Bread Givers

ANZIA YEZIERSKA

1925

Anzia Yezierska came to America with her Polish immigrant family in the 1890s. She never forgot the hunger and hardship of their early days in the Jewish ghetto on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Her struggle to escape from the slums to an independent American life is fictionalized as Sara Smolinsky’s journey in Bread Givers (1925), originally subtitled, “A Struggle Between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New.” It is the most closely autobiographical of Yezierska’s early works.

Yezierska was at the height of her fame in the 1920s when she wrote Bread Givers. She had already been exploring similar themes of surviving in a foreign culture in her short stories and novels. Her first collection of short stories, Hungry Hearts (1920), had been made into a successful film, and she had been accepted by Hollywood as “the Sweatshop Cinderella,” a rags-to-riches stereotype she came to resent as oversimplified. Returning to her roots in New York, she continued to pour out fiction about the hope, guilt, anger, and determination of the immigrant in America. All but forgotten after the Great Depression, she enjoyed a mild revival with her autobiographical novel about being a writer, Red Ribbon on a White Horse (1950). Not until interest in ethnic literature rose in the 1960s, however, was she rediscovered. Bread Givers, which had been out of print, was republished by Persea Books in 1975, and it has remained the author’s most popular work. Yezierska’s fame
seems assured the second time around. Her primary topic, the clash of conflicting values in a multicultural world, is a timely theme in contemporary society.

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Anzia Yezierska was born in Plotsk (or Plinsk), a small town in Russian Poland, around 1883 to a family with ten children. Her father was a Talmudic scholar. The family immigrated to New York around 1893, where the eldest son had moved first, changing his name to Max Mayer. The rest of the family changed their last name to his, with Anzia becoming Harriet (Hattie) Mayer, only later changing her name back. They lived in the Jewish ghetto on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Yezierska left her family to live on her own in 1900, going to night school to learn English and working in sweatshops during the day. She lived at the Clara de Hirsch Home for Working Girls, a settlement house that helped immigrant girls train as servants. She was given a scholarship to study domestic science at Columbia University’s Teachers College and became a teacher of cooking in the New York public schools from 1905 to 1913.

To compensate for the intellectual education she had not gotten, she read and attended lectures, living in Rand School, a Socialist gathering place. There she met feminist activists and writers. In 1911 she married Jacob Gordon, an attorney, but quickly got an annulment and then married Arnold Levitas, the father of her only child, Louise, born in 1912. Finding marriage too confining, she tried to be a working single mother but finally let Levitas have custody of Louise so that she could devote herself to writing. Her first story, “The Free Vacation House,” was published in 1915 in *Forum*.

In 1917 Yezierska met the philosopher John Dewey, who enrolled her in his Columbia class on social philosophy. He inspired her to write and helped her publish. Dewey also wrote love poems to her but broke off the relationship. Yezierska included older Dewey figures throughout her work, representing the wise American who accepts the immigrant woman for her gifts. In 1918 Dewey got her a job as a translator for a research project studying the Polish community of Philadelphia. Her story “The Fat of the Land” won the O. Henry Award as best short story of 1919. A collection of stories was published as *Hungry Hearts* in 1920. Hollywood made a film of it, and Samuel Goldwyn signed Yezierska to write scripts. Uncomfortable with Hollywood, however, she returned to New York.

This was Yezierska’s period of fame as “the Sweatshop Cinderella” who worked her way out of the slums. She wrote realistic scenes of ghetto life in an anglicized Yiddish idiom. *Salome of the Tenements*, a novel that was also made into a film, and *Children of Loneliness*, a collection of short stories, followed in 1923. *Bread Givers* (1925), with the original subtitle “A Struggle Between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New,” is her most famous work. *Arrogant Beggar* (1927) was her last novel of this prolific time. From 1929 to 1930 she was a writer in residence at the University of Wisconsin. During the Depression years, when there was less interest in her work, she became poor again, working for the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration. *All I Could Never Be* (1932) continued themes of her relationship with John Dewey.

