cahan's literary output can be recognized.

Abraham Cahan's literary ruminations concerning the problems of immigration and assimilation found their reflection in one of the most important Jewish-American novels of the early 20th century, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), which is based on the four parts of *An Autobiography of an American Jew*, which were published in 1913, in *McClure's*. The title is an allusion to W.D. Howells' novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), which presents a similar conflict between material success and its moral background. Cahan's novel demonstrates the inability to reconcile a Jewish heart with an American mind – the price which the hero pays for his material success in the New World.

The main character, David Levinsky, is a poor Talmud student from the Russian village of Antomir. The first pages of Cahan's story describe the sordid lives of Jewish paupers, their everyday problems, and the conflicts between Jews and non-Jews. David's father dies when the boy is three and his mother struggles to provide for the family. One day, she is beaten up by Antomir's non-Jewish boys when she tries to defend her son. Unfortunately, her wounds are fatal and she dies. The orphaned boy is taken into the care of a wealthy, Russian-Jewish family, where he falls in love with the daughter, Matilda, a young divorcee, who will later find her vocation as a socialist activist. At first sympathetic towards the young man, Matilda later rejects his advances and gives him money for his passage to the United States, where David begins his "from rags to riches" ascent as a peddler on the Lower East Side. Soon, he operates a sewing machine, passionately learning English in the evenings and dreaming about higher education, which will make him a cultivated gentleman.

A quarrel with the German owner of the sweatshop about milk spilt over some fabric prompts him to found his own garment business nearby. Eventually, he manages to get a bank loan and gradually becomes more firmly established in his business. In order to cut his costs, he moves into a friend's house, where he falls in love with his wife. Although Dora is not indifferent to his advances, she decides to stay with her husband and children. David moves out and plunges into serious work to forget about his unrequited love. Business goes well and David becomes a salesman traveling across the country selling his goods and services.

Following the advice of his friends that financial success should be reflected in private life, David starts looking for a potential Mrs. Levinsky. Disappointed by the mercenary approach to marriage exhibited by many young girls and their families, he chooses Fanny Kaplan, who comes from an orthodox Jewish family. However, during holidays in Catskills, he meets Anne Tevkin, a socialist and Zionist, whose father is an aged, half-forgotten, Lower East Side Hebrew poet. Anne does not respond to David's advances, but he plans to get to her through her father by enabling him to earn a substantial sum of money speculating in real estate. In Tevkin's house, David finds the intellectual and cultural atmosphere of the traditional Jewish family, which he had never experienced, and which is to crown his successful business efforts. However, Anne firmly rejects David and ends their acquaintance.

This emotional failure causes David to sink into a state of melancholy and makes him reflect on his life. Nothing connects him to the friends of his youth anymore, and his business career, with the glittering yet false manifestations of success, cannot fulfill his inner void. The hard earned money does not give his life enough meaning to make him a happy and satisfied person. He pities himself for being "a victim of circumstances" (372), and wonders "if [he] had [his] life to live over again [whether he] should ever think of a business career"(372).

Cahan's novel is important not so much for its artistic value – it is a prose narrative written in a realist style – but rather for its subject matter, especially for those interested in the social history of American multiculturalism. The author grasped an important moment in American history – the flow of immigration from Eastern Europe – which began with people arriving at Ellis Island⁴ in huge numbers in the 1880's, with little luggage but with enormous cultural baggage. "In that decade, more than 200,000 immigrated to America, followed by 300,000 in the 1890's, and about a million and a half from the turn of the century to the beginning of World War I" (Sowell 80). New York's Lower East Side rapidly became a center for East European Jews, and it was

⁴ Ellis Island functioned as an immigration station between 1892 and 1954.

there that most of them took their first steps on the road to Americanization. Just as Harlem during the 1920's Renaissance came to symbolize the black population of New York, so the Lower East Side came to represent the Jewish diaspora in the United States, together with its distinct culture: the melody of the Hebrew and Yiddish languages, the women in wigs and the men with side curls, the smell of herring, the calling of the street peddlers, the cramped tenement flats without basic amenities, the damp and dark sweatshops full of workers leaning over their sewing machines. At the turn of the century, the Lower East Side was a closed ghetto where white Americans rarely ventured. Cahan's novel gave the average American access to this exotic world, describing its denizens and their problems *en route* to assimilation. The author, who grew out of this environment and who managed to appear on the American literary scene, symbolizes a bridge linking the two worlds, the mental bridge which allowed the passage from Jewish immigrant to American citizen.

The mixed reception which the novel received in 1917 was partly due to its allegedly anti-Semitic character. On David's first day in New York, he hears a familiar "voice which hailed [him] in Yiddish. Facing about [he] beheld a middle-aged man [...] Prosperity was written all over his smooth-shaven face and broad-shouldered, stocky figure. He was literally aglow with diamonds and self-satisfaction. But he was unmistakably one of our own people" (61). In this description, one can easily recognize the 1880's comic stereotype of a corpulent, jovial and gaudily dressed Americanized Jew, who is showing off his new wealth. This stereotypical image carried negative connotations as it was generally associated with commercial dishonesty, shrewdness and excessive thrift. Its contrast was a poor, East European Jew, a "greenhorn," with a long beard, side curls, a crooked nose, and a lank body, wearing a skull cap, and roaming the roads with a peddler's pack. The two figures represent respective waves of Jewish immigrants to the US, the first being the German Jews, who came to the US between 1830 and 1880. Having been in America for over a generation and having become "active not only in their own communities but also in American society at large as businessman and bankers" (Sowell 78), they came to be represented by the great wealthy families: the Guggenheims, the Lehmans, the Solomons, the Gimbels, the Altmans – synonyms of the rich and successful bourgeois Jew. The second figure represents the wave of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, mostly from impoverished regions, uneducated and uncouth, who had escaped the religious pogroms and who arrived between 1880 and 1924. Hardly surprisingly, the well established and assimilated German Jews felt embarrassed and feared that the Eastern Europeans' "numbers, ways, and concentration made them highly visible, alarming other Americans and threatening an anti-Semitic reaction that would harm the German Jews, who had quietly gained acceptance before" (Sowell 80).

In Levinsky's character, the early 20th century critics saw a typical antisemitic caricature.⁵ They pointed to his obsession with good table manners and mocked his fear of sophisticated restaurants, which continues till his old age: "I still have a lurking fear of restaurant waiters" (372). But most criticism was directed at his ardent and unscrupulous pursuit of financial success. As good manners constitute Levinsky's definition of a gentleman, he becomes attracted to Dora, who also pays a great deal of attention to table manners:

She was feverishly ambitious to bring up her children in the "real American style" [...] She was thirstily seeking for information on the subject of table manners, and whatever knowledge she possessed of it she would practice, and make Lucy practice, with amusing pomp and circumstance (176).

Levinsky even asks Dora to keep track of his table etiquette, which she does correcting his errors "with a burst of merriment, or with a scandalized air, as if she had caught [him] in the act of committing a felony" (176). Another stereotypical habit, which "worried [Levinsky] like a physical defect" (226) was his gesticulations, for they were "so distressingly un-American" (226), and no degree of self-control could rid him of this Jewish immigrant burden. He later admitted: "I still gesticulate a great deal, though much less than I used to" (226). For the first generation of immigrants, like David and Dora, their outer appearance and manners were the most readily available and visible manifestations of their success at assimilation, in contrast to the much more time-consuming and arduous task of the acquisition of a new language, which, when "acquired past childhood often retains traces of native speech habits" (Wirth Neshet 112).

Although Levinsky begins his American life on the Lower East Side, he does not identify with the Jewish Diaspora; on the contrary, he rejects his Jewish Orthodox past together with its Jewish cultural heritage and embarks on the road to assimilation. His only interest in the life of the Jewish Diaspora is connected with his business dealings: "If I took an occasional look at the socialist Yiddish daily it was chiefly to see what was going on in the Cloak-maker's Union" (286). Otherwise, the Diasporic life becomes synonymous with "greenhorn" and "tramp," and "worse than that it was identified in [his] mind with socialism, anarchism, and trade-unions. It was something sinister, absurd, and uncouth" (286). When he refers to the East Side as "a foreign country" (286), he adopts the rhetoric of an average white American for whom a Jewish

⁵ See Jules Chametzky's Introduction to *The Rise of David Levinsky*. New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 1993.

ghetto was an alien place. Levinsky's contempt for his roots places him on the "native side," and from that perspective he can look at the Jewish ghetto as an exotic and unfamiliar environment, or the common Other. David envisions his survival outside the diaspora and, cutting his ethnic ties, sets himself free from the ancestral burden, on the one hand, and facilitates his unhindered assimilation, on the other. At the same time, his position as an outsider questions his claim to be representative of his ethnic group and his "whiteness" unites him with other immigrant groups; and neither is his spectacular, financial success a common occurrence, not only among the Eastern-European Jewish immigrants. The average early 20th century immigrant to the American Promised Land had to struggle with life on a daily basis.

To American readers, Levinsky's unscrupulous business practices, like pirating the designs put out by the big houses, "in which manner it was that [he] obtained, almost regularly, copies of Chaikin's latest designs" (240), or firing one of his operators because he was an ardent union activist, and suppressing the strike which ensued, portray him as a crude capitalist who betrays his own people for a fat profit. Sanford Sternlicht asserts that "His business practices, personifying social Darwinism, are excessively aggressive and sometimes treacherous. [...] He is disloyal. [...] His egoism is off-putting, and he is excessively self-satisfied" (22-23). Such a critical portrayal of a Jewish protagonist may serve as "evidence of Jewish self-hatred" (Sternlicht 19); however, later critical analyses tend to disregard this point. The initial controversy over the publication of Cahan's novel may have been initiated by the fact that Levinsky's is a complex and not entirely amiable character, which is why the early twentieth-century Jewish-American critics feared that instead of creating a platform for mutual recognition and acceptance, such a portrayal of a Jew would cause bitterness and resentment among American readers.

The major theme of Cahan's novel – the vexed side of assimilation – oscillates between two dualisms: one explores the immigrant's anxieties caused by the clash between the Old and the New Worlds, and traces the complex process of the immigrant's assimilation, while the other, mediates the construction of his public self against his private self. The two motifs are textually intertwined and interdependent in order to show how Levinsky's successes fail to make him happy. At the end of the novel the protagonist's realization of personal loss is overpowering: "My past and my present do not comport well. David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher's Synagogue, seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak-manufacturer" (372). The narrative, which is structured by polarities, "mimics an emblematic sense of self-division" (Foote 33), and forecloses the protagonist's ability to construct a life that is meaningful and fulfilling. As Stephanie Foote claims: "The rhetoric of self-

division seems to privatize an experience that is produced socially and engages a socially-recognized form of expressing self-loss” (33). Cahan’s protagonist shows that the immigrant experience of assimilation and acculturation is especially accountable for leaving a shattered identity in its wake.

By means of its autobiographical discourse, the novel queries the pains of acculturation and assimilation from an immigrant’s viewpoint. By taking on the guise of an autobiography, “the first-person narration reifies the sense of realism by highlighting the ‘I-was-there-ness’ of the narrative, but also calls the same authenticity to question” (Hoffman 397). The story is told only from Levinsky’s point of view, so doubting readers, who are denied other perspectives, must decide for themselves how believable his account is. The life narrative, which is written in plain style and “devoid of sensationalism and violence” (Sternlicht 25), is a flashback of a successful Jewish immigrant who reflects on his life. The language of the novel is English without Yiddish flavor or an attempt at dialect. Sanford Sternlicht explains this fact stating that: “Cahan assumed correctly that the American establishment could make life easier for the Jewish immigrant, and would do so if they recognized the intelligence, humanity, and dignity of these fellow human beings. Thus Cahan’s characters speak English clearly and well, and the novel is accessible” (25). Philip Joseph highlights another aspect of Cahan’s choice of the English language: “The world of English fiction offered him not only the status of American authorship but an intellectual hiatus from the obligations and narrow conventions of Yiddish journalism” (5). A representative of American realism, Cahan, as a local color writer, sought to render his own interpretation of reality in relation to both the Jewish Diaspora and American society. By presenting “Jewish immigrants as rapidly developing people, contemporary urban figures irreducible to souvenirs” (Kent 142), Cahan, however, “refused to cater to the constraints of local color writing” (142). Unlike Mary Antin, who wholeheartedly embraces assimilation, listing public education as its biggest advantage, Abraham Cahan’s novel portrays the process of Americanization with much less enthusiasm, foregrounding the uneven balance between the character’s gains and losses.

Catherine Rottenberg illuminates another aspect of the assimilation process, over which Levinsky has little control. When he confesses that: “[He] was forever watching and striving to imitate the dress and the ways of well-bred American[s]” (260), his desire acquires another dimension as “genteel Americans are both ‘gentile’ and ‘white,’ for these two terms are interchangeable in the text, just as they were during the Progressive Era” (317). Becoming “a true American,” Levinsky must shed two of his identity markers: that of a foreign immigrant and that of a Jew. “The in-between racial status of the Jew,” Rottenberg claims, “can be seen as a result of the still undifferentiated and thus seemingly contradictory status of these two (compelled) categories of

identification since Jewishness was still being framed within a racial discourse” (318). In the mid-20th century with the emergence of multiculturalism, the racial discourse of “Jewishness” leans towards “ethnicity,” a strategy which was plausible only for “intermediary racial groups” (Rottenberg 318). The Jews did not have to reject their Jewishness completely in order to be identified with Americanness because they were perceived as “off-white (or not-quite-white or probationary white) [...] or as whites-to-be” (319), contrary to the immigrant groups of color. This easier affiliation with whiteness facilitated their social mobility, inclusion and empowerment. Ethnicity, as a category of identification, constantly evolves answering the demands of the changing social structure. Therefore contemporary critics do not always list Jewish Americans as a separate ethnic group, in the way they do with African-Americans, Chicanos, Asian-Americans or Native-Americans. The advent of multiculturalism located Jewish-American fiction among other ethnic voices; however, compared to African-American or Chicano writers, it put American-Jewish writers closer to the mainstream than the others.⁶

Cahan’s novel is a valuable record of American social history. David Levinsky acts as a native informant who familiarizes the American public with the realities of the Jewish Ghetto on the Lower East Side at the height of its existence between 1885 and 1915. In doing so, Cahan “establishes his own ethnographic authority and distances himself from the very culture his narrator seeks to reveal” (Kent 137). The vivid descriptions of tenement life, the crowded streets and the dark workshops, reflected so well by the muckrakers and the literature of social realism, give the average American reader an insight into the America of the other half. The weight of social fact the novel incorporates reflects the national discussion about immigration at the turn of the century, embracing the problems of race and ethnicity, citizenship and nationality, the beginning of cultural anthropology, conformity and acquiescence. To a social historian, the “emergence of the ready-made clothing industry through the efforts of the Russian Jewish immigrants, and of their eventual triumph in this industry over their German Jewish cousins” (Zanger 283) is of paramount importance. Cahan portrays Eastern European Jewish immigrants as entrepreneurs who quickly adopt the Protestant work ethic and work hard to “make it” in America, which, in the eyes of the American establishment, legitimizes their claim to be regarded as a valuable addition to American society. Levinsky proudly marks the advent of the Russian Jew who “made the average American girl a ‘tailor-made’ girl” (310). In fact, those who really succeed in a material sense, like David Levinsky, help to perpetuate the

⁶ For a discussion of the role of Jewish-American authors in the contemporary American literary tradition see David Brauner *Post-War Jewish Fiction* (22-28).

myth of the American Dream. Levinsky's rags-to-riches story makes it believable for other immigrants to follow in his footsteps, but, at the same time, his final ruminations question the Dream's validity: "American Jews who embraced their adopted country as a site of political freedom and economic opportunity also feared it for its capacity to deprive them of spiritual authenticity" (Joseph 8).

The second duality, which Cahan's novel presents, rests between his private and public selves. Yet, he does not pursue the two spheres of his life simultaneously but devotes his first immigrant years, which are the time of his youth, to reaching the common, immigrant goal of financial success. Readers, however, follow his arduous ascent to wealth with mixed feelings because, as it is undoubtedly filled with long hours of hard work, loans to be repaid, and constant worry, it is also paved with corruption and the exploitation of his Jewish co-workers. Levinsky's commercial success is achieved not only by hard work and persistence, but also by means of illegal practices: Mrs. Chaikin "threatened to denounce him to the Cloak-maker's Union for employing scab labor" (239); he profited from the 1893 crisis, which was caused by the conflicts between the old manufacturers and the Cloak-maker's Union, and admitted that "the special talents [he] had developed for dodging it [...] had given him an advantage over a majority of [his] competitors" (240). Levinsky's lack of business ethics was also criticized by the Jewish Diaspora: "the socialist Yiddish daily [...] printed reports of meetings at which [he] had been hissed and hooted. [He] was accused of bribing corrupt politicians who were supposed to help [him] suppress the strike by means of police clubs. [He] was charged with bringing disgrace upon the Jewish people" (364).

Levinsky constructs his public self of a young and ambitious entrepreneur with great zeal. His success at business mirrors his attempts at assimilation, as they are interdependent. Re-inventing himself as a businessman in America, the former Talmud student must negotiate his new place in American society in the process. The better he does at business, the more he can identify with the capitalists of turn of the century America: in other words, economic ascent secures visibility for white immigrants. Financial success legitimizes his place in the adopted society in the eyes of Americans, proving his worth and merit to his new homeland. Imitating Americans, he strives at becoming a refined gentleman, while renouncing the Jewish Diaspora facilitates his thorough assimilation. One of the most important spheres of activity upon which Levinsky constructs his private self is his love life. His survival as an economic immigrant does not fill the void after his parents' death, and the absence of a beloved person by his side causes him to feel extremely lonely. All the women he engages with either fail to answer his image of a lover or reject him. Warren Hoffman argues that "David is in love with the idea of women, but cannot deal

with them on an interpersonal level” (341). For the older divorcée, Matilda, David is too inexperienced, too poor, and too unrefined to be treated seriously. When she tells him: “Oh, you are a Talmud student, after all,” he recalls that these words “are Yiddish for ‘ninny’” (53). She mocks his declaration of love teasing him: “That’s not the way gentlemen declare their love,” and then shows him how to do it: “Say: ‘I’m ready to die for you. You are the sunshine of my life’ ” (52). She is patronizing when she asks him questions about his love life, and laughs at him “blushing like a poppy” (51). As much as one is eager to pity a young man’s unreciprocated love, it turns out to be tainted with mercantile undertones: David “developed the theory that if [he] abandoned [his] plan about going to America she would have her father send [him] to college with a view to [his] marrying her” (52). Levinsky wants to better his social position, whether by marrying Matilda or going to America. The obscure motives of David’s behavior undermine the validity of his claim to suffer unrequited love.

