

Writing New Kinds of Jews
Dean Seminar, Spring 2009

Instructor: Yaron Peleg

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Seminar Description:

How does an ancient culture renew itself? How does it take a tradition that is centuries old and reinvent it, update it, and make it dynamic and relevant again? These are some of the questions which this course will ask about Jewish culture in the twentieth century. The course examines one of the most significant developments in modern Jewish history: the decline of Jewish culture in Eastern Europe and the subsequent emergence of two alternative Jewish cultural centers in the Land of Israel and in North America. By reading short stories and novels written in Eastern Europe, Israel and North America, originally published in Yiddish, Hebrew and English, the course will look at the various ways Jews reconstruct their culture. The course will focus on literature that deals primarily with the lives of young adults not only as a way to connect different works, different historical periods and different geographic locations. Adolescence as a formative period in life will be used as a metaphor to examine the developing nature of the three Jewish communities.

Seminar Objectives and Methods

(1) To develop a cultural historical awareness and perspective, to learn about the rise of nationalism and ethnic particularism in the 19th century and its attendant cultural, linguistic, and social aspects, to understand the Jewish responses to all of the above and to modernity in general.

(2) To develop basic textual-analytical skills by learning how to read texts closely and express that knowledge in writing in structured, intelligible, and persuasive ways.

Work Assessment and Seminar Requirements

Students' performance will be based on three integrated measurements: a directed reading journal, reading response and analysis papers, and a research/analysis essay. These three integrated assignments are designed to gradually acquaint students with higher academic reading and writing standards and practices and train them to master them by directed and measured increments. This progressive method is designed to teach students how to produce a high quality academic paper that is well structured, well argued and well written.

(1) Class attendance and participation are essential to the success of the course for you and for the other members of the class. Once a week – each Thursday before class¹ –

¹ Except on these dates: Sep. 17, Oct. 15, Nov. 5, Dec. 3.

students will publish a reading journal entry (1-2 paragraphs) on Blackboard's Discussion Board with their response to the reading assignment for that week – fiction as well as non fiction. In order to promote a vigorous academic discourse, students are encouraged to respond to other classmates' journal entries – such responses may in fact be considered as journal entries in and of themselves. Active participation in the BB discussion will raise students' chances to receive full credit for this part of their grade (20%).

(2) Students will submit 3 short essays (3-5pp) throughout the semester that combine personal response to the readings as well as a more academic analysis of them. After students submit these papers and based on the comments they received, they may rewrite these papers up to two times.

Papers are due on or before these dates: Sep. 17, Oct. 15, Nov. 5.

(3) Students' summary experience for this course will be preparing and submitting a 7 page Final Essay analyzing one or more of the works based on the readings and class discussions.

(4) You are expected to meet the stated deadlines for *all written work*. If, for some compelling reason, you cannot do so, you must contact the instructor by email or telephone **before** the deadline. If you do not register an acceptable excuse in advance, you may **not** make up the work later and you will receive a grade of “50” for it.

Honor Code

In this course, claiming the knowledge or intellectual work of another as your own is cheating and will not be tolerated. As a member of the GWU intellectual community, you are responsible for understanding and applying the Code of Academic Integrity; see <http://www.gwu.edu/~ntegrity/code.html> particularly Article 2, which provides definitions of cheating and plagiarism.

Your Course grade will be calculated as follows:

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Participation: | 15% |
| Reading journal | 20% (you may miss submitting two responses without penalty) |
| 3 Analyses (3-5 pp) | 45% |
| Final Essay (7 pp) | 20% |

Grading Scale

| | | | | |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|------------|
| A 95-100 | B+ 87-89 | C+ 77-79 | D+ 67-69 | F below 60 |
| A- 90-94 | B 83-86 | C 73-76 | D 63-66 | |
| | B- 80-82 | C- 70-72 | D- 60-62 | |

Required Readings:

Motl, Son of Peyse the Cantor, Sholom Aleichem

With His Own Hands, Moshe Shamir

Call it Sleep, Henry Roth

Portnoy's Complaint, Phillip Roth

The Book of Internal Grammar, David Grossman

Articles: on Blackboard

Blackboard: Support material for this course is available on the web-based Blackboard site; login at <http://blackboard.gwu.edu> and follow the prompts. (You must have a gwu email account to use this site)

SYLLABUS

Sep **1** Introduction

Article (in class): Prefaces to the Experience of Literature: Introduction, Lionel Trilling

3 MOTL, SON OF PEYSE THE CANTOR, Sholom Aleichem
(including intro)

Article: "Haskala," Encyclopedia Judaica

Article: "The Meaning of a Literary Idea," Lionel Trilling

[Reading Journal entry](#)

8 MOTL, SON OF PEYSE THE CANTOR, Sholom Aleichem

Article: "The Commitment to Yiddish," Dan Miron

10 MOTL, SON OF PEYSE THE CANTOR, Sholom Aleichem

Article: "The Mimic Writer and His 'Little Jew'," Dan Miron

[Reading Journal entry](#)