Her work was criticized as being repetitive and emotional, but after an eighteen-year period of oblivion, Yezierska made a brief comeback with her fictionalized autobiography *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950), with an introduction by W. H. Auden. In the 1950s she reviewed books for the *New York Times*, and in the 1960s she was rediscovered by university students. Seen as a pioneer of Jewish literature, she was given grants by the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1962 and 1965. In her last years of declining health, she was tended by her daughter; she died in 1970 in a nursing home in California. *Bread Givers* was republished in 1975. *The Open Cage: An Anzia Yezierska Collection* (1979) includes her best and previously unpublished stories. *How I Found America: Collected Stories of Anzia Yezierska* (2003) includes all of the author’s short fiction. With the public catching up to her timely feminist and immigrant themes, Yezierska’s fame has been re-established.

**PLOT SUMMARY**

**Book I: Hester Street**

**CHAPTER I: HESTER STREET**

In the 1890s in the Jewish ghetto on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, on Hester Street, the immigrant Smolinsky family gathers for dinner.
While ten-year-old Sara, the youngest daughter of Rabbi Smolinsky, is peeling potatoes for dinner, the other sisters tell of how they could not find work. The eldest sister, Bessie, the main breadwinner of the family, is discouraged because the family needs her wages or they will be thrown out for not paying the rent. Mashah, the pretty and vain sister, comes in having bought roses for her hat instead of having found work. Fania, another sister, says there are lines of girls for each job. The mother comes in saying the shopkeepers will give her no more credit.

Sara resents poverty and hates hunting through ash cans for wood and coal. The house is dirty and packed with too many people and things. The front room is reserved for the father and his holy books, which he studies all day while the other members of the family support him, as is the old tradition for a scholar in the family. The father reminds the women that according to Jewish law, they must serve him so that they will find a place in heaven, for a woman cannot get there by herself. The women are starving but give all the best food to the father. Sara’s mother tells her husband that he must move out of the front room into the kitchen so that they can rent the room. When the angry rent collector does not get the rent, she throws the father’s holy book to the floor, telling him to get a job. He slaps her, and a policeman takes him to jail. Muhmenkeh, the herring seller, gives little Sara some herring to start her own business, and she begins to make money, hollering along with the pushcart sellers on the street.

CHAPTER 2: THE SPEAKING MOUTH OF THE BLOCK

The neighbors, revering the rabbi as a holy man, pool their money to bail Smolinsky out and pay a lawyer. The lawyer tells the court that the rabbi is the community’s religious man and displays the landlady’s footprint on his Bible. The judge lets him go, and he is the hero of the neighborhood as the speaking mouth of the block who stood up to a rent collector.

With Reb Smolinsky’s fame, it proves easy to rent the front room, and the family gets credit to buy things to fix up the house. The three older girls get work, Sara sells herrings, and there is some ease for the family. The mother stops yelling and cursing and tells her girls stories of the Old World, when they had plenty and she was as beautiful as Mashah. Her father was wealthy and wanted a scholar for a son-in-law, and that was how she married the high-minded Reb. When they became poor and the pogroms threatened them, they sold everything to get to America, where Reb thought everything would be free.

CHAPTER 3: THE BURDEN BEARER

The mother worries about marrying off Bessie, who is getting old. She is the one who bears the burden of the house, bringing in the most wages and giving them all to her father. The boarders, whom the family hoped would want to marry the girls, have eyes only for Mashah, who spends all her money on herself. Fania, the third daughter, is the first to get a young man, but he is poor and goes to night school. He writes poetry to Fania.

One night Bessie comes home with a new tablecloth and some odds and ends to decorate the house. She makes everyone help scrub the house and tidy it up. The next evening, Bessie waits until everyone is gone and then puts on Mashah’s pink dress. She is fat, and Sara has to help her get into it, but the seam rips out. She entertains a young man from work, Berel Bernstein, who wants to marry Bessie because she is a strong worker, and he wants to open his own clothing shop.
Berel offers to marry Bessie without a dowry, but Reb says that he cannot afford to let her go because of all the money she brings in. He insists that Berel pay him for marrying his daughter by setting him up in business. Berel refuses, and Bessie gives him up. Six weeks later, Berel is engaged to another woman, and Sara, enraged, curses him at his engagement party.

CHAPTER 4: THE "EMPTY-HEAD"

Mashah, whom Reb calls the "Empty-head," falls in love with Jacob Novak, a refined piano player and the son of a wealthy department store owner. He lives on the corner, and the music he plays attracts Mashah. Mashah woos him by cooking and creating beauty around him when he comes over to the house.