Mercenary practices will also be present in his further dealings with potential brides. During his first years in New York, when he is too poor to “buy love,” he becomes aroused by merely bargaining with prostitutes. It appears that he finds more satisfaction in observing and teasing the girls of the streets offering their services to passers-by than by the sexual act. Then, Levinsky meets his second love, who happens to be the wife of his friend Max Margolis. Levinsky’s attraction to Dora is based on her excellent domestic skills, her passion for education, as well as on “the fascinating feminine texture of her flesh” (161). But, Dora’s “liking for [Levinsky] [is] primarily based [...] upon [his] intellectual qualifications” (166), not exclusively on feminine infatuation. As much as Dora might feel attracted to Levinsky, she does not want to jeopardize the future of her family and the marriage prospects of her daughter by getting a divorce. Dora appreciates the values of assimilation and is aware of the fact that, although for her it is too late, it is her children who will really benefit from Americanization: “Lucy shall be happy.[...] She shall go to college. She shall be educated. She certainly sha’n’t marry without love. Her happiness will be mine, too. [...] Let her profit by what little sense I have been able to pick up” (209). Dora is ready to sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of her daughter’s, drawing from it her own pleasure.

Ann Tevkin, Levinsky’s last great love, awakens his senses not by any special merit, but by conjuring up memories of his Russian youth: “The old romance of the Hebrew poet and his present wife, and more especially the fact that [he] had been thrilled by it in Antomir, threw a halo of ineffable fascination around their beautiful daughter” (288). Although he does not share Ann’s socialist beliefs – “I could easily knock them out of her,” (338) he boasts – his consuming passion compels him to exercise his material power in order to win the girl’s favor. Hence, he generously donates money to a Hebrew weekly, *The*

Pen, in which her father is involved; he allows the Tevkin girls to “‘bleed’[him] for all sorts of contributions” (335); and he engages in the risky real-estate ventures with her father. Levinsky is sure that his “persistence will fascinate her” (346), especially, because “[he] is a good looking chap [himself] and not as ignorant as most of the other fellows” (292). Levinsky’s rhetoric, when he discusses matrimony, comes to resemble business transactions: “bride market” (292); “[t]hey married them for their money” (291); “I can afford a machine and a beautiful wife” (291); Lenox Avenue swarming “with good-looking and flashily gowned brides of Ghetto upstarts” (292). When David exclaims “Oh, I must have her or I’ll fall to pieces” (339), he does not necessarily speak of love: “David’s need to secure a wife is directly linked, structurally and narratively to the legitimization of his masculine performance and economic achievement” (Hoffman 401). Furthermore, his quest for a wife is moored to his Jewish roots, as the idea of trade is not alien to a traditional Jewish marriage: “Marriage was simply a duty imposed by the Bible. Love? [...] One loved one’s wife, mother, daughter, sister. To be ‘in love’ with a girl who was an utter stranger to you was something unseemly, something which only Gentiles or ‘modern’ Jews might indulge in” (29). The Jewish concept of marriage is based on negotiations between a match-maker and the interested parties, whose interests are prior to the existence of, or lack, the vague feeling called love between the bride and the groom. Levinsky’s observation that the “feeling for Anna was stronger, deeper, more tender, and more overpowering than either of [his] two previous infatuations” (338-339) has more to do with the fact that she “was the first virgin [he] had ever loved” (339), than with any true devotion. A bride who is a virgin, by the virtue of that very fact, becomes more desirable in David’s eyes. Since American society is more tolerant in respect to morality than traditional Jewish Orthodox communities, the assurance of the girl’s virginity resonates with his essential Jewishness, not Americanness. His preference for an Americanized Jewess, who respects traditional Judaism, highlights this part of his self which has not yet been fully assimilated. Even though he is looking for an assimilated and acculturated partner, his choices subconsciously succumb to the ways of his Jewish ancestors. Levinsky’s attempts at winning Anna’s heart are of no avail as the young socialist rejects “the Capitalist’s” money, together with the prospects of an affluent life, and by marrying a humble teacher stays true to her political beliefs.

Warren Hoffman puts down David’s failures at forming a stable relationship to repressed homosexual behavior. None of his love affairs is consummated: Matilda is sexually aggressive so he restrains her by telling her stories of his future studies in America; when Max tells David that he is handsome, he starts a series of unsuccessful dates with his landladies. Dora appeals to him more by her aura of a homely wife than her sexuality: David recognizes her concern for

him in small tokens like changing his sheets, mending his clothes, or the elegant way in which she serves him tea. Ann Tevkin, his third love, is similarly asexual for Levinsky: he appreciates her skill at a game of tennis, the fact that she is well-read, and he marvels at how cultivated she is. Her lady-like manners, which are synonymous with her assimilation, and the ease with which she finds herself among Americans, make her more desirable for Levinsky. Ann becomes his paragon of Americanization, and the model he has been working hard to equal, rather than representing a sexual partner. During his courtship of Ann, the speculations on the real estate market provide him with sufficient thrills and become a substitute for his sexual cravings, just like the bargaining with the prostitutes did earlier. Hoffman's claim that Levinsky's nature is essentially homoerotic seems exaggerated, however. Even though the protagonist's characterization reveals a man whose relationships with women are never fulfilling, his dealings with men are strictly based on business practices. Levinsky has high expectations towards a future wife: she must be a pretty virgin, preferably from a respected and traditional family, yet, thoroughly Americanized: what he is looking for is not a life companion "for thick and thin" but rather confirmation of his success at Americanization.

Cahan uses the figure of an immigrant to consider what it means to be successful. Levinsky's character, is constructed as it is on polarities, fails to yield a consistent and stable whole. However, the dialogue between David's public and private selves highlights the areas where the social and gender constructs strain. Firstly, David regrets that he did not pursue a scholarly career, which would have been a continuation of his Talmud studies, as he "regarded trade merely as a stepping-stone to a life of intellectual interests" (103). His dissatisfaction is deeply indebted to the *shtetl* concept of male status, which "was not defined by wealth, but through devotion to religious scholarship within the Jewish community" (Ewence 1). Throughout his life as a businessman, he is constantly drawn to the realm of culture: he likes to spend time in literary cafés discussing books, theatre, and music; he supports the press and various charities. Although he re-invents himself, firstly as a businessman and then as an intellectual, his priorities change when he grows old: "I think that I was born for a life of intellectual interest. [...] The day when that accident turned my mind from college to business seems to be the most unfortunate day in my life" (371). Levinsky believes in the healing power of science saying, "I should then be in my natural element and if I were doomed to loneliness I should have comforts to which I am now a stranger" (371). He recalls successful Russian Jews: a sky-scraper architect, a physiologist, a song-writer, musicians, a sculptor, and, in contrast, sees himself "as a money-bag striving to play the Maecenas" (372). Levinsky's "sense of triumph often clasc[s] with a feeling of self-pity and yearning" (313) because he fails to acknowledge the fact that

material gains very often involve intellectual loss. This dualism, which was characteristic for turn of the century American society, is represented by the figure of a butcher whose refined looks and impeccable manners, in Levinsky's eyes, conflict with the nature of his profession: "It takes a country like America to produce butchers who look and speak like nobleman" (228).

For a single man, companionship could provide an ersatz family; however, the genuine ties of friendship are absent from Levinsky's life. Tangentially, Levinsky exhibits no deep attachment either to American society or to the Jewish Diaspora. Pursuing a business career presupposes the type of relationships a man may enter into and this is why all his acquaintances are also his business partners. Even though he founds the "Levinsky Antomir Benevolent Society," whose aim is to assist his fellow townsmen-cum-workers, in fact, the organization "makes it simpler for him to reinforce his employees' dependency on him and avoid the unionization of his shop" (Lederhendler 260). Later, he joins a synagogue on the grounds that it is "fashionable," especially so that he can meet influential German American Jews there. Levinsky's conduct mocks the society in which the worth of a person is measured against his potential market value, where community ties become a commodity and "a tool of exploitation" (260). When only the "fittest" survive, there is no place for authentic human bonds. Even Gitelson, with whom Levinsky had come to America, cannot be his friend, and the reason why runs along social lines: Levinsky cannot find a common language with the former seafarer because he is the one who succeeded, whereas the other did not: "I have tried to revive my old friendships [...] but they are mostly poor and my prosperity stands between us in many ways" (371). Levinsky easily embraces the rules of capitalistic society, and his financial success testifies to his prowess at market economy. The ruthlessness and lack of compassion towards his less fortunate immigrant brethren accompany Levinsky's economic ascent. Such a characterization posits a critique of bourgeois society and demonstrates how immigrants succumb to the forces which govern urban, capitalist societies.

Levinsky's Talmudic studies, seemingly unrelated to the struggles of everyday life, prove an invaluable instrument in his business career because they both involve hard work and discipline. Jules Zanger comprehends this duality "in terms of a tension between the spiritual and the material world, between the mystical and the rational as modes of perceiving the world, and between selflessness and selfishness in relating to the world" (286). The smooth passage from the medieval world of the Talmud to the modern, textile industry was possible because the two spheres of human activity involve highly developed mental abilities which exercise the power of the mind. On one occasion, David's knowledge of the Talmud helps him to secure certain information, as he observes that "an occasional quotation or two from the

... was particularly helpful in obtaining a small favor" (225). It does not mean, though, that religion can be substituted by economic success, which is exemplified by Levinsky's feeling of loss. There is also irony in the fact that his religious studies prepared him so well to conquer the material world. In Antomir, the knowledge of the holy books gave Levinsky leverage in claiming higher intellectual status over the other poor Jews; in America, the influences of Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin provide him with the scientific tools to substantiate his feelings of contempt for the less fortunate greenhorns: David substitutes his religious zeal for a secular view of life, with education and wealth becoming his new Deity. Even though his material success signifies his superiority over the "huddled" immigrant masses, the price he pays for being included within the "fittest" circle is a guilty conscience, confused loyalties, and the lack of family and offspring.

The aging Levinsky feels at a crossroads, as if his life were "devoid of significance" (1). While reflecting on his past, he admits that "when [he] takes a look at his inner identity it impresses [him] as being precisely the same as it was thirty or forty years ago" (1). As his Talmudic studies trained his mind "to seek alternative interpretation, to discover discrepancies and contradictions, to analyze and dissect and analogize" (Zanger 291), the result of such training is a fragmentary vision which prevents the construction of a coherent self. The dialectical mode of Talmudic interpretation fosters "[t]he text's sense of doubleness and the concomitant split between narration and action resulting in the creation of what is essentially a split persona" (Hoffman 397). Warren Hoffman directs his attention towards the rift in the title, which refers to the narrator in the third person "thereby pointing to the separation of the protagonists' actions from the narration of those events" (397). In fact, Levinsky often says that he is in love, but the narration is inconclusive as to the veracity of his feelings. Constant disputing and undermining, as a habit of Levinsky's mind, dwarfs any claims to conclusion and fosters ambivalence. Levinsky's example proves that, even though one may change one's outer appearance, adopt the habits of the target nation, and even learn to speak without a foreign accent, there is still more to the process of self-creation. However successful his public self is and however well he becomes assimilated into American society, his sense of inner void suggests the disruption between his inner and outer selves and likewise between his Russian past and American present, poverty and affluence, lower and higher social status.

Turn of the century America needed immigrants and theoretically offered them ample opportunities, which some of them used to their advantage. Cahan's narrative does not question the fact that America is a land of opportunities; this is rather taken for granted. What it does question, though, is the price a person is prepared to pay for them. Levinsky's story is a pretext to show the worst aspects

of the early twentieth-century American materialism, commercialism, and greed. Contrary to immigrant characters portrayed in novels by Upton Sinclair *The Jungle* (1906) and Michael Gold *Jews Without Money* (1930), Levinsky's road to success appears to be simple and easy, thus suggesting that an East-European Jewish immigrant who succeeds in the New World is not particularly difficult to find.

The characteristic feature of Cahan's immigrant narrative is his ambivalence towards the concepts of assimilation, success, and the total rejection of the past. All the choices the characters make are contested and inverted; hence the lack of a stable framework of reference renders a person skeptical. Philip Joseph enumerates the reasons for Cahan's later distrust towards the issue of assimilation: the continued persecution of Eastern European Jews, the failure of the international socialist movement as a political ally, which evaded the condemnation of anti-Semitic attacks against Jewish workers for fear of alienating Christian voters, and the curbing of an open immigration policy by the US Congress⁷ (7). Cahan's novel "unsettles the contemporary assumption that a population's marginality points to its parochialism and historical immaturity" (Joseph 28), portraying Jewish immigrants as complex and inconclusive characters. This is literature which is suspended between question and answer, adaptation and rebellion, suspense and conviction, or, to borrow Werner Sollors' terms, between consent and descent, the contradictions which result in "the entrapment of consciousness" (Lederhendler 262).

⁷ When the US Congress passed a bill (1896-97) making literacy the criterion of entry for immigrants, Abraham Cahan wrote an article "The Russian Jew in America" for the *Atlantic Monthly* defending their access to political emancipation.

5. The Voice of Immigrant Daughters: Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers*

I don't want to sell herring for the rest of my days. I want to learn something. I want to do something. I want some day to make myself for a person and come among people.
(Yeziarska 66)

Anzia Yeziarska was born either in 1880 or 1885¹ in a *shtetl* near Warsaw. Her father Bernard (Baruch) was a Talmudic scholar and her mother, Pearl, supported the family by peddling goods. When Anzia was 15, the family migrated to the U.S. to escape the poor living conditions and the threat of anti-Semitic pogroms. Just like thousands of other East European immigrants, they settled in New York on the Lower East Side. Having completed only two years of elementary school, Anzia was sent to work and did various menial jobs in sweatshops, laundries and factories, and for a time she was also employed as a maid. Rebelling against her father's traditional expectations for Jewish women, Anzia left home at the age of seventeen and went to live at the Clara de Hirsch home for working girls, one of several charitable shelters in New York. She continued her education at a Teacher's College at Columbia University in New York City, and after her graduation entered the teaching profession.

In 1917, after two divorces, Yeziarska started a passionate two-year long relationship with the famous philosopher and educator John Dewey, who encouraged her to write and publish. Dewey was a major figure of twentieth-century American intellectual history, whose interests included philosophy, politics, education, and social science. He was not only an advocate of the philosophical concept of pragmatism but also an enthusiast of "progressive education." The reform of American education, he believed, would make schools more effective agencies of a democratic society by means of the active participation of both teachers and students in the educational process. The

¹ Yeziarska's birth date is unclear; it is reported both as 1880 and 1885.

respect for diversity and the development of a critical, socially engaged intelligence would facilitate independence of opinion, which is crucial in the educational process. Dewey's theoretical ideas were put into practice when, in 1896, he organized an experimental school at the University of Chicago. Dewey was also an active member of the first Teachers' Union in New York City, and a founder member of the American Association of University Professors. Yeziarska was his muse and the inspiration for a number of poems, as well as a window onto the world of Jewish Americans, while Dewey became her mentor and intellectual guide to mainstream America, and, at the same time, the encouraging paternal figure she lacked in her own life, especially given that her father's view of womanhood was deeply rooted in orthodox Jewish tradition. Yeziarska called her *liaison* with Dewey a "harmonizing" of two cultures: the Jewish and the American. She was attracted to his intellect and erudition, whereas he admired her youthful passion and outspokenness. Their relationship was fictionalized in Norma Rosen's *John and Anzia: An American Romance* (1989).

Yeziarska published her first story "The Free Vacation House" in 1915. Her most anthologized short story, "The Fat of the Land," won the Edward O'Brien Best Short Story award in 1919, and later appeared in an anthology *Hungry Hearts* (1920), stories from which were adapted for the 1922 Samuel Goldwyn silent movie of the same name. Yeziarska gained popularity after the publication of her first novel *Salome of the Tenements* in 1923, which was filmed by Sidney Alcott in 1925. Samuel Goldwyn hired her as a script-writer and consultant, but except for financial gratification her flirtation with the budding movie industry was unfruitful. On her return from Hollywood, she wrote *Bread Givers* (1925), *Arrogant Beggar* (1927), and *All I Could Never Be* (1932), the last book inspired by her acquaintance with John Dewey. During the 1930's Depression, she worked for the Works Progress Administration Writers' Project, cataloguing trees in Central Park. In 1950 she published her fictionalized autobiography *Red Ribbon on the White Horse*. In her later years, she supported herself by giving lectures and writing book reviews for the *New York Times*. Anzia Yeziarska died in 1970.

Upon their publication, Yeziarska's stories were hailed as a genuine portrayal of Jewish ghetto life, and their author, often referred to as the "Cinderella of the Sweatshops," was proclaimed an authentic voice of the tenements. Kevin Piper draws attention to the widespread anti-immigrant rhetoric of 1920's America, culminating in the passing of the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924, which influenced the reading of *Bread Givers* "as politically informed by the desire to prove the assimilability of eastern European Jews" (99). Thus, Yeziarska's work places her alongside other Jewish-American immigrant authors, such as Mary Antin and Abraham Cahan, whose common focus is to

show the desirability, but also the complexity, of the process of assimilation. Thomas J. Ferraro posits that: "In portraying her 'own people' [Yeziarska's] duty was to update the project of realism by investigating the reciprocal reshaping between East European folk Judaism and the structures of opportunity in twentieth-century America" (532). Because of historical and political changes – the outbreak of World War I and the Depression of the 1930's – and the lesser demand for stories about immigrant ordeals, by the 1940's her work had fallen into obscurity. The later reception of Yeziarska's novels varied depending on the critical viewpoint: the Jewish Diaspora considered her novels too critical of her own people, accusing her of mocking and exaggerating the Jewish characters, both assimilated and immigrant, whereas American audiences regarded her work as too essentially Jewish. However, by the mid-seventies the rise of feminism had resulted in a renewed interest in the immigrant experience, with a special focus on female protagonists. Alice Kessler Harris, who re-discovered Yeziarska, wrote an introduction to the 1999 edition of *Bread Givers*, in which she discusses the difficult choices Jewish female immigrants were forced to make between "the legitimate search for self-fulfillment and duty to family" (Kessler XXXVI).² Contemporary critics tend to "cite the proliferation of stock characters – the overworked mother, the ineffectual father, the intellectual gentile or assimilated male savior, the cold WASP, the rootless Americanized Jew, the condescending social worker, the passionate and intelligent young Jewish immigrant woman" (Horowitz).³ To contemporary readers who are familiar with the hardships of immigrant beginnings, Yeziarska's novels add little more; she perpetuates the stereotypical images which have long functioned in American society. What is important, though, is the female point of view, which significantly complements male narrative voices.

Set on the Lower East Side in 1920's New York, *Bread Givers* is modeled on the structure of the bildungsroman. It tells the story of Sara Smolinsky, one of the four daughters of an Orthodox rabbi, Reb Smolinsky. When the Smolinsky family emigrate to the U.S., they are on the verge of starvation because their father does not work; instead, he follows the traditional path of the Talmudic scholar, which means reading and studying religious texts, leaving his wife and children to support the family. Once the girls find odd jobs and their

² Anzia Yeziarska: *Bread Givers* [1925] (New York: Persea, 2003) All subsequent references to the novel come from this edition and page numbers are given in parentheses.