15 MOTL, SON OF PEYSE THE CANTOR, Sholom Aleichem

Article: "Bouncing Back," Dan Miron

17 MOTL, SON OF PEYSE THE CANTOR, Sholom Aleichem

1st analysis paper due

22 WITH HIS OWN HANDS, Moshe Shamir

Article: "Hebrew and Modernity," Robert Alter

24 WITH HIS OWN HANDS, Moshe Shamir

Article: "Shall All Hopes Be Fulfilled," Gershon Shaked
[Reading Journal entry](#)

29 WITH HIS OWN HANDS, Moshe Shamir

Oct **1 WITH HIS OWN HANDS**, Moshe Shamir
[Reading Journal entry](#)

6 CALL IT SLEEP, Henry Roth

Article: "Out of the Ghetto: Jewish Novelist in Liberal America," Venkatesvarlu

8 CALL IT SLEEP, Henry Roth

Article: "The Many Myths of Henry Roth," Leslie Fiedler

[Reading Journal entry](#)

13 CALL IT SLEEP, Henry Roth

Article: "The Classic of Disinheritance," Ruth Wisse

15 CALL IT SLEEP, Henry Roth

2nd analysis paper due

20 CALL IT SLEEP, Henry Roth

22 CALL IT SLEEP, Henry Roth

Article: "Modernism of the Lower East Side," Karen Lawrence

[Reading Journal entry](#)

27 CALL IT SLEEP, Henry Roth

29 PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT, Philip Roth

Article: "Jewish American Fiction: Issues and Traditions," Stephen Wade

[Reading Journal entry](#)

Nov **3 PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT**, Philip Roth

Article: "The Ironic and the Irate," Alan Cooper

5 PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT, Philip Roth

Article: "The member of the Tribe," Dera Shostak, pp. 67-85

3rd analysis paper due

10 PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT, Philip Roth

Article: "The member of the Tribe," Dera Shostak, pp. 85-107

12 THE BOOK OF INTERNAL GRAMMAR, David Grossman

[Reading Journal entry](#)

17 THE BOOK OF INTERNAL GRAMMAR, David Grossman

19 THE BOOK OF INTERNAL GRAMMAR, David Grossman

Article: TBA

[Reading Journal entry](#)

24 THE BOOK OF INTERNAL GRAMMAR, David Grossman

26 Thanksgiving. No Class

Dec **1 THE BOOK OF INTERNAL GRAMMAR**, David Grossman

3 Conclusion

Final Essay due

Some Expectations for Classroom Conduct

Students may expect me as your instructor to

- be prepared for class and ready to begin on time
- end class on time
- observe announced course syllabus and schedule, abiding by grading scale, course policies, assignment dates etc.
- answer email questions within a day—two or three days over weekend and holidays
- listen carefully to questions, answer them to the best of my ability, and report research results on questions I cannot answer immediately.
- return written work within one week

The instructor and your fellow students may expect you as a student to

- arrive for class on time; if unavoidably late, quietly select a seat near the door
- remain in class until it concludes; if leaving early is necessary, explain in advance to the instructor and sit near the door
- turn off cell phones, pagers etc. during class
- arrive in class prepared for discussion and ready to participate
- encourage yourself to ask questions and offer observations in class and make an effort to focus them for the benefit of all
- be respectful to your fellow students, the instructor and the academic process in your responses and comments
- conduct yourself with integrity and honesty, familiarizing yourself with the University Code of Academic Integrity and following its provisions

Some Words about Paper Assessment

In grading your papers, I will use the "Skeletal Scale for Evaluating Papers" developed by the Indiana University Campus Writing Program <http://www.iub.edu/~cwp/assgn/skelscale.shtml>. A copy of the scale is provided below.

Modified Skeletal Scale for Evaluating Papers

| | |
|----------|--|
| A | A paper that receives an A is excellent in thought, organization, and style. The A paper uses a sound organizational strategy, with clearly developed paragraphs proceeding from a unified thesis. The ideas in the paper are engaging and show illuminating insights into the work being studied. Assertions are supported by textual evidence (not necessarily quotations) and expand on the thoughts and ideas presented in the scholarship. There are very few distracting errors in style, diction, or mechanics. |
| B | A B paper is still quite good, but it can be weaker than an A paper in some areas. It may have good ideas that are marred by some problems of organization and style. Alternatively, it may be well-organized and well-written but offer fewer or less valuable insights than an A paper. |
| C | This is the grade given to a paper that is clearly acceptable, but not exceptional. A C paper will show a competent understanding of the assigned topic, but its insights usually do not go beyond the obvious points that most papers make. A C may also be assigned to an inconsistent paper that shows some excellent insights but fails to tie ideas into a unified whole. |
| D | A D paper can have some virtues--either occasionally good ideas marred by unclear writing or clear writing conveying superficial ideas that show a lack of engagement with the work being studied. |
| F | A paper will receive an F either because it is poorly written throughout or because its ideas show no insight into the work being studied, or the paper is completely unacceptable--obviously written in haste without thought or effort. |

NOTE: This scale does not reflect pluses or minuses, such as the differences between a B-, B, and B+. Instead, each grade scale presents a continuum of qualities and characteristics of good writing. How well your writing accomplishes all the identified qualities will determine its position on the continuum for each grade.