When Jacob's father meets the ghetto girl his son is in love with, he puts pressure on his son to dump her. She hears of his concert, to which she is not invited. In despair, Mashah sends Jacob a letter of reproach. The lovers almost make up, but Reb finds them and pushes Jacob out of his house. Jacob keeps trying to see Mashah, but she is too weak to go against her father's will. Reb continues to browbeat Mashah, and Sara begins to hate him.

CHAPTER 5: MORRIS LIPKIN WRITES POETRY

Reb intercepts a love letter to Fania from Morris Lipkin, who says he has no money to give her, only his poems called "Poems of Poverty." Fania and Reb argue, and she insists that she will marry someone she loves. Sara joins in the fight, debating with her father, and he calls her "Blood-and-iron" for daring to question him.

When Mrs. Smolinsky accuses Reb of driving suitors away, he says he will find suitors for his daughters by going to Zaretsky, the matchmaker. Reb finds them and pushes Jacob out of his house. Jacob keeps trying to see Mashah, but she is too weak to go against her father's will. Reb continues to browbeat Mashah, and Sara begins to hate him.

A month after the wedding Mashah comes home with the news that she is starving and needs food. She admits Moe is not a diamond salesman; he borrowed the diamonds from the jewelry store where he worked and was fired for it. Now he is a shoe clerk. The father berates the daughter for her misfortune. Sara finds Morris Lipkin's love letters to Fania under the mattress, reads them, and falls in love with him. She follows Morris around, finally confessing her love. He calls her a silly kid, and she tears up his letters and her hope of finding love.

CHAPTER 6: THE BURDEN BEARER CHANGES HER BURDEN

Though Sara is thin, she is known as a good worker because of her passion. She works in a paper-box factory and gets paid more than larger women. She gives it all to her father, who will not let her have any for herself. He gives part of the money to charity but will not buy his daughter a coat. Reb becomes a matchmaker, thinking he is good at it. The wife of Zalmon, the fishmonger, dies, and Zalmon wants a replacement to care for his six children. Reb decides that this is Bessie's chance, though Zalmon is fifty-six.

Mrs. Smolinsky defends Bessie, but Reb has his own plan to get money from Zalmon to start his own business. They shake hands on the matter and then tell Bessie. She hates Zalmon and the smell of fish and has a fit of crying. Zalmon comes courting, having bathed and shaved and bringing Bessie presents of his former wife's fur coat and gold watch.

Bessie is wretched until Zalmon brings his youngest, five-year-old son, who has hurt his knee. Bessie takes care of him, and the boy, Benny, says he is waiting for his mother to come home, but she does not. Bessie cries and hugs him. Zalmon begins to use the child to bargain for himself, but Bessie feels trapped. When Bennie falls sick, one of the children finds Bessie, who cares for him, and he calls her "mother." She gives in to Zalmon.

CHAPTER 7: FATHER BECOMES A BUSINESS MAN IN AMERICA

Mrs. Smolinsky tells her husband to put the four hundred dollars from Zalmon in the bank, but he says the cash must be ready for a bargain. He sees an ad for a grocery in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and rushes off to look at it. Reb sends word for his wife and Sara to come to Elizabeth to see the store. When they arrive, there are
crowds buying food, and the store looks successful. Reb has already bought it. They begin to dream about being rich but then discover they were swindled. The store is not really stocked, and the people came in because the man had reduced the prices below cost. Reb is shocked, because he had believed what the man told him. His wife is frantic, but Reb remains calm, trusting in God.

CHAPTER 8: THE HARD HEART
The family prays for a miracle. They sleep in the store and buy supplies on credit, but they can never keep enough stock to pull in customers. Sara is bored and longs for the fast life of the city, where she earned money. Her mother is happy for the green grass and blue sky at least. When Sara sees the incompetence of her parents, how her father drives away customers with preaching and insults, she loses her temper. She grabs her things and explains that she is leaving and not coming home again.

CHAPTER 9: BREAD GIVERS
Sara gets off the train in New York and goes to stay with Bessie. She is shocked to see Bessie standing next to her husband peddling fish to crowds of desperate ghetto women. In Zalmon’s house, five boys sleep on a mattress on the floor, and the fat daughter takes up a sofa. Bessie congratulates Sara for getting free and says that she would run, too, except for Benny. Bessie and Sara sleep together on the floor; in the morning, Zalmon sends Sara away, claiming she is a bad example to his daughter.