³ For the reception of Yeziarska's works see Thomas J. Ferraro: *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-century America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993) 53-55.

mother rents out the second room to lodgers, they somehow manage to make ends meet. When the three older girls fall in love and want to get married, their hopes are crushed by their tyrannical father who sends all the suitors away. Bessie misses the chance to marry Berel Berenstein because her greedy father wants the young man to provide not only a dowry, but also pay the wedding costs. Furthermore, he also demands that Berel set him up in business. The real motivation behind the rejection, however, is that Berel is not the father's but the daughter's choice and the truth is that Reb Smolinsky needs Bessie's wages of which he would be deprived should she marry. Mashah's love for a piano player is, according to her father, inappropriate, so he blackmails the young man and plots a lover's quarrel, which results in the couple breaking up. A poor poet, Morris Lipkin, who is Fania's love, is shamed away by her father and never comes back. Then, Reb Smolinsky arranges three matches for his daughters, all of which leave them unhappily married and, in Bessie's and Mashah's case, impoverished. None of the older daughters is strong enough to challenge her father, so they remain dutiful and obedient. Only the youngest, Sara, voices her contempt and rebels against her father's conception of traditional Jewish womanhood, yet to no avail, so she decides to run away from home and become a teacher. Facing discrimination for being an independent woman, devoid of family support, and suffering ostracism, Sara finally manages to graduate from College and find a teacher's job. Subsequently, on her mother's deathbed, she promises to take care of her father, whom she has not seen for a considerable time. When Sara finds love in the person of Hugo Seelig, the principal of her school, her loneliness ends. The novel's final pages reveal that Sara and Hugo will take care of the pauperized Reb Smolinsky to rescue him from an unfortunate second marriage. Thus, the paths of father and daughter meet again as Sara decides to fulfill the promise she gave to her dying mother and look after her impoverished and increasingly senile father.

Bread Givers is divided into three parts which reflect the symbolic journey of an immigrant: departure from home, the passage between the Old World and the New, and arrival. "Hester Street," the first part, is set in the heart of the Lower East Side and concentrates on the details of ghetto life. The narrator acts as a chronicler of the Jewish immigrant experience in America showing it from the perspective of this ethnic minority. Book II, entitled "Between Two Worlds," depicts Sara's escape from the bondage of her orthodox and patriarchal family to become a "person." Coming face to face with mainstream America, which is represented by her fellow College students, Sara struggles to survive in this world, but is finally rewarded with a College diploma. The final part, "The New World," shows Sara as an independent and self-assured woman, who is, nevertheless, not entirely free from doubts concerning the rightfulness of her choices and decisions. But once she finds her love, her life seems to be

fulfilled; it is only when she dutifully returns home to take care of her old father that her life comes full circle. As much as the ending suggests the triumph of the Jewish tradition over assimilation, it also gives a new meaning to the title of the concluding part: "The New World" does not refer to the new one contrasted with the old one of Sara's immigrant past, but rather, it emerges as a conjunction of the two. "This swapping out of old and new relocates America's expanding frontier within a Jewish immigrant neighborhood. Thus, 'Hester Street,' that bastion of the old world, becomes a microcosm of the new" (Piper 112). Sara's ethnic heritage and her progress towards assimilation render her a new person who will inhabit and alter the structure of American society: the second generation of immigrants, who are not as torn between the past and present as their parents were on coming to America, testify to the hybrid nature of their experience, at the bottom of which is the claim that "Jewish immigrant values serve as the materials for the making of a new image of America" (Piper 112).

Sara Smolinsky, the first-person narrator of *Bread Givers*, tells her life story employing the conventions of a semi-autobiographical genre, which is common among early Jewish-American immigrant narratives. Her life is a journey towards self-creation, against ethnic and gender odds, during which she must separate herself from her family's heritage. Sara's unrelenting conviction of the relevance of her own mind, enables her to reinvent herself as a separate and independent person in an American environment. She acknowledges her father's religious zeal, but finds her own vocation, which is the pursuit of a secular education. This route enables her to leave the Jewish ghetto and secure a place among mainstream Americans. By doing so, she becomes an heiress of the Emersonian tradition of self-reliance. Using her own words to tell her story, Sara legitimizes her coming-of-age as a self-reliant person, which is the ideological prerequisite of American citizenship. Georges Gusdorf and James Olney, theorists of the autobiography, highlight the importance of an element of individual self-creativity as a vital characteristic of the genre, which, Gusdorf claims, is grounded in those societies which respect the notion of individuality.⁴ The autobiographical mode of writing foregrounds the individual over the collective as a privileged agent in the process of the creation of meaning. Sara's narrative cannot be reduced only to being representative of the life of the Jewish Diaspora. She decides to cross ethnic boundaries in an attempt to reinvent herself in American fashion before reengaging with her traditional Jewish

⁴ For a discussion of autobiography see: James Olney: *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972) and Georges Gusdorf: "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography." [1956] Trans. and ed. James Olney. *Autobiography, Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980) 28-48.

father. It suggests that, for her, assimilation entails embracing the opportunities of modern America without the necessity to erase her Jewish heritage: "Our home will be richer if your father comes with us," says Hugo (296). As the novel ends on the daughter's decision to look after her father, readers may speculate what their future living together will be like. Remembering their stormy relationship, one might wonder whether her old father will finally condescend to praise his daughter, and whether Sara will find enough patience to look after him. Put another way, the question is whether the preservation of Sara's distinct ethnicity will be compatible with her newly acquired national identification. In *Yeziarska's* novel, the autobiographical voice attains another meaning by virtue of being a female one, thus transgressing the conventional limits of an authoritative male subject status. A female protagonist draws the reader's attention to peripheral matters, which are usually disregarded by male protagonists: the detailed descriptions of domestic chores, the taste of food, the colors of clothes, and subtle matters which are only discussed with female companions such as sisters and mothers. Hence, the female autobiographical voice enlarges the scope of the novel's subject matter. Moreover, it offers an insight into the narrative process which shows how much masculine normative roles differ from female ones.

Examining the novel, one may distinguish three layers of narrative which point to the areas which are responsible for the protagonist's exclusion from mainstream American society: class, gender, and ethnicity. The Smolinskys' story is representative of the fate of thousands of nameless East European immigrants who entered the U.S. at the turn of the century. The first issue which *Yeziarska's* narrative interrogates is connected with working class background, which was common to most turn-of-the-century East European immigrants to America. As they were mostly poor, uneducated, and lacking professional skills, they joined the American working classes. The second factor, which prevents *Yeziarska's* protagonist from full participation in American society, is her gender. Sara's story depicts a woman's struggle for the right to decide about her life, during which she must overcome not only her own ethnic bias, but also the constraints of the dominant culture. Thus, *Yeziarska* constructs her narrative at the junction of three important factors which influence her protagonist's reconstruction as a Jewish, working-class woman. Moreover, her novel reflects the social context of 1920's America and the issues of ethnicity. The novel's setting on the Lower East Side brings into focus the sweatshops, which appear at the intersection of immigration, working class, and the city. Being an indubitable element of the Jewish ghetto experience, the sweatshops serve as traditional economic demarcations of the low workers' status in American society. The details of Lower East Side life provide an insight into the ethnic ghetto, which thrived alongside mainstream American society; thus, the first

section of the narrative is located in the ethnic collectivity of the working-class *milicu*. When the children of the second wave of Jewish immigrants began to exhibit the effects of assimilation and acculturation, there arose questions concerning the danger of the annihilation of their religious and racial distinctiveness. In other words, the question was how much of a person's heritage needs to be sacrificed in order to secure assimilation.

The 1880's witnessed the second wave of Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the U.S., which was followed by a massive influx of Italian immigrants. The "huddled masses" were responsible for the congestion of the Lower East Side: "By the turn of the century, the Lower East Side averaged more than 700 people per acre – more than in the worst slums of Bombay" (Sowell 83). As the Jewish immigrants were predominantly poor and unskilled, they worked in manual occupations, among which trade and the garment industry became their trademarks. Thomas Sowell discusses the reasons for this limited occupational range: religious Orthodoxy, which prohibits working on the Sabbath; problems with communicating outside the Yiddish community, as they did not know English; kosher food, which was available only in the neighborhood; and easy access to a synagogue (83). Contrary to the first wave of German Jewry, who "had been less religiously and culturally self-restricted and had never had an enduring all-Jewish neighborhood in New York," (Sowell 83) the *shtetl* Jews found their new home on New York's Lower East Side.

The Jewish community, which is represented by the Smolinsky family, live on the margins of American society; in fact, their world is reduced to their immediate neighborhood. As they have not mastered the English language, they do not venture outside the limits of the ghetto; everything they need is to be found in the vicinity. Reb Smolinsky continues the life he lived in the Old World, and devotes all his time to reading the holy books, which leaves his wife and daughters to act as the "bread winners" of the family. Overwhelming poverty defines tenement lives. The rooms have no light and little fresh air, just like the one Sara rents: "It was a dark hole on the ground floor, opening into a narrow shaft. The only window where some light might have come in was thick with black dust" (158). As the landlady claims that she has "never washed the windows since [she] lived here, not even for the holidays"(163), Sara cleans them to let a breath of not particularly fresh air inside. When at one point she sticks her head out "a bunch of potato peelings fell on [her]. [Then] someone began shaking a carpet. Then a shower of ashes blinded [her]" (163). Tenement dwellers show no concern for their own or their neighbors' cleanliness, which was a viable argument against them in the hands of nativists. The inside of Sara's room is no better: "The bed see-sawed on its broken feet. The mattress was full of lumps, and the sheets were shreds and patches."(158). When the ghetto dwellers' energy is concentrated solely on their survival, they care little

about cleanliness and neglect their personal hygiene. Hence, appalling poverty becomes the quarter's trademark. The fact that the Lower East Side ghetto was commonly associated with filth and offensive odors was often used in the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the times.

When Sara leaves home, she looks for a separate room to enjoy the solitude indispensable for her studies: "I want a room all alone to myself," (158) she tells the landlady. Then, she realizes that: "For the first time in [her] life she saw what a luxury it was for a poor girl to want to be alone in a room" (158). Sara's decision to rent the room is based on the fact that it has "a separate entrance to the hall" and "[a] door [she] could shut" (158). When her father is asked to vacate his room for lodgers, he wonders: "But where will I have quiet for my studies in this crowded kitchen?" adding that "Only millionaires can be alone in America" (13). His wife confirms the stark reality of his words: "By Zalmon the fish-peddler, they're squeezed together, twelve people, in one kitchen" (14), as the other two rooms are rented to boarders to provide income for the family.

The crowds swarming in the New York ghetto streets are responsible for another marker of tenement life – the relentless noise, which permeates its every nook and corner: "Phonographs and pianolas blared against each other. Voices gossiping and jabbering across the windows. Wailing children. The yowling shrieks of two alley cats. The shrill bark of a hungry pup" (164). Although Sara feels "like one crucified in a torture pit of noise" (164), her strategy of survival is to shut her ears to the cacophonous confusion of sounds. From her father, "a master of the art of tuning out the world around him, Sara learns to ignore the reality of being poor in America" (Piper 110). His constantly reminding the family of the futility of earthly life lessens the anguish caused by dire poverty. Furthermore, Sara's inner drive to succeed and her unabashed belief in the rightfulness of her choice make her an example of a strong-willed protagonist. She may be seen as a paragon of fortitude not only by other immigrants, but by Americans, too. The latter, in appreciation of her mental fortitude and unwavering determination, will finally reward her with social inclusion and appreciation. The message to American readers is clear: if she devotes so much effort to her assimilation, one may assume that she will similarly be eager to put all her strength into building the success of her new country. Sara becomes not only the agent of her own emancipation but, metonymically, comes to represent the entire immigrant cause as well.

The accumulation of people, residents and lodgers, in the cramped rooms results in chaos and untidiness: "So much junk [they] had in [their] house that everybody put everything on the table," so at dinner time, Sara has to throw "the rags and things from the table to the window, on the bed, over the chairs, or any place where there was room for them" (8). The kitchen is "packed with furniture," (8) the soapboxes under the bed and against the wall accommodate

clothes and the father's books, and a nail in the wall is a substitute for a hanger. When Sara gets a teaching job, she can finally afford to rent a decent room: "sunny, airy [...], the kind of room [she] had always wanted" (240). What she likes most about her new home is the feeling of "clean, airy emptiness," whose "simplicity was rich and fragrant with unutterable beauty" (241). And the memories of "the crowded dirt from where [she] came" (241) allow her to realize how much her material sphere of life has improved.

There are different strategies for how to deal with dirt, which is another characteristic feature of ghetto life. Sara tries to overlook the inconveniences of her life, just as she disregards the noise, for the sake of her "burning ambition to rise in the world"(171): "If I'm to have strength and courage to go on with what I set out to do, I must shut my eyes to the dirt" (163). This task is not so difficult for her as her rabbi father has always taught the children that the mundane world is of limited significance compared to heavenly bliss. Mashah, on the other hand, who has nothing to look forward to and spends all her energy trying to feed her children, uses her aesthetic talents to enliven her dark and damp room: "With her own hands she had patched up the broken plaster on the walls and painted them golden yellow"(146); she uses white oilcloth to cover "the rotten boards of the window sill and the shelves"(146), and hangs "[w]hite curtains of the cheapest checsecloth [...] on the one window"(146). Her attempts at coloring the world around her are signs of her assimilation, for Mashah has been inside American homes and is aware of the difference in the quality of life. The little ornamentation she can afford is a step toward her acculturation, and a visible marker which differentiates her household from other ghetto dwellings. It does not mean, though, that traditional Jewish households lack decoration and color. But, it is important that she decides to spend what little money she has got on a table cloth, knowing that there will not be enough for food. When Sara expresses her need for aesthetic pleasure: "I needed something beautiful to look at after that hard day in the laundry" (161), by proxy, the narrator dispels the common belief that ghetto life centers only on the survival of the flesh. Practical, immigrant minds, which struggle with everyday hardships, are also capable of higher emotions which feed on aesthetic pleasure. The aesthetic needs of the immigrant class are latent but Sara's example demonstrates that they do not necessarily have to wait until basic physical needs are satisfied. Providing instances of immigrants' creativity, Yezierska "hopes to make Jewish immigrant experience more palatable to a broader audience" (Kvidera 1144).

Amongst the "blackest poverty" (163), the tenement dwellers feel the need to differentiate between poverty and dirt; in Mashah's words: "I couldn't stand it if I had to live in the dirt like the women around me. It's bad enough they shut out the light and let in smells. But at least I can keep my own house clean"

(146). The insistence on cleanliness restores Mashah's self-esteem. The family's attention to hygiene and sanitation is contrasted with their neighbors' ignorance. However, Yezierska's claim that the Smolinsky family are an exception amidst the pervasive ghetto filth is questioned by historians. Thomas Sowell attributes their insistence on sound hygienic practices to Jews' "traditional emphasis on cleanliness, whether religiously based or evolved from centuries of urban living in Europe" and notes that "[p]ublic bath-houses were a tradition among Eastern European Jews and were recreated in New York" (85). Tangentially, "[r]eligious rules regulating the handling and preparation of kosher food also had sanitary effects" (86). Although the newcomers are bitterly criticized by their more assimilated German brethren for their backwardness and uncouthness, Sowell's study asserts that: "Health and cleanliness were more characteristic of Jews than of other city slum dwellers" (86). Tyrone R. Simpson II offers another reading of dirt as a manifestation of color, which, by contrast, employs "the unconscious production of white space" (104). Sara's disgust at filth-ridden tenements and aversion to dirty spaces is an expression of her "anxiety about class marginalization through a color discourse that intimates racial anxiety" (Simpson 100). The life of the ghetto is associated with darkness and blackness: "black choking tenements" (85), and even the Yiddish curse "a black year on them" (163) makes use of this color. In this context the color black denotes the destitution and misery of ghetto life. Lori Harrison-Kahan claims that "[d]arkness and blackness are also invoked to convey feelings of isolation and despair, aside from those that arise from their poverty" (421). Sara's pursuit of Americanization incorporates the necessity to negotiate her racial affiliation: as a Jewish immigrant, she belongs to the shifting category which locates her as almost-white. Middle-class aspirations, like education, financial success, and white heterosexual femininity, facilitate her inclusion into the "white" category. On the other hand, her marginalization as a labor-class immigrant can endanger her potential "whiteness" – the token of inclusion into middle-class American society. Therefore, she must resort to different tactics which celebrate all things white, one of which is to portray the world outside the Jewish ghetto with images of whiteness and light, emblematic of power and social prominence.

Bitter cold is another reality accompanying tenement life, as few families have enough money to buy fuel. That is why, despite her feeling like a thief and a beggar, Sara has to "hunt through ash cans for unburned pieces of coal, and search through empty lots for pieces of wood" (7). In this way the Smolinsky family can do the cooking and, at the same time, heat the room. When Sara starts her independent life, she suffers from cold: "My feet were lumps of ice," (170) she laments, despite the fact that she puts all her clothes over herself to keep warm. "So cold it was, even the gas froze," (170) she complains as she

tries to learn her lessons. It is her mother – “[h]er face was stiff with cold, and she blew on her half-frozen fingers” (170) – who walks all the way from Elizabeth, New Jersey, and brings her daughter a duvet and a jar of herring, rescuing her from frost and starvation. Sustained by this gesture of motherly love, Sara can continue her assimilative path.

Bread Givers presents the lives of the Jewish working class as exhausting because everyday problems demand most of their energy. It is hardly surprising that youth vanishes quickly from the working girls’ faces, only to be replaced by tiredness and sadness. When Bessie returns home from work “her eyes [seem] far away and very tired” (1), while Fania comes back so exhausted that she is “dragging feet” (2). Fatigue inevitably takes its toll on their health. Fania does not get the shirt factory job because “there was such a crowd of [girls] tearing the clothes from [their] bodies and scratching out each other’s eyes in the mad pushings to get in first”(2). Therefore, she leaves defeated. Mashah, previously “standing proud in the power of her beauty” (145), now married, is “slapped in the face by an unpaid bill” and begs pity from the milkman. The soda “with which she scrubbed the floor so clean, and laundered her rags to white, had burned it and eaten the beauty out of her hands” (147). Her children and domestic chores consume all her vitality making her day-to-day existence one long struggle. Even her husband despises her jaded and aged looks – “You’re nothing but a worn-out rag” (150) – and with his harsh words punishes her for no longer looking like a youthful and happy woman. Bessie, with sweat streaming from her face, her body and clothes “covered with the gummy scales of the fish” (140), helps her fish-monger husband in business and looks after her six stepchildren. After a long day of work, “her body seem[s] to double over, as she drag[s] herself to bed” (142). Her thoughts and actions revolve around the shop and taking care of the household. In Yeziarska’s novel, the unavoidability of hard work emerges as a key factor defining the Jewish ghetto identity, especially that of women, who not only bring in wages but must also do the housework. The author deliberately mentions only Jewish workers to show how hard their beginnings were, even though other immigrants to the American Promised Land shared the same fate.