Next Sara tries her sister Mashah’s home but runs into Moe Mirsky in the street. Wearing a new suit, he looks like a gentleman. In her doorway, Mashah is arguing with the milkman over the unpaid bill. Sara cannot believe that Moe has spent their money on himself instead of food for the children. Sara sees the attempts Mashah has made to create beauty in her home, but she herself looks old and shabby and hopeless. When the gas goes out, Sara puts a quarter in the gas meter and helps the children to bed. They wait at dinner for the bread giver (wage earner), Moe, but he comes in after they have finished, saying he ate in a restaurant. He abuses his wife for being shabby and overworked. Sara says that she would kill him if he were her husband and walks out.

Book II: Between Two Worlds
CHAPTER 10: I SHUT THE DOOR
Sara remembers a story in the newspaper about a girl who went to night school and then college and became a teacher. She looks for a room to rent, but many landlords do not want working girls. She finds a cheap, dirty room and exults because closing the door and being alone is the first step in becoming a person.

She finds a job ironing in a laundry. In night school she studies English and arithmetic in a class of fifty students. She begins a demanding schedule of ten hours of work, two hours of class, and two hours of homework every day. The neighborhood is loud with noise as she tries to study, but she blocks it out with discipline.

CHAPTER 11: A PIECE OF MEAT
Sara does not have enough money for food and is always hungry. Thinking of food when she is ironing, she burns a shirt, and the boss takes three dollars out of her salary. In the cafeteria, she buys some stew, asking for a lot of meat, and is angry when the worker gives her mostly potatoes. The man behind her is given stew with big chunks of meat. Furious, she says she wants a dish like the man’s. She is told they always give the men more.

She goes home, eats bread, and tries to study, but it is so cold that she cannot. Suddenly, there is a knock on the door, and it is her mother, who has walked all the way from Elizabeth with a feather bed. She has brought a jar of pickled herring, and Sara feels pain at her mother’s love because she cannot give her mother the one thing she wants: a visit from her daughter. Sara says that she will visit after she gets her degree. She cannot waste her youth; she must become a person. Her mother holds her for a moment, disappointed, and leaves.

CHAPTER 12: MY SISTERS AND I
Sara tires of being alone. Suddenly, her sisters Fania and Bessie burst through the door. Fania has come from California in silks and diamonds, while Bessie is in her rags. Fania tells Sara to come to California with her, but Sara says she has to finish college. She notices that Fania has shadows under her eyes. Fania confesses her loneliness, as her husband is gone all the time, gambling, and she has no friends. She has to lie to him to get money. She can only think of Morris Lipkin.
Bessie talks about her cruel stepchildren, whom she cannot please. Sara thinks that Bessie looks older than their mother. Sara decides that she does not want to marry because she has a goal to her life. She refuses to stop studying and go home with them. Fania compares her to their father with his Torah.

CHAPTER 13: OUTCAST

In the laundry Sara feels outcast from the other girls because they gossip about their boyfriends and tell about their love lives. The girls make fun of her purity and lack of a boyfriend. In school she is different, too. She is hungry for knowledge and asks endless questions, annoying both the teacher and students. In the mirror she sees that her face is sad and lifeless, even at twenty-three. Deciding to dress like the other girls, she spruces up her wardrobe and buys makeup. The laundry girls see her attempts and make fun of her. She longs to get to college with loftier thinkers.

CHAPTER 14: A MAN WANTED ME

Sara fails geometry and worries that she is not smart enough. A letter from Fania warns her that Max Goldstein, a rich young businessman from California, is coming to see her. She is trying to get Sara married to him. It is spring, and Sara is lonely, so when Max knocks on her door, she is ready for company. She likes him and goes out with him. He seems to like her as she is, innocent and plain. He flatters her, and she likes being touched. He tells her his success story, how he worked his way up to buying real estate in Los Angeles. He takes her to a dance, and she dances to the rhythms of jazz for the first time. She feels alive and gives in to the experience. Although she hates how Max talks of money all the time, she likes the affection. She is finally disillusioned when he does not respond to her desire to study. He cannot think of anything beyond money; he wants to buy a wife, and though she has been awakened by his attention, she knows they have nothing in common. She goes back to her geometry.

CHAPTER 15: ON AND ON—ALONE

Sara’s father arrives and yells at her for refusing Max Goldstein. She is hurt by his abuse and wishes he could see that she needs his support. Instead, Sara is goaded into saying she hates her father, and he curses and disowns her. She knows it is merely a conflict between the Old World and the New World but determines to go on without family, love, or approval.

CHAPTER 16: COLLEGE

The long-awaited day arrives when Sara leaves for college. She takes the train to a quiet college town, marveling at the green trees, pretty houses, and glorious buildings. There is beauty without poverty; the young people are tastefully dressed, not gaudy. They seem to be at ease laughing and playing. She imagines that these are the real Americans she has been waiting to meet. In class she tries to make conversation, but the students are cold to her.

Sara gets a job at a laundry and settles in. She gets along in her classes but is always the outsider. Although she flunks geometry, she comes to life in Mr. Edman’s psychology class because she understands her own behavior for the first time and learns how to control her raging emotions. She wants to be inspired and tries to get him to teach her outside class, but he is too busy and overworked. When summer comes, the other students go home, while she gets a job in a canning factory.

Sara begins to idolize Mr. Edman. In the fall, he is friendly to her. She finds out where he lives and gets a room in the same house. She makes overtures to him, and he gets annoyed, telling her he does not like her manner. She is crushed. Sara finds that she is best understood by older men like the dean, and he takes her under his wing. He appreciates her hard journey and encourages her to be a pioneer.

In her senior year, Sara wonders what will become of her after college. She enters an essay contest on the topic of what college has done for her. At graduation, her name is called out. She has won.

Book III: The New World

CHAPTER 17: MY HONEYMOON WITH MYSELF

Sara returns to New York with new clothes, a new career, and a new image of herself. She travels in first class on the train, has proper table manners, walks on Fifth Avenue, and has a checking account with her thousand-dollar essay prize money. She buys a dark blue suit for teaching and all new accessories, priding herself on her quiet, dignified manner. She rents a room with windows and sunlight. Sara has power and feels she can go as high as she wants in life.
CHAPTER 18: DEATH IN HESTER STREET

Sara has been away from her family for six years and decides to visit them. Her parents are back on Hester Street, and as she goes in the door she hears her mother and father arguing. Her mother is ill and begs her husband to stay with her. He claims he cannot miss prayers at the synagogue and says he will call the widow Feinstein upstairs to help her. The mother gets angry and says that the widow is only waiting for her death to get Reb for herself.

Her mother is so ill that Sara hardly recognizes her, and Sara feels guilty. Mrs. Smolinsky is overjoyed to see Sara. She is proud that her daughter looks and acts like a lady, a real teacher. Sara shows her mother money from her purse and says she will help them and visit every day. Her mother says that she is dying and her one last wish is that Sara be good to her father because he is helpless. She shows Sara her foot, full of spreading gangrene.

All the sisters are home as the mother dies. The doctor says that she needs to have her foot amputated to live, but the mother is afraid of an operation. She continues to nag her husband about eating his meals upstairs with the widow Feinstein. Reb soothes his wife with his touch. The mother introduces her daughters to the doctor, with special pride in the daughter who became a teacher, smart like her father.

Suddenly Mrs. Smolinsky’s eyes are full of light, which she transfers directly to Sara just as she dies, a last blessing. Sara sees her father suffering like a child, wondering who will take care of him. The neighbors all come to mourn, and the undertaker takes a knife and makes a tear in the clothes of all the family members, as is the mourning custom, but Sara will not let him cut her new suit, and people are shocked.

CHAPTER 19: LODGE MONEY

Sara goes to see her father every day, but he does not seem to be mourning. He wears his best clothes and eats with Mrs. Feinstein. He praises her and says that God has sent him some luck. Sara wants to tell him to beware and is disgusted with her father for forgetting her mother’s true devotion. Reb tells Sara that legally he can remarry after a month, and that is what he will do. She knows now that her mother had seen what was coming. Sara warns her father that the widow wants his lodge money. He says it is too late; he has already married her.

Sara goes to inform her sisters, and in shock, they denounce him for the insult to their mother. They do not visit him. One day Sara receives a note from the new Mrs. Smolinsky saying that there is trouble. She rushes to Hester Street thinking her father is ill. The woman has taken her mother’s death money (insurance) and redecorated and bought new clothes, and now she wants the children to pay for their keep. She wants to have diamonds for herself. She threatens to get Sara fired by the board of education if she does not help. She threatens to take Reb to court for non-support. Reb pleads with Sara to help him get rid of the cursed woman. The daughters refuse to help, but Sara worries.