It appears, though, that the most unbearable and penetrating aspect of life is the ever present feeling of hunger which Sara experiences: “A terrible hunger rose up in [her] – a hunger [she] had been trying to forget since [her] lunch of two stale slices of bread and a scrap of cheese”(166). Rather than fictionalizing hunger as an ephemeral feeling, Yeziarska shows how it builds up: “the starvation of days and weeks began tearing and dragging down [her] last strength” (166-167). Sara cannot divert her hungry mind from obsessive images of food: “I saw before my eyes meat, only meat, great, big chunks of it. And I biting into the meat” (167). The bodily necessity of food becomes a curse: “I

hated my stomach. It was like some clawing wild animal in me that I had to stop to feed always. I hated my eating” (173). Physical hunger becomes an indelible part of Sara’s ghetto experience; at family meals, the children wait for their share “trembling with hunger” (11), and “with watering mouths and glistening eyes” (10) they watch their mother serve the best portions to their father. Thus, the shared experience of hunger serves two purposes: it “makes her one of the Jewish community, built on poverty [and] signals her as a woman, for it is always the man who is the one to have ‘the best eating of the house’ ” (Pascual 151). Insatiable hunger and food appear as cultural markers when Sara travels on the train to college and, although starving, eats little morsels of “bread, a herring and a pickle” (209) in such a way that she is not seen by her fellow travelers. The very choice of food reveals her as a Jew, and the ravenous way she swallows it reaffirms her identification with the undernourished and badly fed denizens of the ghetto. Interestingly, on her way back, equipped with a college diploma, which is her ticket of admission into the American world, she re-enacts the food-eating train episode by ordering a proper meal in a dining car. This time, however, it is chops, spinach and salad. The choice of menu implies a change of taste, which is palpable proof of her acculturation. Food, in Yeziarska’s novel, appears not only as a source of bodily nourishment but also as a class and ethnic marker,⁵ which helps to define Sara’s sense of the ghetto self. The novel supplies different representations of hunger; while, on the one hand, hunger is seen as an undesirable aspect of ghetto life which Sara strives to overcome, on the other, it is a strong motivating factor which propels her social ascent.

The struggle to feed the family on an everyday basis defines immigrant existence – hence the numerous examples of jealousy, competition, mutual hate, and lack of comradeship among the Jews. The women in the fish store bargain for every cent calling the vendor a thief, a robber, a swindler, and accusing him of skinning them in the weight. When Sara decides to buy stew in a cafeteria, she gets much less than a man behind her: “Don’t you know they always give men more?”(169) a voice from the queue instructs her. “It takes a woman to be mean to a woman” (169), she remarks, while other customers stare at her unpleasantly, and “the girl at the serving table laughed” (169). When Sara is looking for a job “a huge, bulgy-faced owner” (160) treats her in such a way that she feels “like a speck of dust under his feet” (160). When she gets an ironing job, the other girls mock the fact that she lives on her own so much that the “[angry] jabbering pelted [Sara] till the whistle for work put an end to

⁵ For a discussion of food in Yeziarska’s fiction see: Nieves Pascual: “Starving for Hunger: The Fiction of Anzia Jeziarska.” *Mosaic: a Journal of the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*. Winnipeg: March 2003. Vol. 36, Iss. 1. 147-161.

further insults”(180). Even Sara’s own sisters chastise her for her desire for education: “For what does a girl need to be so educated?” asks Fania, adding “You can read and write. You know enough”(174). Sara’s mother, faithful to her own upbringing, sees her daughter’s happiness in marriage, rather than education: “What’s a school teacher? Old maids – all of them. It’s good enough for Goyim, but not for you” (172). The collector lady from the landlord comes with an angry glare and hard eyes, calls the Smolinskys “dirty immigrants”(17), and advises Reb Smolinsky – “the dirty do-nothing”(18) – to go to work and stop singing prayers. When Reb Smolinsky is jailed for assaulting her, his neighbors display an act of solidarity in collecting the money to bail him out, and paying for the best American-born lawyer to defend him. Smolinsky is released from custody and acquitted, this happening in a cunning, not entirely honest, way. It is, though, not Reb Smolinsky people sympathize with personally; he functions as a representative of the whole oppressed Jewish immigrant community. In the manner of a folk tale, poor Reb’s – the defender of the faith’s – victory over a rich and greedy landlord – metonymical for capitalism – satisfies a communal demand for justice; and, “with the pleasure of getting even, once in their lives, with someone over them that was always stepping on them”(26), his victory becomes theirs.

Glimpses of the “real” life of the other half reach the ghetto through the stories of people who work outside its confines. These stories about a world “so far over [their] heads that they were like fairy tales” (6) describe American houses equipped with “marble bathtubs [...] with running cold and hot water all day and night so they could take a bath any time they felt like it,” (5) rather than having to queue in front of the public bath-house together with dozens of others. They tell of “silver knives and forks, separate for each person. And new-ironed tablecloths and napkins every time they ate on them” (5). When Mashah, who “had work hemming towels in an uptown house,” buys herself a toothbrush, a towel and a bar of soap, things she had seen in an American house, her mother “tore her hair when she found out that [she had] made a leak of thirty cents in wages where every cent had been counted out”(6). Mashah is mocked for playing “a lady” and accused of having “no heart, no feelings,” “that millionaire things willed themselves in her empty head,” while the rest of the family “were wearing out [their] brains for only a bite in the mouth”(8).

Only when Sara goes to college does she realize the existence of a parallel world, in which the houses exhibit “the calm security of being owned for generations, and not rented by the month from the landlord,” and where the quiet streets are shaded with trees, “[n]o crowd, no tenements. No hurrying noise to beat the race of the hours. Only a leisured quietness whispered in the air: Peace. Be still. Eternal time is all before you” (210). She observes American people “sitting on their porches, lazily swinging in their hammocks, or watering

their own growing flowers” (210). They have the appearance of “those who belong to the world in which they were born” (211) as “[t]heir faces were not worn with the hunger for things they never could have in their lives” (211). The young people she meets are not “shut up in factories” but enjoy life “free from the worry for a living” (211). She inhales their smell “the soap and the bathing” (212), admires the “plain beautifulness” of their clothes, white and pink fingernails, milk white hands, soft and shiny hair. She absorbs the new world with all her senses: “I looked at them with my hands, my feet, with the thinnest nerves of my hair.[...] their shiny freshness, their carefreeness, they pulled me out of my senses to them”(213). The stark contrast between the college students and Sara’s neighbors makes her realize how wide the divide between the working classes and the American middle classes is, a gap which makes her barely noticeable to native-born Americans: “And they didn’t even know I was there”(213). The inevitability of physical work – that is why Sara cannot understand the benefits of physical education – cheap clothes, basic food, and the sordid conditions of life are the “physical and conceptual borders that define the Jewish ghetto, especially for first-generation settlers”(Kvidera 1134). The outer manifestations of middle-class America come into Sara’s focus, but what she has been taught during her college education penetrates much more deeply her sense of self: “to value middle class mores, materialism, and the habit of abstract thought over the close family ties she cut in order to achieve those things” (Christopher 82). However, Evelyn Avery observes that “[d]espite her academic success, Sara never makes close friends”(33) while at college, nor does she feel part of the academic and social environment; instead, she tries to equal native-born students whose acceptance she covets. On completing her education, Sara does not venture further into the mainstream of American society but returns to where she came from; the fact that she chooses the comfort of her own ethnicity over the continuation of her assimilative quest suggests that her assimilation has not been entirely successful.

Although Anzia Yezierska provides colorful details of the impact of immigrants on the growing urban population of New York, “the treatment of [her] writings as [mere] realistic descriptions of ‘Lower East Side authenticity’ undermines their status as imaginative works of art” (54), argues Thomas J. Ferraro. Similarly, Piper claims that “[t]o see *Bread Givers* as constricted by history overlooks the possibility of its creative engagement with the conditions in which it was written”(104). As much as *Bread Givers* represents the life of the Jewish community in 1920’s New York, “imitating their cacophony and fractured English” (Wisse 273), historical determinism should not override other readings of the novel. In Bhabha’s words: “The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference: their claim to be representative provokes

a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address” (145). The textual meaning of Yeziarska’s narrative reveals itself at the border between stark realism and imaginative creativity, somehow overlooking sentimentality.

The second factor which lies at the roots of Sara’s exclusion from mainstream American life is moored in the gender of the protagonist. As a dutiful daughter of an Orthodox Jewish family, Sara must conform to normative female roles, which are delineated by religious constraints. The family’s expectations towards daughters and sons are different, with the latter enjoying privileged status in the family. Sara’s father laments the lack of a male heir: “[a]lways Father was throwing up to mother that she had borne him no son to be an honor to his days and to say prayers for him when he died” (9). Reb Smolinsky recreates in America the world he knows best, the world of the *shtetl*, in which “only men were people”(205), and a woman’s position was defined by the Torah: “What’s a woman without a man? Less than nothing – a blotted-out existence. No life on earth and no hope of Heaven” (205). In this patriarchal world, in which “men were the only people who counted with God, Father not only had the best room for himself, for his study and prayers, but also the best eating of the house. The fat from the soup and the top from the milk went always to him” (10). His wife’s subservience is unconditional: “[a]t Father’s touch Mother’s sad face turned into smiles. His kind look was like the sun shining on her” (11). When he recites the Torah, she “licked up Father’s every little word, like honey. Her eyes followed his shining eyes as he talked” (12); her gaze embodies “undying worship” (248), revering him as if “he were the king of the world”(12). Having been brought up in a patriarchal society and not knowing any alternative models of family, Sara’s mother accepts and internalizes the male rhetoric encouraging her daughter’s marriage to a fish peddler: “Zalmon would give her everything a woman could only wish for herself, a fur coat, new furniture for the house, and six children already there”(96). Similarly, she fails to acknowledge her Americanized daughter’s needs doubting the value of her desire to be a teacher: “I’d be happier to see you get married” (172). Yeziarska juxtaposes immigrant parents and children to show the generation gap, which, in the case of immigrants, is widened by their different degrees of assimilation.

It is the man who defines a woman’s role in the traditional Jewish family: “[a] woman’s highest happiness is to be a man’s wife, the mother of a man’s children;” otherwise she is “not a person at all” (206). Although Reb Smolinsky fails in his business dealings, he repeats the Torah’s words that “women have long hair and small brains” and its injunction that “[i]t needs a man’s head to run a business” (122), and believes it is only a male privilege to be educated. Unsurprisingly, his stand on Jewish womanhood is shared by other male characters: Berel Bernstein asks for Bessie’s hand wondering at how his life

would improve “if a man could only have a wife to cook for him and wash for him” (44), and Zalmon asserts that his new wife could be “a lady with nothing to do but stay home and cook for [him] and clean the house and look after the children” (93). By inference, Sara rejects Max Goldstein’s offer of matrimony because she fears she would only be “another piece of property” (199) among his domestic accoutrements. After Max “shove[s] aside the books that piled on [her] table”(199) – a symbolic gesture in which he expresses his contempt for education – Sara realizes, that “it’s money that makes the wheels go round”(199) for him. Cognizant of her own desires, Sara refuses to acquiesce in the rule of the normative patriarchy and believes that education will facilitate her escape from its oppression. Little does she know, however, that patriarchal rule extends far beyond ethnic borders and its vestiges are still ensconced in early twentieth-century American society.

“Never had there been any show of feeling between Father and us children”(203), recalls Sara. In fact, the relationship between father and daughters is based on total subservience: not only do they have to obey their father, but any attempt at questioning his will ends with a threat: “[e]ither [she] listens to what [he] says, or out she go[es] of this house” (75). Marriage is a problematical issue for the Smolinsky family: since the father provides no income of his own, he needs his daughters’ wages: “when [Bessie] gets married who will carry [for him] the burden from this house? She earns the biggest wages. With Bessie [he] can be independent” (45). According to Jewish teachings, it is the children’s duty to support their father while he “spreads the light of the Holy Torah” (46). Again, the father uses a religious argument explaining that he is “a man of God” (46), and Bessie “would get a higher place in Heaven supporting [him] than if she married and worked for a man of the earth” (46). Melisa Carter notices that Smolinsky “longs for the entitlement bestowed upon him as a man of God in the old country, forgetting that he left because of the growing intolerance of his religion”(29). Similarly, when Sara starts her teaching job, her father wonders if she would hand him her wages “as a dutiful daughter should” (248). Once Reb Smolinsky starts marriage negotiations, he is mostly interested in how much money the suitors have; he views match-making his own daughters as a business arrangement, and hopes for a sizable commission. Moe Mirsky is a suitable candidate, in his eyes, by virtue of being a diamond dealer: “What more can you ask? The riches shine from him.[...] This is a man I want for my daughter”(74-75), and he hopes that “through Mashah’s riches, all of the [family] will get rich quick”(77). Fania’s suitor, endorsed by her father, successfully “quickens his love with many presents” (78). When Zalmon asserts that his new wife will get his late wife’s “Sabbath fur coat and her gold watch and chain”(94), Reb Smolinsky’s greed manifests itself as he runs “his fingers over glittering gold”(94). Recreating the

ways of the old world, whose representative is Sara's father, Yeziarska provides a stereotypical description of a greedy Jew, whereas his daughter's success at assimilation enables her to shed those undesirable (from the American viewpoint) Jewish character traits. Renny Christopher points out that Sara's attempted refusal to accept materialism over middle-class manners, means, and education is not entirely successful: "[f]or all her earlier rejection of materialism, this seems to be the main meaning of her upward mobility: she goes shopping for appropriate clothes for work"(83). However, Lori Harrison-Kahan presents another interpretation of Sara's consumer passion: Yeziarska's "immigrant female protagonists dress in American garments in order to remake themselves" (425). Not to disavow the psychological and spiritual gains of Americanization, Sara's example shows that material rewards are most desirable and readily accessible for those individuals who succeed in the struggle for upward mobility, a claim which also finds resonance in the immigrant myth of the American Dream, whose fulfillment is measured in material terms.

When the Smolinsky daughters mature, they feel the urge to escape from the constraints of patriarchy, and marriage is their only chance "to run away from their house, where there would be no more Father's preaching" (79). Fania is excited at the prospect of going to Los Angeles, not because she is getting married, but because "it's a dream city at the other end of the world, so many thousands of miles away from home"(80). The lives of three of the daughters are totally controlled by their tyrannical father: Bessie admits that she "[hasn't] the courage to live for [herself]" (50); Mashah is "weak, dumb, helpless" (64) and gives in to her Father's will; Fania watches, standing "like helpless stone"(73), how her father mistreats her beloved; only Sara stands up to her father's rule and resolves: "I want to learn something. I want to do something. I want some day to make myself for a person and come among people" (66). By showing how the arranged marriages destroy the happiness of three of Smolinsky's daughters, Yeziarska voices her disapproval of the traditional ways, pointing to their complete disregard for the feelings and desires of the young women whose fates are being decided. Setting off the character of the youngest daughter, presumably the most assimilated, the author foregrounds the difficulties a female must overcome to cast off the shackles of her ethnicity: it is only Sara who refuses to have her clothes torn "according to the Biblical law and ages of tradition"(255) at her mother's funeral. Yet, it is not the end of her road towards becoming "a person," as she must also overcome social prejudices and stereotypes. The immigrant bildungsroman reflects the dialogue between ethnicity and nationality, in the course of which the immigrant protagonist finds it difficult to "accept and internalize the moral fabric of society" (Piper 109).

Leaving home is the first step in her assimilation, and then she must complete her education, and find a job which would secure her independence.

There are two moments in the narrative which suggest that Sara's Jewish values remain deeply rooted in her identity, however hidden they seem to be from the outside world. The first is when she realizes that her life is complete only with a man at her side: "You and I are of one blood" (280), exclaims Sara to Hugo Seelig, referring to their shared experience of immigration and assimilation. Her admitting to the loneliness of a single life places her on a par with other heroines of romances, who are always rewarded with love. It is ironic how she had been struggling to prove wrong her father's words that a woman without a man is nobody only to confirm their validity at the end. On the other hand, Sara's invocation of "the shared blood" may be essential here. It is the fact that Hugo is of Jewish origin that makes him a suitable candidate for her life companion, and the shared immigrant experience will only facilitate their mutual understanding. Yeziarska's protagonist follows an arduous path of Americanization, but, at the end of that path, chooses one "of her own"; a choice which queries the extent of her assimilation and brings the question of racial and national loyalty to mind.

Ann Shapiro explains Sara's feelings: "Given that a woman, more than a man, has traditionally found her place in the community through marriage and motherhood, [Sara's] renunciation of her gender roles isolated her" (85). As there were two basic ways of class mobility available for women – marriage and education – Sara's attempt through education shows the *gendered* nature of both: "the narratives of desire for education and desire for love are interwoven" (Launius 126). Lori Harrison-Kahan claims that: "[Sara's] interest in the opposite sex has little to do with heterosexual romance and more to do with the desire to wed one's self to America" (423), and later asserts that immigrant women on the assimilative path "conflated love of American institutions – such as democracy and education – with love for the men who have easier access to the promised ideals" (Harrison-Kahan 424). This claim does not have to challenge the sincerity of Sara's love for Hugo, though, but if he had not been an assimilated Jew, most probably, she would not have chosen him. By marriage to Hugo, Sara achieves two goals: she confirms her successful assimilation, and does not have to renounce her Jewishness. The choice of a man who would be right for her is significant for he must be "the antithesis of the Jew who owns a herring stand on Hester Street," (Shapiro 81), as well as being intellectual, worldly-wise, and preferably older than herself – *vide* Mr. Edelman, who proved too young and inexperienced. Sara is subconsciously looking for a man who would "bear a resemblance to the father she both resents and respects" (Shapiro 81). Reb Smolinsky, the Talmudic scholar, represents the Jewish intellectual world which is denied to women, whereas an

Americanized Jew, like Hugo Seelig, facilitates Sara's way out of the ethnic ghetto and promotes her intellectual development. Sara's love for Hugo is, in a way, a response to the seductive power of his knowledgeable mind, to the lure of his principal's authority, which is "substantiated by the social norms of the time, and made sacred by Sara and the community's respect" (Ferraro 573). However ambivalent Sara is about her father, her pursuit of education brings her closer to the male role model exemplified by him than to the one represented by her uneducated and servile mother.

The second moment in the narrative which shows the strength of ethnic roots is Sara's final decision to take care of her old father, by which gesture she again assumes the role of a dutiful, Jewish daughter. Children's responsibility to take care of aging parents is obviously not an exclusively Jewish feature. Yet, Sara's decision wins the approval of American readers who might be dissatisfied reading about the daughter's successes while her father spends his last years in misery. This time, however, Sara pays respect to her filial obligation on her own terms: she does not come back to live under her father's roof but takes him into her own home, which she shares with the man she has chosen for herself.

Christie Launius supports the *classed* reading of this passage, "as a gesture made to ease guilt about her upward mobility," and "a substitute for working for social change" (135), if it only means rescuing her own father from the unfortunate second marriage. Feeling proud for what she has achieved, Sara looks back at those she has left behind. Her anxiety results from worry about those who did not even start their journey towards assimilation and continue to struggle daily for survival in the ghetto. Although she does not explicitly express her contempt for the cruelty of a class system that locks people in poverty, her own individual achievement is dwarfed by the uncertainty of the fate of those she had to leave behind in order to succeed. When she admits that she feels "the shadow still there, over [her]" (297), she expresses her responsibility toward her Jewish heritage. That is why she decides to stay in the ghetto to teach immigrant children.

Hugo Seelig, an assimilated and successful Jewish immigrant, helps Sara reach out to her father. When he asks Reb Smolinsky to teach him Hebrew, he makes a symbolic gesture of reconciliation between the two generations of traditional and modern East European Jews, between civic America and the communal values of the Jewish Diaspora, a gesture which provides a solution to the anxieties of assimilation. By bridging the two cultures of old and assimilated Jews, Yeziarska asserts that such a liaison is not only possible but also desirable because they complement rather than exclude each other, regardless of how great a "burden a continued association with the religiously devout patriarch places on [his daughter's] American destiny" (Simpson 109).

The model of Americanization, represented by Sara and Reb Smolinsky, endorses the theories which entail a partial loss of immigrant identity. In comparison, Yeziarska does not regard one's ethnic heritage as a hindrance to successful assimilation, but, rather, as a nourishing ground from which immigrants may draw strength to wrestle with the challenges of the new world. One cannot, however, escape the feeling of ambiguity which lingers in the concluding paragraphs of the novel, when Sara seems to be full of doubt about her teaching, her newly acquired social status, and the complicated relationship to her family: "the problem of Father - still unsolved," she answers laughing at Hugo's "easy enthusiasm"(296). By inference, Alicia A. Kent concludes that "Sara cannot ultimately break from the patriarchal system of her Eastern European Jewish past because it still exists in the present in modern America" (150-151). Renny Christopher sees the ending as "a refusal to capitulate to the Horatio Alger myth"(85). If the novel had ended with Sara's triumph on her graduation day, it would have perpetuated the immigrant dream of successful upward social mobility. By choosing an enigmatic ending, Yeziarska contests a reading of her novel through the lens of the American Dream discourse.

Ethnicity is the third factor which removes the Smolinsky family from participation in mainstream American culture. East European Jewish immigrants coming to America tried to overcome the unfamiliarity and alienation of American life by recreating the old world ways in the ghetto. As a Talmudic scholar, Reb Smolinsky, takes with him his holy books, which, he believes, "always were, and always will be, the light of the world" (9), leaving the "feather beds, and the samovar, and the brass pots and pans" (8), the tokens of secular life, behind. Religion, for Reb Smolinsky, is not only his vocation but also his spiritual bedrock, the only stable and familiar element in a changeable world, "through which he is [also] granted authority in his family" (Carter 29). The repetition of the Holy words bolsters his sense of identity, which in an American context demands a new framework of interpretation. Profound faith secures the psychological mooring for the construction of the imagined community, whose preservation is not linked to geographical location but to memory and the traditions perpetuated by its people. Religion provides a cocoon which shields Reb Smolinsky from the perils of the outside world, but, at the same time, its impenetrable frame prevents his assimilation. He confronts life in America with "innocent wide eyes like a child" (121), which testify to his ignorance of the world but also assert his pure motives, posing the question as to whether innocence can be at fault.

Coming to America does not change Reb Smolinsky's sense of a religious mission, as he still sees himself "the light of the block, the one man who holds

up the flame of the Holy Torah before America” (48). Thus, he symbolizes a world which is disappearing: that of the first generation of immigrants, whose links with America are much weaker than with their former world. However deeply he is submerged in the religious world of the Torah, he must confront America. When immigrant children head towards assimilation, gone is the world of the *shtetl* with its traditional Jewish ways of life: Mashah joins cooking classes “to learn the American way of cooking vegetables and fixing salads” (56), so presumably in her kitchen the “fried potato *lotkes* and the greasy *lokshen kugel* that [her] Mother used to make” (56) will seldom be served. No matter how much Smolinsky dreads to see his daughters embracing wild “*Americanerin*” (144) fashions, and how much he laments the lack of respect for fathers and fear of God – “What’s the world coming to in this wild America?” (135) – the changes within the structure of the Jewish community are inevitable. Yeziarska’s story grasps a very important moment in the history of Jewish-American immigration: the changing of the ethnic generation guard.

Yeziarska’s male protagonists do not have the same educational aspirations as the female ones, and their desire for class mobility is mostly concerned with material gains. That is why the narrative of *Bread Givers* concentrates on the different fates of the female characters: the mother represents the traditional ideal of Jewish womanhood, whereas Sara’s character signals the appearance of a modern, Americanized Jewess. Located between the two polarized representations are Bessie, Mashah, and Fania, who have begun to realize the constraints of the patriarchal family, which denies them the right to choose their husbands, but who are not determined enough to resist their father’s tyrannical rule. Although, they have already shown themselves to be susceptible to the assimilative forces which foreground the cultural differences between Jews and Gentiles, their Orthodox Jewish upbringing has molded their worldview, and they follow the familiar path. Juxtaposed with male characters, who are only nominally the “bread winners,” but who in fact fail to provide for their families, the exceptionality of Sara’s character invites a different reading of the title. Yeziarska depicts strong women who can take care of themselves: “along with neighborhood women such as Mumhenkeh, the herring seller on the corner” (14), [they] invert this gendered division of labor as the novel reveals them as the true providers” (Piper 112). Thereby, the title acquires another meaning, which is an allusion to the changing pattern of the patriarchal family. Immigration to America benefits a Jewish woman in that it enables her to subvert her traditional gender roles and pursue her own desires: “earn her own living, live on her own, receive a full education, fight her way out of poverty, become a professional person, and marry for love” (Sternlicht 34). In other words, assimilation offers

Jewish women the opportunity of emancipation and independence, a way “to overcome their otherness as Jews and women and to achieve American success” (Stone 2). Notwithstanding, *Bread Givers* dramatizes the more profound effect of such a narrative, namely, “the remaking of America through its immigrant ethnic roots” (Piper 112), a process, Yeziarska’s novel argues, that is fostered by the female characters.

6. The Voice of the Betrayed: Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money*

O workers' Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely, suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East Side when You come, and build there a garden for the human spirit. O Revolution, that forced me to think, to struggle and to live.

O great beginning! (Gold 309)

Michael Gold (the pen name of Itzok Isaac Granich) was born on the Lower East Side in New York in 1893, the eldest of the three sons of a family of Jewish immigrants who came to the U.S. from Romania. When Gold went to school, his name was changed first to Irving and then to Irwin, both sounding less Jewish than Isaac. As his father's business was not prospering, the young Michael had to find a job to help the family's finances. Witnessing his father's further unsuccessful business ventures, he lost faith in capitalism. In 1912 he enrolled in evening courses in journalism at New York University, followed by classes at Harvard. An incident in 1914, in which he was assaulted by the police at a rally of the unemployed, marked the beginning of his fascination with radical political views. Gold soon realized that he could support himself by writing for the leftist press, so he began contributing to radical periodicals such as *The Masses* and *The Call*, where he revealed himself as an avid supporter of the Communist Revolution of 1917. As Gold was a strong opponent of the United States' involvement in the First World War, he escaped to Mexico in 1917 to avoid the draft. He returned in 1921 to become associate editor of *The Liberator*, the cultural journal of the Communist Party. During the Palmer Raids of 1919-1920,¹ he adopted the pen name Michael Gold "after a Jewish Civil

¹ The Palmer Raids of 1919-1920 were a series of attempts, made by the Department of Justice, to arrest and deport left-wing anarchists from the U.S.A. Mitchell Palmer, who was Attorney General, led the investigations, which resulted in many arrests and

War veteran he admired for having fought to ‘free the slaves’ ” (Gross). Apart from revolutionary poetry and fervent articles defending workers’ rights, he wrote plays and also became friends with Eugene O’Neill, Theodore Dreiser, and John Reed. “Gold was never a radical theorist” (Sternlicht 38); instead, he “[e]mbraced and endorsed popular Marxist views, which he presented in the most inflammatory way possible” (Sternlicht 39). In 1925, he went to the Soviet Union to study theater and write radical plays. In 1928, he was appointed editor-in-chief of the *New Masses* in which he published works by proletarian writers, and soon he was hailed as a cultural commissar of the Communist Party. As a writer and political activist, Gold condemned “conventionally liberal writers [as] sell-outs and tools of the capitalist exploiters” (Sternlicht 19). *Jews Without Money* (1930), his only novel, was an instant success “going through 11 editions just in the first 12 months” (Sternlicht 39) and earned him a comparison with Maxim Gorky. In order to avoid the anti- communist witch-hunt in the U.S., between 1950 and 1957, he went to live with his family in France. Michael Gold died in San Francisco in 1967.

The 1890’s witnessed the formation of the Jewish labor movement which “demand[ed] an eight-hour day, [...] cooperative housing, insurance plans, and educational activities” (Sternlicht 45).² Jewish labor activists worked in close collaboration with the Socialist and the Communist Party, and their campaigns resulted in the implementation of a series of laws which improved the safety of working conditions. The disproportionately large Jewish-American presence in Communist-led literary movements – “close to 50 percent of the aggregate of those who appeared regularly in Party-affiliated publications and joined party-led organizations” (Wald 171) – can, according to Alan Wade, be attributed to East European socialist loyalties, which were a reaction against Tsarist autocracy. Communism offered “the alternative of a moral life justified by allegedly scientific arguments and analysis” (Wald 171) to young Jewish-American immigrants for whom the orthodoxy of the Jewish religion was too strict and the lure of American modernity too tempting. Finally, “the Communist movement was among the most militant in attempting to organize a response” (171) against the growth of fascism in Europe in the 1930’s. Moreover, “a heavily Jewish-populated” (172) New York City in the 1930’s was not only the “center of the Communist movement”(172), but also “the

deportations. The Palmer Raids were part of the Red Scare period after the First World War, which was characterized by American fear of political radicals. The U.S. Department of Labor criticized Palmer’s disrespect for legal processes.

² In 1881 Samuel Gompers, a Jewish immigrant cigar maker, founded the Federation of Organized Trades Unions of the United States and Canada. The name was changed five years later to the American Federation of Labor.

headquarters of the US publishing industry” (Wald 172). The period after the First World War escalated American fears regarding the divided loyalties of immigrant groups residing in America, fears which were first targeted at the Germans, and then the Irish. President Wilson warned in 1916: “hyphenated Americans [who] have poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life. Such creatures of passion, disloyalty and anarchy must be crushed out” (Kennedy 24). The national concern that labor agitators would spread anarchistic ideas was fueled by the Russian Revolution of 1917. During the Palmer Raids of 1919-1920, a number of radical activists were deported from the United States to the Soviet Union, among whom were Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. In 1919, 249 non-citizens were put on board the “Buford,” nicknamed by the press the “Soviet Ark,” and sailed to Finland, later to be deported to the Russian border.³

Although the definition of proletarian literature shifts the focus on working-class authorship, to the implied audience, the working-class recipients of the texts, its subject matter has always foregrounded the class struggle, which is presented through a political lens. The genre of proletarian fiction advocates verisimilitude and “accuracy to lived experience, visual detail, and structural repetition” (Kerman 49). As far as a typical proletarian protagonist is concerned, Sarah Kerman claims that he should “demonstrate both individuality and ‘typicality’ [...], embodying paradigmatic struggles or experiences that readers could then relate to their own lives” (48). In her essay “*Call It Sleep* and the Limits of Typicality,” Kerman discusses the polarization of proletarian literature in the 1930’s: on the one hand, its “task was to mediate between individual experience and generalized social forces by using typical protagonists and situations,” while, on the other hand, the “authors themselves would embody this mediation by their affiliation with both the proletariat and the professional class of writers” (52). In Gold’s case, however, one sees no discrepancy of the sort, as the author is viewed as an ardent communist activist rather than an aspiring “professional class” literary figure.⁴ The acceptance of Marxist ideology in the fictional narrative aims at highlighting the writer’s involvement in the class struggle, whereas the historical background serves as a rationale for reading proletarian novels. The genre of proletarian literature is defined by prescribed criticism of capitalism, which brings into focus the oppression of the working class. Although the term “proletarian literature” is not synonymous with “leftist” cultural positions, proletarian writers often

³ To read more about the deportation see Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955).

⁴ See Alfred Kazin’s Introduction to the 1996 edition of *Jews Without Money* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers).

exhibit adherence to the Communist Party line, which presupposes an ideological stance on class issues. Proletarian writers are often accused of reducing literature to a didactic weapon in the class struggle, in that aesthetic elements are harnessed to their political functions; likewise, the assumptions of contemporary critical theory judge these texts by their agitational effectiveness, not literary merits. As proletarian literature is preoccupied with content over form, its authors dismiss *avant-garde* writing as a fruitless exercise in rhetoric. Gold's formula for proletarian fiction is presented in his essay "Towards Proletarian Art" published in *The Liberator* (1921), in which he elaborates on the demise of bourgeois individualism, and the ascent of the working-class consciousness dedicated to revolutionary art. Eric Homberger, however, expresses doubts as to the consistency of Gold's theory:

What Gold meant by "proletarian art" remains unclear. [Gold] uses "proletarian" interchangeably with "masses," and suggests that Walt Whitman was the discoverer, without quite realizing it, of proletarian art in America. The proletariat for Gold were nothing less than heroic possessors of Life – 'The masses know what Life is and they live on in gusto and joy' – who have been thwarted by society from the full realization of their artistic and cultural heritage. Gold's thought was dominated by a lyrical and mystical celebration of the modern industrial worker, tinged by frustration at the bitterwaste of the human potential under capitalism (Proletarian Literature 222).

Jews Without Money, which became a prototype of the American proletarian novel, "characterized by location, age of protagonist, authorial identity, and strong focalization" (Kerman 49), is Gold's most important contribution to the discussion of class divisions in American society. It documents the life of an impoverished Jewish, immigrant family living on the Lower East Side of New York City. Written as a series of episodes, linked by the figure of a narrator, who is both an observer and a commentator, the story portrays the colorful milieu of the Jewish ghetto. Mikey narrates his family's quotidian struggle for survival: his father, who is a painter, suffers from lead poisoning. After an accident, in which he falls off a ladder, he is no longer able to support his family, so the boy's mother secures a job in a cafeteria taking over the role of breadwinner. However, when the family is pushed into poverty, the twelve-year-old Michael decides to leave school and find a job. The adolescent narrator observes the world with uninhibited curiosity, and describes the cast of characters who enliven the narrative: prostitutes, pimps, gangsters,

boxers, pedophiles, rabbis, teachers, corrupt politicians, doctors, landlords, and social workers. When he talks about his adventures with a gang of boys, one cannot fail to notice the similarities to Mark Twain's character Huckleberry Finn. Both young, male protagonists come from the lower reaches of American society and experience the world in all its variety. From Mikey's perspective, the Lower East Side is not a Melting Pot, but a battleground between various ethnic groups: Italians, Irish, and Jews. The novel ends with Mikey's desperate plight, in which he condemns the cruelty of the capitalist system, which denies him educational opportunities, entraps him in poverty, and robs him of hope for a better life. The concluding passages of the novel provide a solution to the oppression of the working class, this being proletarian revolution.

Jews Without Money employs the strategies of a fictional autobiography, with the first person, adolescent narrator telling the story of his Lower East Side childhood: "I can never forget the East Side street where I lived as a boy" (13). The narrator, an ethnic child, is "no romantic incarnation of a divine child whose fictional innocence [brings] with it a host of didactic implications for the reader" (Muir 126). Instead of a romanticized and idealized Victorian representation of childhood in which a young protagonist is blissfully innocent and uncorrupted by the adult world, an ethnic child is an embodiment of his environment; thereby, neither is he untainted by human vices, nor are his experiences Edenic. Instead, the author portrays an ordinary, ghetto boy who is a representative of the many others who are roaming the nooks and corners of the Lower East Side. Gold's protagonist could hardly be taken as a role model for young readers. Consequently, his adventures would not be favored as assigned reading for children of American middle-class parents, nor indeed were they the addressees of the novel. The young narrator comes from the margins of society and his conduct transgresses established social norms. Being part of the world he is describing, he fails to notice a broader perspective of American society, which would encompass both the mainstream and the periphery; and that is why his account is one-sided. In this way, the author demonstrates how reductive ghetto life is in imprisoning its denizens by means of poverty and social exclusion, and how difficult it is for them to escape the psychological trap of feeling disempowered. On the other side, the autobiographical narrative voice, which emulates white, male, Anglo-Saxon dominance, orders the public space by assuming the existence of "the other half." The narrator's account presents only a small part of American society; but there is more to the United States than the Lower East Side ghetto. By analogy, there is also an America where innocent and carefree children are the norm, where they do not have to worry about survival, suffer from hunger or be sent to work to support their parents. "The other" America, although inaccessible to the ghetto children, exists alongside Gold's America.

The choice of autobiographical voice helps to facilitate the construction of a believable character, which in turn renders the entire narrative more believable. Gold's story places an individual and his family at the center of the narrative, and focuses on their hand-to-mouth existence. Individual experiences eclipse the general agenda, whose running motif is a portrait of the New York ghetto at the beginning of the twentieth century. The episodic structure of the narrative, which involves a concatenation of loosely connected episodes, is glued together by the figure of the narrator, on the one hand, and the locus of the Jewish ghetto, on the other. There is a strong bond between the narrator and the milieu of the narrative, which is caused by his identification with other Jewish immigrants, as well as by his social foreclosure: the ghetto borders delineate his world. The fragmented narrative, in contrast to an aesthetically unified story line with a definite beginning and ending, reflects the instability of ghetto life: no job security, a constant battle with poverty, rampant disease, a high level of crime, the brutality of everyday existence, and social exclusion: "Jobs, jobs. I drifted from one to the other, without plan, without hope. I was one of many. [...] I was nothing, bound for nowhere" (308), laments the protagonist. *Jews Without Money* also emphasizes environmental determinism, typical of naturalism, which serves to illustrate how the brutal environment of the ghetto destroys the innate goodness of its inhabitants. Written in "journalistic style" (Sternlicht 44), Gold's narrative overlooks the intricacies of form: "[t]he simple subject-verb sentence construction lends a rhythmic cadence to each paragraph, implying that the actors are interchangeable with each other [...] each contributing to the miserable crowding of the ghetto, but not individually responsible for it" (Kerman 59). Thus, the effect of universality is achieved by means of the storyline, whose representativeness makes it typical of proletarian fiction. Gold's account is not particular to the Jewish ghetto since "[t]he same story can be told of a hundred other ghettos scattered over all the world"(10), he asserts. While the narrative may be praised for its "passion and sincerity" (Rottenberg 119), it may also be criticized for "sensationalism, primitivism, and, most recently, [for] idealizing a certain type of hypermasculinity" (Rottenberg 119). Despite the sundry critical approaches it has attracted, what constitutes its main focus remains its ideological message.⁵

The main value of Michael Gold's novel lies in the way it presents a shift in the perception of America by immigrants: all hopes the newcomers had vested in the Promised Land are supplanted by feelings of betrayal and disillusionment – American reality has robbed the immigrants of their American Dream.

⁵ For a discussion of the novel's reception see Catherine Rottenberg "Writing from the Margins of the Margins: Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*."

“America is so rich and fat, because it has eaten the tragedy of millions of immigrants. [...] Uprooted! Lost! Betrayed!” (42), accuses the narrator, who identifies the main reason for the immigrants’ disappointment as capitalism – the inhumane economic system which is responsible for the workers’ oppression, poverty and misery, which, in turn, stand in the way of their inclusion and empowerment. Negotiating the protagonist’s “position in relation to mainstream middle-class society,” Catherine Rottenberg claims, “the most pressing problem is poverty and not being defined or defining oneself as Jewish” (128). In other words, Michael Gold’s novel claims that the brutality of tenement life is the product of capitalism, rather than the result of essentially Jewish characteristics.

Reflecting on his ghetto youth, the narrator exposes the evils of unrestrained capitalism. Young unemployed men, who have already been given a taste of the ruthless system, find it impossible either to escape from the ghetto or submit to its rules. Social exclusion, which makes them outcasts, facilitates their anti-social attitude, which manifests itself in criminal behavior: “Every East Side street had [...] a gang at its corners” (26), whose members “fought and quarreled with the world, and with each other” (27). Even for children, the East Side is “a world plunged in eternal war” (42), during which one’s survival depended on joining “a gang in self-protection” (43), and remaining loyal and brave. In this “world of violence” (63), where social norms are distorted, “[banging] the teacher on the nose” (36) becomes an act of heroic bravery. The streets become scenes of crime: “Bang, bang! Two pistol shots rang out in the backyard! [...] We saw two men with pistols standing in the moonlit yard. Bang, bang! They fired again at each other. One man fell” (23). Criminal gangs, which cooperate with corrupt policemen and politicians, dictate the rules and eliminate those who dare to challenge them. Thus, the ghetto appears to be a lawless territory resembling the Wild West, where order is enforced not by the application of democratic practices but by force. Furthermore, the narrative implies that America is responsible for the high rate of criminal behavior among young Jewish males, because had they been given the possibility to stay in the old country, they would have remained within the law.

Louis One Eye, the most feared gangster in the neighborhood, is portrayed as a victim of the capitalist system: “The State had turned a moody unhappy boy into this evil rattlesnake, that struck a deathblow at the slightest touch of man” (129). His early experience of domestic violence and time spent in a reformatory – “the State ‘reformed’ him by carefully teaching him to be a criminal, and by robbing him of his eye” (128) – bereave the boy of human compassion, leaving only a feeling of hatred towards the world: “His remaining eye had become fierce and large. It was black, and from it poured hate, lust, scorn and suspicion, as from a deadly headlight to shrivel the world” (129).

Louis's gaze accuses the world of indifference towards social injustice and the atrocities of ghetto life, which is echoed in the narrator's rhetorical question: "Is there any gangster who is as cruel and heartless as the present legal State?" (128). There is, however, a sign of goodness left in Louis's soul, represented by his gentle care of pigeons, which come to represent "a heartbreaking joy" (129), as they "seemed free and beautiful" (129). The optimism evoked by this image, however, is later counterbalanced by the narrator's observation that, when "[the pigeons] returned meekly to their prison, they were not free" for "pigeons, like men, are easily tamed with food" (129). This is one of many images in which the author makes use of animal figures in order to draw a parallel between the animal and human worlds: each group's primary concern is to satisfy its basic needs. Flying pigeons, the symbols of peace, embody the idea of unrestrained freedom and ample opportunities, a condition unreachable for ghetto dwellers, who are entrapped in the cage of the oppressive capitalistic system.

In another episode, a sex offender who tries to seduce Joey, "knock[s] the old peddler to the sidewalk" (59), slashes his face, and barely escapes his own death by lynching: "an epidemic of madness swept the sudden crowd. Bedlam, curses, blood, a tornado of inflamed cruel faces. Every one, even the women, kicked, punched, and beat with shovels the limp ugly body on the sidewalk" (59-60). The crowd's uncontrollable frenzy has more complicated roots, however, which signal both the sufferer and the criminal as victims of circumstances; in other words, both the immoral conduct of the sex offender and the child's unsupervised roaming of the streets are the results of their underprivileged social position. The crowd's desperate outbreak of hatred and anger is directed at the culprit, but their real target, the narrative suggests, is the injustice and destitution of the ghetto world, which are responsible for the moral decay of its denizens. By taking the law into their own hands and beating up the criminal, the disadvantaged ghetto residents find an outlet for their own frustrations and powerlessness. The opportunity to annihilate immediate evil functions as an instant remedy for their own helplessness and provides an ersatz sense of control over their world. The empowering feeling of being one of many, rather than a helpless individual, fosters feelings of solidarity and relates to the novel's final message, that only through united actions can the dispossessed ameliorate their social and economic position.

The barbarous reality of the ghetto is especially striking in the characterization of its women, most of whom are portrayed as victims. Gold's female characters lose in confrontation with men and economic deprivation. The opening chapter of the novel is entitled "Fifty Cents a Night," and depicts the "hundreds of prostitutes on [the narrator's] street" (14). The ghetto's approach to sex is dehumanizing, as it is regarded as a commodity which can be bought and sold. Poverty drives women to prostitution, whereas their naivety,

ignorance and meekness makes it difficult for them to leave the business: “Many of the whores were girls who had been starved into this profession. Once in, they knew no way out” (34). Sometimes suicide is their only solution, as in Rosie’s case: “See, momma, I am getting out of the business at last” (32). Rape is another common phenomenon on the East Side: “[i]t is a popular sport wherever men live in brutal poverty”(28), asserts the narrator’s sexist rhetoric. Female sweatshop workers are sexually harassed, for keeping the job often depends on how consenting they are. The only female character who wants more in life is Lily, but “she was taken from school at an early age, and basted coats at home with her mother and another sister” (265). Having been denied the opportunity of education, Lily feels happy only when sent with the clothes to the Fifth Avenue shop; she “would put down her bundle on the side walk, and dance to every hand-organ she met” (265). Not being able to put up with her mother’s tyranny any longer, she runs away from home. The next time she is seen, “she was powdered and painted, and swung the insouciant little handbag of a prostitute” (267). Hence, the only attempt at female emancipation ends in defeat, the narrative posits. The most affirmative female character, the Jewish mother, endorses the claim that devoid of familial support, women fail in confrontation with a harsh reality. For a woman to succeed, she must acquire male characteristics, like Ida the Madam, who is “big, fat, aggressive; [and] wore a big diamond ring and knew how to make money. She liked to drink bucket after bucket of beer,” and she “despised the weak little girls, who worried, and had romantic scruples, and remembered their fathers and mothers” (32). Not only is Ida’s appearance devoid of femininity, but the nature of her business – running a brothel – identifies her adoption and internalization of dominant, male characteristics. At the other end of the female spectrum, there is the rich Mrs. Cohen: she “lay on the sofa. [...] glittered like an ice-cream parlor. [...] Her bleached yellow head blazed with diamond combs. [...] Diamonds shone from her ears; diamond rings sparkled from every finger” (217). The narrator observes that she “looked like some vulgar, pretentious prostitute, but was only the typical wife of a Jewish *nouveau riche*” (217). Such disgust of the rich Jewess is clearly expressed through her contemptuous portrayal, but it also stems from the realization of social injustice which she represents: the rich Jews get richer because they mercilessly exploit their less fortunate brethren. In spite of the fact that proletarian novels advocate social change by arousing class consciousness, their content is often gender-biased. As much as the female stereotypes are representative of the ghetto – a good Jewish mother, a dirty prostitute, an innocent victim of rape, a contemptible *nouveau riche* – they reduce female characters to passive agents who are ensnared in the man’s world. Gold’s female characters are punished if they do not endorse family

virtues; in this way, proletarian narratives reinstate conservative values such as the primacy of marriage and family.

The images of dirty sex, which appear in the first chapters of the narrative, are an inescapable element of ghetto life: "The East Side of New York was then the city's red light district" inhabited by "hundred of prostitutes [who] occupied vacant stores, [and] crowded into flats and apartments in all the tenements" (15). Consequently, "syphilis bloom[s] by night and by day" (15), while the saloonkeeper and the gambling houses prosper. Harry the Pimp, who has "twenty girls working for him," (28) is a very popular person in the neighborhood. By some he is even regarded as "a kind of philanthropic business man" (29) by virtue of his protecting and helping the girls: "They come to me from the gutter [...] I bathe them, I give them food, I teach them manners, I teach them to be sober and to save their money" (28), he boasts. Harry is an incarnation of hypocrisy: during the day, as a pimp, he takes advantage of desperate girls, while in the evening, "he walk[s] solemnly to supper" (30), to join his wife and children. In the ghetto world, in which a pimp represents value to society, one observes the corruption of the social moral order. The decline of values which occurs in America is accompanied by nostalgia for the Old World, where, the narrative assumes, life was less ambiguous.

The omnipresent violence of ghetto life is also reflected in the children's games, one of which "was to torture cats, chase them, drop them from steep roofs to see whether cats had nine lives" (63). The distinction the narrator makes between "the smug purring pets of the rich" and the "outcasts, criminal fiends [...] hideous with scars and wounds...smeared with unimaginable sores and filth," (63) with eyes which glare dangerously, reflects the social division between the world of the haves and have-nots. Mikey's words: "We tortured them, they tortured us," which brings into focus human and animal behavior, highlight the moral damage which the conditions of the ghetto cause in young people's consciences. Indicating the reason: "[i]t was poverty" (64), the narrator points at the importance of environmental factors in shaping the children's character. Similar callousness accompanies the treatment of a tired horse, which, after the whole day of work, is "made to wait for hours in the street" (70) until it is fed and watered. Whenever it takes apples or bananas out of hunger, it is "kicked and beaten" (70). The horse, "[n]eglected, and dirty, fly-bitten, gall-ridden," (70) finally meets its tragic death in the street, where it is "left for a day" (70) becoming "another plaything in the queer and terrible treasure of East Side childhood" (70). Admitting that he "never had much pity" (64), Mikey shows how the inescapable conditions of life deprive people of compassion, and how the struggle to survive suppresses higher human emotions, degrading and disempowering people, putting them on a par with animals. The images in which animals are badly treated, appeal to the readers' empathy with the

suffering creatures and call for change. Gold's narrative depicts a world devoid of sympathy, either for animals or for fellow human beings. The estrangement of man from nature, "brought about by capitalism" (Fried 43) is conveyed by a lamentation – "a rhetorical strategy that can symbolically and imagistically draw upon the traditions of exile from place and separation of self from empowerment" (Fried 43).

The Lower East Side, and by synecdoche America, is presented as a place in which only profit matters. As much as the ghetto dwellers disapprove of prostitution, they understand that it is the only means of survival for many girls. The landlord, who is "a pillar of the synagogue," (34) admits that, "those girls are whores. But they pay three times the rent [others] do, and they pay promptly," (34) and adds philosophically, "A black year on it, but a landlord must Live!" (34). By expressing his disdain for the "syphilitic millionaires" (40), the narrator questions the validity of the American Dream, at the core of which lies material gain. "In every pauper Jewish family the mother's dream was to have one of her sons a Doctor, as in every Irish family she dreamed of a Priest" (226). Mikey's father claims that: "[i]t's better to be dead in this country than not to have money," (301) and urges his son to promise him that he "will be rich when [he] grow[s] up" (301). The ghetto poor, who are denied access to material goods, reject the ethos of hard work which, they are told, brings happiness and affluence. Instead, hard work for them means long hours, beggarly wages, and the constant struggle to survive. The idealistic greenhorn's idea "that there was nothing but fun in America" (107) finds its demise when confronted with harsh reality, and Mikey's father "soon came to understand it was not a land of fun. It was a Land of Hurry-Up. There was no gold to be dug in the streets here. Derbies were not fun – hats for holidays. They were work – hats. *Nu*, so [he] worked! With [his] hands, [his] liver and sides! [He] worked!" (107). His plans to "make it" in America would find their culmination in making "a school teacher out of Esther," (110) his daughter, and a doctor out of Mikey, while he would "show the world how [he could] run a suspender ends shop!" (110). Soon enough, working for other people, Mikey's father realizes the futility of his efforts: "I am a man in a trap" (109), he admits, as he realizes that he will never collect the three hundred dollars he needs to start his own business: "A curse on Columbus! A curse on America, the thief! It is a land where the lice make fortunes, and the good men starve!" (112). The debilitating effect of exhausting labor can also be seen when Aunt Lena starts work in a clothing shop: "the youth, the charm and ecstacy of the East Side were buried then" (133) for her. Lena's previous curiosity about the world and her desire to "want to see things" (132), is killed by the work routine and the overpowering feeling of fatigue, so she "rarely went to see the tugboats work on the river, or the pushcarts on Orchard Street, and the other sights of America" (133). Her

world shrinks just as her ambitions evaporate under the burden of everyday existence. The merciless exploitation of human labor, the narrative claims, strips the “young, naïve, European peasant faces” (263) of their innate goodness and optimism so that, in time, they come to show only the evidence of suffering endemic to the life of the underprivileged.

In order to convey the idea of the Jewish ghetto as a lawless and uncivilized territory, the narrator employs the images of a jungle, which allude to Herbert Spencer’s theory of social Darwinism. The nineteenth century application of the Darwinian theory of natural selection to social, economic, and political issues resulted in a theory which questions the benefits of communal cooperation and foregrounds the importance of heredity in an individual life. Spencer’s elitist concept justified the emergence of exploitative forms of capitalism, in which workers were underpaid for backbreaking labor, and the formation of labor unions was seen as futile by the workers themselves. Similarly, social welfare programs to help the underprivileged and different types of charities were regarded as useless, for they only postponed the inevitable, namely, the extinction of the “maladapted.” Spencer’s ideas influenced the advocates of unrepentant capitalism, such as Andrew Carnegie, for whom the theory became a rhetorical tool used to justify unscrupulous economic competition.

Invoking the imagery of “a jungle, where wild beasts prowled, and toadstools grew in a poisoned soil – pervers, cokefiends, kidnapers, firebugs, Jack the Rippers” (60), Gold portrays the neighborhood of the Lower East Side as a place where only the fittest survive. Undoubtedly, the fittest is Nigger: “[h]e put his head down and tore in with flying arms, face bloody, eyes puffed by punching, lips curled back from the teeth, a snarling iron machine, an animal bred for centuries to fighting” (43). As he is the unquestioned leader of the boys’ “brave savage tribe” (43), Nigger invents games in which he “would march up to the pusheart and boldly steal a piece of fruit” (38). The ensuing peddler’s chase fails as the thief is a good runner.

Multiple images which allude to the animal kingdom indicate the similarities between wild nature and the ghetto life. “Like boys in Africa and Peru” (38), they “were naked, free and cocoo with youngness” (39-40). Enraged, Louis’s face becomes “hateful as a gorilla’s” (139). Fyfka the Miser is described as somebody exhibiting more animal features than human: “with dumb, gloomy, animal face” (75), “with a gum black muzzle, and nostrils like a camel [...] small eyes, like a baboon’s,” (75) and “always scratching himself”(74). Later, he is referred to as “this nightmare bred of poverty; this maggoty yellow dark ape” (76), who “snarled like an ape” (78). When Mikey’s family invite him to help himself at dinner, he “would gobble and grab, with a slinky look at us out of the corner of his eye, like a dog” (75). When Susie, the prostitute, takes carbolic acid in an attempted suicide, she lies on the floor

“writhing like a cut worm” (31). Mrs. Tanenbaum is described as somebody who looks like “a roly-poly little hysterical hippopotamus with a piercing voice” (249). Women living in tenements have to “hunt in the street for water” (248), due to its shortage.

The animal metaphors degrade the humanity of the characters reducing their behavior to basic functions, and denying the existence of higher emotions. The concrete jungle dwellers devote much of their efforts to satisfying their basic needs when they are not competing for better wages and housing with their neighbors. The dehumanizing imagery strengthens the characters’ alienation both from their surroundings and the mainstream of American society, presumably more civilized, which is presented as indifferent to the ghetto conditions. The choice of literary naturalism, which sees a human being as a product of social, environmental, and hereditary forces, highlights the characters’ unrestrained sexuality and draws the readers’ attention to the violence and brutality of tenement life. American naturalism rekindled interest in the immigrant inhabitants of the growing cities, as writers believed that naturalism equipped them with adequate tools to represent the ethnic elements of American society.

On the other hand, in the eyes of the young narrator, the notorious Lower East Side acquires a different quality as it remains in his imagination the nostalgic playground of his childhood. The power of children’s imagination transforms the “shabby old ground” (46) into “a vast western plain” (46), where they “buried pirate treasure,” (46) “built snow forts,” (46) “dug caves,” (46) “played football and baseball,” (46) and roasted stolen potatoes. It is here, that the protagonist learns his first lessons in tobacco smoking, enquires about the intricacies of sex, and where he “first came to look at the sky” (46). The boys “had to defend [their] playground by force of arms” (47), which resulted in a war with the Forsythe Street boys: “washboilers [...] as shields, [...] tin swords, sticks, blackjacks. The two armies slaughtered each other in the street. Bottles were thrown, heads cut open” (48), but they won their playground back.

In a more peaceful time, the Lower East side is pervaded by an exotic aura: a “mysterious lemonade man [...] with fierce pointed mustaches, [...] a Turkish fez, white balloon pants, and a red sash,” a merry-go-round, “a little one with six wooden steeds mounted on a wagon and pulled by an old horse”(55-56), a fortune teller “with a hand-organ and a parrot”(56), and the sorrowful laments of “the lonely old Jew without money”(56) peddling used clothes. Childhood memories, by virtue of being linked to the most innocent period of human life, “still blaze in a halo of childish romance” (56) in the narrator’s mind. This kind of nostalgia, often encoded in immigrant narratives, comes from perceptions of dislocation and absence of certainty. Longing and remembrance are ways of

looking for repetitions of the Old World in the New One in an attempt to restore an inner balance, which is the prerequisite of the immigrant's assimilation.

Since “[t]alk has ever been the joy of the Jewish race, great torrents of boundless exalted talk” (112), the grim reality of the ghetto is often colored through the act of storytelling. Mikey's father, an “unusual story-teller” (81), regales his friends with stories of “his old-world youth” (81), and soothes the children “with delightfully fantastic tales,” which he heard “from the lips of professional story-tellers in Oriental market-places, or from Turkish or Romanian peasants” (82). What is more, “[t]he Jews have been known as ‘the people of the book’ ” (87), who “revere its writers and men of thought” (7), and exhibit a passion for the theatre and philosophizing. The art of storytelling is an important element in the preservation of Jewish culture. A sense of belonging, which derives from shared knowledge, strengthens the communal bonds, which are especially important for the immigrants. The social foreclosure, which denies the ghetto denizens equal admission to American opportunities, demands a new framework of cultural reference to be constructed. As the Jewish immigrants are divested of access to mainstream America, they draw inspiration from their native heritage. Therefore, the evening gatherings, during which stories are told, lighten the gloomy reality of life, offering a respite from daily worries: “Like earnest children, they discussed villains, and magic mountains, and wishing lamps as if this mythology were as real as the sweatshops and garbage cans” (84). The role of story-teller endows Mikey's father with the qualities he lacks in his real life: he “spoke in the low, sure, magnetic voice of a master. He knew his power, and gained a strange dignity when he was telling a story” (84). For once, he is the master of his own words and of his own destiny, enjoying the ability to exercise control over the listeners. The power of words, which transform the ghetto filth into a fairy land, gives the ghetto dwellers hope: “All poor men believe in such magic, and dream of the day when they will stumble on it” (87). The negative consequences of storytelling, however, are shown in the example of pimps, “who were smooth story-tellers” (33) and seduced the innocent girls “the way a child is helped to fall asleep, with tales of magic happiness” (33). The fable of “The Golden Bear,” which is Mikey's father's favorite, promotes the idea that “the good things of life come by magic” (86). This conviction questions the foundations of the American Dream, which claims that the route to success is paved with hard work and perseverance. Drawing on the example of “The Golden Bear,” the author implies the futility of the immigrant struggle in the face of the oppressive economic system, which shamefully exploits the workers offering nothing in return but pain and poverty.

The portrayal of the mother, the most heroic character in the novel, questions the ghetto's dehumanizing influence on immigrants. Katie Gold, the center figure of Mikey's narrative, despite hardships and the brutality of

tenement life, embodies pure love: “She had a strong sense of reality, and felt that when one was poor, only strength could help one” (158). Katie is a typical Jewish mother: hardworking, humble, “cursing in Elizabethan Yiddish, using the forbidden words ‘ladies’ do not use, smacking us, beating us, fighting with her neighbors, helping her neighbors, busy from morn to midnight in the tenement struggle for life” (158). She is the kind of mother who “would have stolen or killed” (158) for her family, and who loves them “with the fierce painful love of a mother-wolf” (158). It is his mother, not his poverty-stricken father, who rescues Mikey from an exhausting and badly-paid job: “My mother saw how thin I was becoming. She forced me to quit that job” (308). Undefeated by hardships and personal tragedies, she remains the source of her family’s strength.

The symbolic figure of the Jewish mother transcends the familial bounds as Katie becomes the archetypal mother figure for the whole tenement and a paragon of virtue: “She tried to ‘reform’ everybody, and fought people because they were ‘bad.’ She spoke her mind freely and told every one exactly where the path of duty lay.” (31) Although she disapproves of prostitution, she sympathizes with victimized women who need help and is “too kindhearted to keep them out” (31). She is the only one who retains a sense of human dignity amidst the ghetto brutality: “[t]his will teach you not to learn all those bad, nasty things in the street!” (19) she says as she punishes Mikey for insulting the prostitutes. When the new immigrants, “smelling of Ellis Island disinfectant” (73) need a place to stay, Katie would “grumble, curse, spit and mutter, but she’d never really ask [them] to move out. She didn’t know how” (75). Her goodness towards other people is set off against the harsh reality of ghetto life: “She was always finding people in trouble who needed her help. She helped them for days, weeks and months, with money, food, advice and the work of her hands” (160). Helping the neighbors “was simply something that had to be done” (161), so whenever a woman fell sick, she would “drop in there twice a day, to cook the meals, and scrub the floors, and bathe the children, to joke, gossip, scold, love, to scatter her strength and goodness in the dark home” (161). Never does she expect any reward and “[i]t would have shocked her if any one had offered to pay for these services” (161).

Her unselfish help stands in opposition to the organized charities, that “helped no one without first systematically degrading him and robbing him of all human status” (293). Asking a series of personal questions “with [...] an air of authority” (292), shuffling the index cards, the investigator evokes only “hate and fear” (293) in tenants, as he represents “the cruel machine” (293), not individual attention and compassion. Consequently Mikey’s family “would rather have died than be bullied, shamed and finger-printed like criminals by the callous policemen of Organized Charity” (293-294). Katie’s ability to relate

personally to an individual in trouble, regardless of his or her ethnicity and social background, transcends racial and social boundaries, and reaches beyond the established order: in the cafeteria, she “learned to fight, scold, and mother the Poles, Germans, Italians, Irish and Negroes who worked there. They liked her, and soon called her ‘Momma’ ” (245). Her inherent kindness, an internal drive to do good deeds, to help the needy, to protect the oppressed, which are reflected in her relentless worry that “there is so much misery in the world” (162), cross religious and ethnic boundaries, locating itself at the center of humanity. Mother’s struggle to retain her and her family’s dignity amidst the ghetto destitute embodies the value of communal strength and marks her out as a spiritual leader of the working classes. Hers is the figure which unites the underprivileged and the excluded, under the banner of working class humanity and solidarity.

Although *Jews Without Money* depicts the details of Jewish ghetto life in New York City at the beginning of the twentieth century, its characters, driven by nostalgia, often resort to reminiscences of their European past. Tellingly, they long for the pastoral ideal of Eastern Europe, which thrives in their memories as a place full of fragrant flowers, colorful meadows, orchards heavy with fruit, and forests abounding in mushrooms. Relocated to a modern urban environment, they reevaluate the old world as a place of happiness, especially when contrasted with the gloomy landscape of the ghetto tenement. Moreover, the memory of their European life provides a common link between different ethnic groups; when Mother befriends an Irish lady, she learns that “that woman used to gather mushrooms in the forest in Ireland. Just the way [she] gathered them in Hungary” (171). The shared experience of mushroom picking, which fosters an understanding between a Jew and a Christian, is, notably, located in the women’s past, not the American present. Thereby, America is presented as a place inimical to immigrants, where genuine human contacts are rare. By inference, the importance of memory of the Old World, which is inherent in the experience of immigration, provides a platform for communication in the multiethnic context of American society.

Jewish immigrants try to reproduce the *shtetl* life of the Old World, with its very closely knit communal bonds in America: “[j]oy and grief were social in a tenement” (283). The street peddlers and the cockroach businesses typical of the East Side testify to “petty tragedy, petty slavery,” (195) but they have “a single point in their favor, each keeps a family alive” (195), just like they did on the European continent. The remnants of the Old World superstitions are visible when Mikey falls ill and two American doctors fail to help him; then his mother “[calls] a Speaker-woman, Baba Sima the witch-doctor” (143), who finally cures the boy. Although the immigrants are no longer greenhorns, they do not identify with their adopted homeland, referring to America as not as *our* but

“their country” (247). Catherine Rottenberg observes that “Mikey is portrayed not as desiring to become part of the dominant culture but rather as constantly searching for an alternative” (Rottenberg 127), be it that of the Jewish gangster, Chassidism, or the working-class world of his father. The division between “them” and “us,” between the privileged and the disadvantaged, marks the immigrants’ exclusion, which makes their further assimilation problematic.

Although the Jewish ghetto constitutes a world within a world, there are nevertheless signs of assimilation among the ghetto dwellers, which start with the name changing procedure: “If his name is Garlic in the old country, here he thinks it refined to call himself Mr. Onions,” (22) observes the vest-maker Mottke humorously. Eventually, Mikey’s family take the next step towards assimilation, which involves the purchase of ready-made American clothes: “a velvet suit with lace collar and cuffs, and patent leather shoes” (19) for Mikey, and “a black plush gown” (19) and new shoes for Mother. Finally, the family go to have a picture taken, a solemn experience, which leaves them “exhausted but triumphant” (20). The Jewish wine cellar, where Mikey’s father spends time with friends, exhibits a “big American flag [and] a chromo showing Roosevelt charging up San Juan Hill. At the other end hung a Zionist flag [...] and star of David” (115). “The juxtaposition of Roosevelt on an imperialist mission and the Zionist flag gestures toward the increasing compatibility of these two ‘nationalisms’ ” (Rottenberg 130).

The ambivalence of assimilation and the problems of divided loyalties are signaled by the character of Mendel, who “could fool Americans with his trick” (80) because he “often passed himself off as a real American” (80), but, at the same time, “talk[s] Yiddish and [remains] loyal to his race” (80). Mikey, who calls himself “an American boy” (144), is reluctant to believe that Jewish traditional medicine will cure his illness: “I was skeptical, and I could not believe in the magic” (146). Although it apparently works in his case, he pronounces his detachment from traditional medicine by calling it “foreign hocus-pokus” (144). Renouncing Jewish culture, he finds an alternative in Marxist ideology, which looks for solutions not in magic, but in the development of working class consciousness. Thus, the narrator forecasts the protagonist’s final conversion to communism as a remedy for the ills of American capitalism.

The memory of pogroms persists in the Jewish immigrant community: “The East Side never forgot Europe” (164). Religious conflicts between Jews and non-Jews are relived in the ghetto environment through stories which feature Christians who kidnap Jewish children “to burn a cross on each cheek with a redhot poker” (164), who cut off children’s ears to “make a kind of soup” (164), or who hunt “the Jews like rabbits” (165) to baptize them. Only Mikey’s mother shows religious tolerance and reaches beyond the traditional animosities, when

she admits to having “many friends among the Italians and Irish neighbors” (165). Whenever she does express hatred of Christians, the narrator excuses her explaining that it is “really the outcry of a motherly soul against the boundless cruelty in life” (166).

As much as hatred towards Christians unites the Jews, other religious concerns tend to divide the community, one of them being Orthodox East European Judaism confronted with its less rigorous American version. The Hassidic rabbi, Reb Samuel, who has “that air of grandeur that surrounds so many old pious Jews,” (191) represents the traditional values of the Old World, which endorse strict rituals and guard the moral conscience of the Jewish community. So deeply immersed in the world of biblical spirituality that “Talmudic texts interpolate his ordinary talk” (191), Reb Samuel humbly serves his community. Unfortunately, his clinging to the old ways of his faith results in his failure to adapt to the changes which American modernity brings: “It finally defeated him, this America; it broke the old man, because he could not bend” (191).

Contrary to Reb Samuel’s spirituality, Reb Moisha represents religious shallowness and ignorance; in the narrator’s words, he is “a walking, belching symbol of the decay of Orthodox Judaism” (65). As a *Chaidier* instructor, who “has never read anything, or seen anything, [and]knew absolutely nothing” (65), he reduces religion to a series of rituals. As his only knowledge consists of the “sterile memory course in dead Hebrew,” (65) he insists on his students’ mindless repetitions: “Over and over again [they] howled the ancient Hebrew prayers for thunder and lightning and bread and death; meaningless sounds to [them]” (66). In order to maintain discipline among his students and establish his authority, he resorts to the use of force, “pinching boys with his long pincer fingers” and “whipping special offenders with his cat-o’nine-tails” (65). It is Mikey’s mother who wants him to attend *chaidier* for fear of the boy’s growing up “into an ignorant goy” (67), whereas he sees sense neither in the content nor in the form of Jewish religious teaching. Mikey’s words: “I hated this place” (67) reflect clearly his contemptuous attitude.

While Mikey’s mother is pious and “observe[s] all the minute, irritating details of the Jewish orthodoxy”(181), her husband is less rigid and forbids her to shave her head in order to put on the wig of married woman. For Mikey, “the Jewish holidays were fascinating” (184) not for religious reasons, but for their festive atmosphere. Similarly, Chassidic gatherings remind the boy of mysterious “folk [from his] father’s fairy tales” (193). The synagogue services, which the narrator compares to theatrical performances, are “amusing at times” (185), especially when the “Rabbi blew a ram’s horn, and a hundred bearded men wrapped in shrouds convulsed themselves in agony” (185). Even “Oriental melodies” (185) are not able to hold the congregation’s attention, as they

“gossiped, yawned, belched, took snuff, talked business, and spat on the floor” (185). Rabbi Schmarya, who is brought from the old country with a view to strengthening the Jewish faith, deserts the congregation as he “had been offered a better-paying job by a wealthy and un-Chassidic congregation” (203). By presenting varying degrees of religious worship, the narrator shows how traditional Jewish piety loses in confrontation with American reality: Jews working on the Sabbath, eating pork, and shaving their long beards are symptoms of the laicization of the Jewish community. As the pressures of assimilation affect all aspects of Jewish immigrant life, the narrator’s implicit point is that the Old World faith is not adequate to resist American capitalism and modernity.

By way of conclusion, the author’s words: “I have told in my book a tale of Jewish poverty in one ghetto, that of New York” (10) put the ghetto community in focus. However, despite the author’s claim as to the universality of his account, the distinctive images reflecting the peculiarities of Jewish life as well as the flashbacks to the *shtetl* locate the narrative in the specifically Jewish immigrant milieu. Gold’s ghetto is inhabited mainly by the impoverished immigrant workers who struggle against the exploitation of burgeoning American capitalism. Catherine Rottenberg questions the author’s claim to present the Jewish working class in such a way as to make it representative of the American working class. Instead, she finds identity issues to be of paramount importance; she argues “that the novel is concerned first and foremost with the question of whether “Jewishness” itself can serve as oppositional” (127), thus illuminating the ambivalence in “the narrative trajectory and [...] the contradictory ways the Lower East Side is described as a place that is both desirable and objectionable, potentially subversive yet sordid and complicit” (127). Put another way, Gold portrays the Jewish ghetto as a site of moral corruption and physical exploitation, but also as a nostalgic remnant of Jewish traditional life. These conflicting images highlight the question whether Jewishness, as a mark of ethnic affiliation, should take priority over working class issues, which aim at eradicating racial and ethnic differences. The answer which Gold’s novel provides seems to favor the working class cause over the particularity of Jewishness.

The sense of political propaganda which lies at the core of Gold’s novel has the effect of dominating its content and encouraging a one-sided reading. The author demonstrates that negative stereotypes are not essential to the Jewish character. Instead, they are the result of ghetto poverty and its destructive influence, which turns people’s positive potential into corruption. Thereby, Gold’s novel questions the value of the immigrants’ assimilation, which, he claims, improves their position in American society, but also enslaves them in the capitalist system. By becoming American citizens Jewish-American

immigrants feed the armies of working class laborers who are easily abused and exploited. Put another way, the capitalist order is held responsible for the misfortunes and exclusion of the ghetto inhabitants, rather than their racial or ethnic affiliations. Gold claims, therefore, that for the immigrants it is more important to unite with other workers against the capitalists' exploitation, than nurture their ethnic ties.

Jews Without Money asserts that the brutality of ghetto life is the result of the oppressive nature of American capitalism, the annihilation of which would bring prosperity and happiness to the lives of the working class. The characters of Aunt Lena and Doctor Solow may serve as examples of budding class consciousness, which is triggered by the experiences of exploitive labor: the sweatshops change a "shy and ecstatic immigrant girl" (235) into a "pale, [...] tired" (235) and hungry woman. Her mind, however, "had grown in the struggle," (236) as she "boldly and vehemently" (236) supports the union cause. Going on the picket line, she admits that the union's strike "is war" (237), which demands sacrifice – "how we scratched their faces," (237) she boasts. Readers can observe how, under the influence of working class ideology, a naïve and simple girl changes into a radical agitator. Union membership gives meaning and strength to her disadvantaged ghetto life.

Gold's narrative reveals the corruption of the American political system and presents ignorant immigrants as victims of political scams: "[t]omorrow I will make you a citizen, and then the next day you will vote," (208) explains Baruch Goldfarb, "a Tammany Hall ward politician, a Zionist leader and the owner of a big dry goods store" (207). Then he assures a potential voter: "[a]ll you do is mark a cross under the star [...] You will earn three dollars and be a Democrat" (208). Ethnic differences lose in the confrontation with the much more powerful force, which is politics. When an election is involved, it ceases to matter whether the voter is a Jew or not, as long as he casts his vote in the "right" way. Gold shows the ghetto as an easy hunting ground for political activists who take advantage of the immigrants' lack of knowledge and education.

Neither the instruments of American democracy, nor Jewish ethnic affiliation is able to alleviate the weight of the workers' misery. That is why Gold's narrative advocates the "workers' Revolution" (309) as a viable force to "destroy the East Side [...] and build there a garden for the human spirit" (309). The prophetic vision of the coming of a Jewish Messiah who will redeem the world is replaced with the God of socialism and communism becoming the worker's new religion – "the true Messiah" (309). Catherine Rottenberg draws attention to the fact that "the invocation of the messiah to describe the revolution, register[s] Gold's inability to completely erase or settle the question of what exactly constitutes Jewish difference" (134). As Gold's protagonist realizes that his East-European Jewish identity is not adequate to deal with

American capitalism, he adopts Marxist ideology, which, in his view, will provide a rational solution to the problems of the working class. “The economically depressed yet specifically Jewish space must be eradicated in order to provide an alternative to the structures of domination” (Rottenberg 134). Mikey, who is to a large degree secularized and assimilated, further transforms the image of the Jewish Messiah into Buffalo Bill, an epitome of the Native American’s fight against the oppression of the United States’ government. By juxtaposing elements of Jewish religion and American history, the author bridges the immigrant world with the American one. This strategy results in the expansion of the immigrants’ sensibility so that they “break the hegemony of the past by making life more open to self-willed destiny, and less subject to the weight of tradition” (Fried 42).

Even though *Jews Without Money* supports the “workers’ Revolution” as a way to eradicate the ills of capitalism, Gold’s novel also promotes communal strength and a sense of solidarity as weapons against injustice. A sense of individual kindness, which is represented by affirmative characters like Mikey’s Mother, serves as a common platform between communal and class consciousness. A symbolic pattern of entrapment and exclusion, both social and economic, is endemic to ghetto life. Gold’s narrative mythologizes this by giving it a purpose: however painful the immigrants’ suffering is, its experience fosters their ideological conversion to Marxism, which, in turn, is expected “to forge an alliance between the Jews and native Americans” (Wisse 273). Thus, “a Jewish immigrant past could be used as a touchstone of reliably lower-class origins” (Wisse 273). However, the fact that “the conversion to Marxism” occurs only on the last two pages, whereas most of the text is devoted to descriptions of ghetto life, may cause the reader to question the characters’ logical development. Therefore, the author’s concluding insistence on the benefits of Communism results from his political preferences rather than the consistency of the narrative. As much as the graphic descriptions of the New York ghetto provide interesting reading, the ending, written in the manner of blunt political propaganda, renders Gold’s narrative less believable.

Conclusion

Negotiating Home and Jewish Identity in Early 20th Century Jewish-American Narratives presents a collection of texts written by Jewish-American authors between 1912 and 1930. Early twentieth-century America was a place of heated political and social debates, which were fueled by the growing number of immigrants, among which the East-European Jews constituted a particularly significant group. The attitude of the American mainstream toward the newcomers ranged from total acceptance, through skepticism to open hostility. The body of Jewish-American literature of the period which has been selected for commentary in this collection of essays exemplifies the typical anxieties which troubled American society at the beginning of the twentieth century. A sense of ambivalence as to what it means to be an American was expressed both by native-born and immigrant writers. Yet, the ethnic lens makes this literature especially noteworthy as the tensions appear most markedly at the seams of the social fabric. This is the margin where racial, ethnic, social, gender, and ideological borderlines meet and crisscross, creating a unique social mosaic.

What emerges from my discussion is a literary portrait of the Jewish Lower East Side penned through an autobiographical lens. Each work presents a unique record of life in the Jewish ghetto seen either through the eyes of an adolescent or an adult, fe/male narrator. The reader is granted access to different neighborhoods, most of which are impoverished ghetto quarters. The occasional introduction of examples of Jewish affluence only highlights the overwhelming poverty of the ghetto. However, successful and wealthy Jews testify to the greenhorns' possibilities of social mobility. Even though prosperous Jews are portrayed with irony and their wealth is mocked, they clearly serve as a background against which the poor but decent and honorable Jews are portrayed. Thus, the seemingly diverse ghetto life presented in the narratives, in fact, reinforces the common stereotype of ubiquitous ghetto poverty and portrays Jewish immigrants as victims.

The poignant scenes in which Sara Smolinsky and David Levinsky struggle with hunger and deprivation, promote the Jewish experience as unique to the ghetto, and depict the Jewish fate as incomparably hard. Consequently, Sara and her sisters are presented as the only ones who care about cleanliness and tidiness in the ghetto community; others are, presumably, content with life in

filth. If the protagonists' neighbors of other ethnicities are mentioned at all, they are presented as uncouth and ignorant, which also suggests their inability to assimilate as easily as the Jewish immigrants. All the narratives that have been considered present the Lower East Side as a predominantly Jewish quarter and the Jews as the most vulnerable and underprivileged of its inhabitants. The plight of other ethnic groups such as the African-Americans, Irish, Polish, and Italians, whose lives were equally difficult, is deliberately omitted from the narratives. Jewish immigrants are presented as the forerunners of Americanization, who set an example for other immigrant groups. This somewhat biased presentation aims to demonstrate how difficult it was for the Jewish immigrants to survive and yet readers should not fail to appreciate how well they adapted, in spite of the unpropitious circumstances. Ruth R. Wisse criticizes the exploitation of the concept of "the Jewish ghetto destitute" by Jewish-American writers: "Whereas Yiddish writers like Sholem Aleichem had resolved not to let poverty or the insult of the ghetto deny the resiliency of Jewish life, the ideological left transported this system of values to credit Jews with resiliency only as long as they remained poor" (274).

Early immigrant narratives echo the assimilative rhetoric of the twentieth-century American mainstream policy, which regarded immigrants' complete assimilation as the right way to incorporate them into the fabric of society. Moreover, the model of assimilation in which the immigrants are rewarded with social ascent and financial gains, also perpetuates the idea of the American Dream among the newcomers. The stories included in this collection describe the various obstacles which the protagonists must overcome on the way to Americanization. At the end of the arduous path, however, they can enjoy success. Their triumph is a signal to the American and ethnic public that the "Wandering Jew" has finally found a place to stay. Jewish-American authors seek to demonstrate how much effort Jewish immigrants put into the assimilative process and how grateful they are for the opportunity that America has offered them.

Negotiating Home and Jewish Identity presents a changing vision of the Old World; from Mary Antin's portrayal of the Pale of Settlement as a prison for Jews, to Michael Gold's nostalgic memories of a Jewish "paradise." These writers' novels provide a time frame for the collection, with the publication of *The Promised Land* in 1912, and *Jews Without Money* in 1930. Such a radical shift in the portrayal of the Old World is a reflection of the immigrants' relationship with the New One. Antin's narrative, which is one of the first of its kind, wholeheartedly embraces America as the Jewish Promised Land and argues against nativist rhetoric. In order to validate Jewish immigration to the United States, in the eyes of both American and Jewish readers, Antin contrasts the two worlds. The predominantly negative associations of the Old World,

such as the lack of citizenship rights, religious intolerance, denial of access to education, and constant threats of pogroms, are juxtaposed with an essentially optimistic vision of American life. Even the division of the novel into two parts serves to differentiate between the Eastern European misery and American opportunity. *The Promised Land* accentuates the advantages arising from immigration and Americanization, ignoring the problems which might appear on the way. The author encourages newcomers to abandon their past and adopt American ways as their own. Antin's one-sided presentation of the concept of assimilation reflects the official propaganda of the times, which encouraged immigrants to shed their native, cultural heritage and become "proper" Americans. Subsequent authors, such as Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, Michael Gold and Ludwig Lewisohn, began to question Antin's vision of complete assimilation and their novels introduced the variety of problems which came in its wake.

On the other end of the Old–New World polarity takes the form of an exaggerated nostalgia, which permeates the narratives. A longing for the world which is gone, and whose contours are preserved in the protagonists' memories in the scent of flowers, mushroom picking, the taste of mother's food, and the recollection of childhood games is shared by all the protagonists. The bucolic landscape of the *shtetl*, where life was regulated by traditional rituals, conjures up happy memories, which are often missing from immigrant life. Michael Gold's novel, which exhibits all these threads is, in fact, a sentimental tribute to the memory of the East-European past. This trope, however, is not unique to narratives written by Jewish immigrants, but is typical for any immigrant experience. Once the anxiety of dislocation wanes, newcomers tend to look back at the Old World with their hearts, rather than with their minds. The passing of time dwarfs the painful recollections and brings to light the happy ones, which become an antidote to the hardships of present-day life.

A similar lack of balance can be observed in other narratives which are also structured by polarities: Jews – Gentiles, the ghetto – the American mainstream, the poor – the rich, the underprivileged – the dominant, the working class – capitalists, female – male. Such binary representations, although easy to grasp, reduce the various problems to their stereotypes. In order to prove the novel's point about successful assimilation, for example, Sara Smolinsky's Orthodox father comes to live with his Americanized daughter. Bearing in mind the complicated nature of the father-daughter relationship thus far, one can only speculate as to what kind of problems this cohabitation would produce. By promoting a clear-cut vision of the world, in which roles are strictly assigned so that readers know whom to sympathize with and whom to despise, the narratives serve their ideological purposes, at the expense of artistic value. Early twentieth-century Jewish-American narratives present successful protagonists

who easily find their own, sometimes not entirely legal, ways in American society. The characters' ease at handling business matters implies their acceptance and approval of the class system. The propaganda of success perpetuated in immigrant novels confirms Jewish flexibility in respect of social adaptation, which had already been demonstrated by centuries of Jewish history. Conversely, it claims America to be an especially welcoming place to Jewish immigrants.

All the texts in the collection represent an ethnic perspective in American literary realism. The choice of realism is not accidental as there is no room for experimentation when the message to the reading public must be clear. Even though they derived from a distinct religious and cultural environment, Jewish-American immigrant writers successfully managed to employ the poetics of realism in their stories. The novels written in an English spiced with Yiddish words introduce the exotic world of the ghetto, which, for some Americans, was their first contact with the Jewish immigrant community. Hence, the authors were aware of the importance of the didactic qualities which their texts carried. Realistic descriptions of ghetto poverty, which abound with references to hunger, worn-out clothes, dirt, cold, debilitating physical work and a feeling of overpowering hopelessness, were calculated to evoke pity in American-born readers, which, in turn, facilitates acceptance of the newcomers. A fascinating panorama of more or less assimilated Jewish characters presents them as good candidates for Americanization. Even decidedly negative Jewish characters are depicted with understanding and sympathy, while the gentle irony which accompanies their characterization lessens the disturbing effect of their conduct. Immigrant writers expanded the definition of American literary realism, which had so far been associated with such white, male, mainstream authors as William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Theodore Dreiser. With the introduction of such issues as nationality and ethnicity, which were explored by means of images from contemporary American life on the margins of established society, Jewish-American writers redefined the notion of American literature of the age.

Jewish-American immigrant literature reflects one of the main events of the twentieth century: the 17 October Revolution in Russia. Inspired by the ideas of Marxism, Michael Gold places class struggle in an American context hoping that "Marxism, not business, [would] forge an alliance between the Jews and native Americans" (Wisse 273). Thus, Jewish immigrant origins, which would be equivalent to a "proletarian" family background in Revolutionary Russia, would become the foundation of the future American working class. Radical Jewish-American authors saw class unity as an alternative model of assimilation, in which "the Jewish immigrants about whom they write find expression for their Jewish identities in their commitments to justice and social

activism” (Wald 61). Moreover, the ideas of collectivism and participation in the labor movement were for them a way to deal with anti-Semitism. Michael Gold, both as an activist and author, was more interested in social classes than individuals, which is why he ignored the importance of self-reliance in favor of the masses view of American society. Yet, in *Jews Without Money* he refers not to the masses but mostly to his fellow Jews. The novel supports a deliberate association between the proletariat, class struggle and the Jewish cause, which, in Gold’s literary rendition, become equivalents. The proletarian literature of the period was regarded as communist propaganda without any aesthetic value. Although the Leftist standpoint gained support during the Great Depression, it later invited intense criticism and was marginalized during the McCarthy era.

From the present day perspective some of the issues discussed by immigrant authors still deserve attention. The diasporic experience, which is crucial to modernity, has gained importance in our changing world. The realization of a post-modern, multicultural and multiethnic society has, in practice, proved to be more difficult than expected. In a contemporary context, the process of assimilation initiates questions about the limits of immigrants’ individual freedom. The manifestations of distinctive ethnicity such as the wearing of *burqas*, religious observance, a refusal to learn the host nation’s language, or clinging to traditional dietary habits challenge the value of assimilative success. To assimilate is not only to embrace a new world, but to inherit the past and be responsible for its legacy. The problems which affluent countries face nowadays with ethnic immigrant groups call for the necessity to redefine the concept of assimilation, which was so dear to Mary Antin. The question of divided loyalties between the immigrant’s past and the host country gained focus during the World War II when Americans decided to set up Japanese internment camps. The threat of global terrorism has brought this topic under general discussion, in which the recurring divisions into “us” and “them” need to be addressed.

Throughout *Negotiating Home and Jewish Identity* I have discussed the intricate problems resulting from the experience of immigration. I hope that my multifaceted reading may foreground some important aspects of the analyzed texts, and that further discussion will ensue. My overarching goal was to explore the changing visions of assimilation in relation to early twentieth-century Jewish-American immigrant narratives. The fact that many of the issues illuminated by the discussion have not been resolved indicates their continuing relevance to modern societies.

American Immigration Law 1790-1924: Basic Facts

- 1790 The Naturalization Act establishes the rules for naturalized citizenship limiting it to “free white persons” of “good moral character” who have lived in the country for two years prior to becoming naturalized.
- 1819 The first Federal regulation relating to immigration: among other things, it establishes the continuing reporting of immigration to the U.S., and sets specific sustenance rules for passengers of ships leaving the U.S. ports for Europe
- 1864 Federal regulation which legalizes the importation for contract laborers
- 1875 Federal regulation which prohibits entry to prostitutes and convicts
- 1840-1880 The first wave of Jewish immigration, mostly of Sephardic origin, from Western Europe: Germany, England, Scandinavia. In their host countries, they had been granted citizenship rights, and, therefore, they could enjoy the benefits of education and seek employment outside their ethnic group. As they displayed lax attitudes in respect of religious Orthodoxy and lived in modern, urban environments, they were broad-minded and open to contact with other groups – characteristics which made them perfect candidates for smooth assimilation.
- 1830's -1850's Growth of anti-Catholic sentiments, which resulted in riots against Catholic Irish immigrants led by nativists. Anti-Catholic hostility started with the growing numbers of Irish immigrants arriving in the U.S. in the 1840's and 1850's because of the Potato blight. Unskilled Irish men competed for jobs with free African-Americans, which caused mutual bitterness between the two groups. The Catholic Church played an important role in assisting the newcomers by means of charitable organizations and preserving the native culture, as

well as promoting their acculturation. Americans, however, feared that the flow of Roman Catholic immigrants would pose a threat to the Protestant foundations of their country.

- 1880-1924 The second wave of Jewish immigration, mostly of Ashkenazi origin, from eastern and southern Europe: Russia, Poland, Ukraine, and Romania. These Jews were of rural origin, predominantly impoverished, uneducated and strict in Orthodox religious observance. As they had been denied citizenship rights in Europe, they developed clannish tendencies living in closely-knit communities, *shtetls*, which substantially limited their contact with the host societies. Therefore, they were distrustful of foreign influence and socially introverted. They could not seek employment outside the *shtetl*, so they engaged with the range of limited options of employment that were available: petty trade, running drinking parlors, and garment production – skills which they would be able to make good use of while competing on the American labor market.
- 1882 The Chinese Exclusion Act suspends immigration of Chinese laborers and bars reentry of all Chinese laborers who had departed and not returned before the passage of the Act. It was the first American legislation to bar entry to a specific ethnic group.
- 1894 The Immigration Restriction League, founded in Boston by three Harvard College graduates, was an organization which addressed the popular concerns over the influx of undesirable immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, who were regarded as culturally inferior and whose social norms were seen as alien to the American way of life. The League activists wanted to inform the American public about the social and political consequences of what they saw as an invasion, claiming that the existing laws were inadequate, and that there was a need for further selection of immigrants: for example, it was demanded that immigrants should prove their literacy in some language. The League was active for nearly twenty years.
- 1892-1954 Ellis Island, a small island in New York harbor becomes the biggest receiving immigrant station on the American east coast, which accommodated immigrants arriving from Europe; its equivalent on the west coast was Angel Island in Los Angeles, which received immigrants of Asian origin: Chinese, Korean,

and Japanese. Ellis Island succeeded Castle Garden (originally known as Castle Clinton), which served as an immigrant receiving station between 1855 and 1890.

- 1907 The peak year for Ellis Island with over a million newcomers (1,004,756); on 17th April 11,747 immigrants were processed.
- 1907 The Gentlemen's Agreement between the U.S. government and the Empire of Japan on the basis of which the Japanese government would deny passports to the U.S. for laborers, unless they had previously been domiciled in the U.S. Another exception were the parents, wives, and children of those already residing in the U.S. In return, the U.S. government would not impose further restrictions on Japanese immigration and would desegregate San Francisco schools: in 1906 the San Francisco School Board had segregated Japanese students into a school where Chinese students had already been segregated. The general aim of the Act was to appease the growing tensions over the large number of Japanese workers, whose cheap labor undermined the prospects of native Americans, especially in California.
- 1907-1910 The Dillingham Commission was set up to scientifically examine the origins and consequences of immigration and immigrants' assimilative capabilities; its findings demonstrated the inferior capabilities of Eastern and Southern European immigrants, which justified their exclusion. The Commission advocated keeping restrictions on entry to the U.S., for example, a literacy test which would prevent uneducated immigrants from entering the country.
- 1910's-1924 Eugenics provided biological arguments to support immigration restrictions by claiming that mental illnesses and physical disabilities are hereditary. Eugenics experts argued that American society was being polluted by morally and culturally inferior immigrants from Eastern Europe. The findings of the Eugenics Research Association (1924) resulted in the introduction of the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924.
- 1917 The Immigration Act introduces a literacy test, which excludes "all aliens over sixteen years of age physically capable of reading, who cannot read the English language, or some other

language or dialect, including Hebrew or Yiddish.” The Act also increases the entry head tax to \$8.

- 1921 The Immigration Quota Law regulates that the number of any European nationality entering in a given year could not exceed 3 % of foreign-born persons of that nationality who were living in the U.S. in 1910. Nationality was to be determined by country of birth, and no more than 20 % of the annual quota of any nationality could be received in any given month. The Act favored immigration from western and northern Europe.
- 1924 The National Quota, (Johnson–Reed) Act, limits the annual number of entrants of each admissible nationality to 2 % of the foreign born total of that nationality as established in the 1890 Census, thus further restricting eastern and southern European immigration. In fact, this Act marks the end of mass immigration to America.
- 1952 The Immigration and Naturalization Act (a.k.a. the McCarran-Walter Act) collects and codifies the existing provisions and reorganizes the structure of immigration law. The Act introduces immigrant selection, which denies entrance to unlawful, immoral, diseased, and politically radical immigrants, special attention being paid to those who might have connections to communism. In the wake of World War II and the anti-communist Cold War sentiments in America, the Act curbs the entry of American war enemies such as the Japanese
- 1965 The Immigration and Nationality Act: national quotas are lifted and new criteria are established, which specify seven preferences for Eastern Hemisphere quota immigrants: 1) unmarried adult sons and daughters of citizens; 2) spouses and unmarried sons and daughters of permanent residents; 3) professionals, scientists, and artists of exceptional ability; 4) married adult sons and daughters of U.S. citizens; 5) siblings of adult citizens; 6) workers, skilled and unskilled, in occupations for which labor was in short supply in the U.S.; 7) refugees from Communist-dominated countries or those uprooted by natural catastrophe.

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Jewish Presence on the American Continent: 1654-1930

- 1654 Sephardic Jews escape persecution by the Portuguese rulers of Brazil and come to America; they establish the first Jewish congregation in the Dutch Colony of New Amsterdam
- 1655 Jews in the New Netherlands are granted rights to trade and travel, and to stand guard
- 1656 Jews in the New Netherlands are granted rights to own property and to establish a Jewish cemetery
- 1674 Another Jewish congregation is established in Newport, Rhode Island. Jewish settlers are treated as second class citizens: they are not allowed to engage in retail trade, practice handicrafts, hold public positions, serve in the militia, or practice their religion in a synagogue.
- 1702 Ashkenazic Jews arrive from Germanic Europe
- 1730 The first Jewish synagogue, the Remnant of Israel, is built on Mill Street in Lower Manhattan
- 1740 England grants naturalization rights to the Jews living in the colonies
- 1775 The first Jew to hold elective office is Francis Salvador, who is elected to the South Carolina Provincial Congress
- 1776 The number of Jews residing in the American Colonies reaches 2000
- 1788 Jews are permitted to hold federal offices (at the time when the U.S. Constitution is ratified)
- 1789 Jews inhabit large cities: New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Charleston, and Newport
- 1800 The Jewish population estimated at 2,500
- 1814 The first American Hebrew Bible is published by Thomas Dobson

- 1820's The initial group of German Jews arrives in America due to the scarcity of land in Europe, poverty and restrictions on marriage, domicile, and employment
- 1822 The first Jewish-American periodical *The Jew* is published in New York
- 1840's The Jewish population reaches 15,000
- 1848 The second wave of Jewish immigrants arrives after the failed German revolution. They are better educated than the first group
- 1877 A wealthy Jewish banker, Joseph Seligman, is refused entry to the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga, New York. The incident signals growing anti-Semitic sentiments in American society
- 1880's East European Jews flee poverty, pogroms in Russia, and restrictions in the East European host countries. They bring Yiddish culture to the Jewish ghettos, which has a great influence on American journalism, theater, and the literature of the period. The Jewish population is between 230,000 and 300,000
- 1897 The Yiddish *Jewish Daily Forward* is founded in New York
- 1900 The Jewish population is between 938,000 and 1,058,000
- 1915 The lynching of Leo Frank, a Jewish factory manager falsely accused of murdering a girl; the incident is a result of simmering anti-Semitism obscured to an extent by the general feeling of acceptance towards the Jews
- 1920 The Jewish population is between 3,300,000 and 3,600,000
- 1927 The first film with sound *The Jazz Singer* is about the problems of Jewish acculturation
- 1930 The Jewish population is between 4,228,000 and 4,400,000

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