CHAPTER 20: HUGO SEELIG

Sara is teaching in the same neighborhood where she sold herring as a child. She is lonely and thinks of all her father’s sayings about a woman being nothing without a man. The other teachers are unattractive old maids. Only the principal, Hugo Seelig, has kept a spark of life in him. He is kind to everyone. He comes into her class and helps her correct the children’s pronunciation.

When the new Mrs. Smolinsky sends Hugo Seelig a letter explaining that Sara is not helping her parents and half her wages should be sent to them, Sara is terrified that she will be fired. Instead, Hugo comes to her with a compliment from a parent who is pleased with how her child is learning. The two become friends and find they have much in common. They come from villages a few miles apart in Poland and have had similar experiences growing up in America. Sara feels a release from the burden of her past and confesses that she has had to make her heart hard to survive. Hugo says that she is not hard but strong.

CHAPTER 21: MAN BORN OF WOMAN

Sara is happy but feels guilty over her success whenever she walks down Hester Street. She has not seen her father for months. One day she bumps into an old man in the street selling chewing gum. The packages fall to the ground, and she helps pick them up. As she looks up at him, she is shocked to recognize her father. He pitifully bewails that his children have abandoned him. His new wife has forced him to the street to sell gum. Sara takes him to his house. She cares
for him and sees how he has aged since her mother died. She calls a doctor, and he is put to bed.

Reb’s wife waits on him during the day, and Sara comes after school. Her father refuses to take medicine from his wife because he is afraid of her. She is waiting for him to die. When Sara hears his wife trying to discover where his lodge papers are kept, she knows that she cannot leave him with this woman. She gets a leave of absence from school to nurse him. The daughters get together and provide an allowance so that his wife will be happy. The wife softens, as she finally gets diamond earrings.

Sara takes Hugo to meet her father. Hugo impresses Reb, especially when he asks him to teach him Hebrew. Reb lights up with pride.

Sara has wanted a home of her own with Hugo, but she cannot cast off her father. She asks Reb to live with her, and he agrees only on the condition that she will keep the old sacred laws. Hugo agrees that Reb should live with them when they marry. Sara worries that Reb will tyrannize their home, but she cannot rid herself of her father’s influence over her or of the weight of her inherited Old World tradition.

### Characters

**Benny**

Benny is the fish peddler Zalmon’s five-year-old son. Bessie marries Zalmon to be a mother to Benny. Benny is also the reason she stays in the marriage rather than running away.

**Berel Bernstein**

Bessie Smolinsky’s chosen suitor is Berel, who works with her in the clothing factory and lives in Mumenkeh’s house. He is a cutter, making good wages, and he wants Bessie because she could be his partner in the business he wants to set up for himself. When Reb tells him he has to pay to marry Bessie by setting him up in business to make up for her lost wages, Berel tells him off. He explains that he is desirable to many women with dowries, and he will not support the whole Smolinsky family. He tells Reb to get a job because in America the only thing that counts is working for money. Berel chooses to marry the forewoman in the factory, and when Bessie is desolate, Sara curses him at his engagement party.

**The Dean**

The dean of Sara’s college is an older man who appreciates her Hester Street background and encourages her journey out of the ghetto as a pioneer effort. Having someone to believe in her makes a difference. She wins the senior essay contest and its prize of a thousand dollars.

**Mr. Edman**

Mr. Edman is a psychology professor at Sara’s college. He is a good teacher who motivates Sara, but when she wants extra attention outside of class, he says he is too busy. She discovers that he is overworked but manages to walk with him sometimes to converse. When she discovers where he lives, she gets a room in the same house and tries to become friends with him. He epitomizes the higher life of learning to her. He only sees her as a nuisance, however, and asks her to leave him alone.

**Widow Feinstein**

The widow upstairs from the Smolinskys on Hester Street schemes to marry Reb so as to get his lodge money after his wife dies. She assumes that the daughters will support them. She threatens Sara’s job and threatens to take Reb to court to get support. He had assumed that all women were worshipful like his wife had been, ready to wait on him so that he could study. She bullies Reb and forces him out on the street to sell chewing gum. When she sends a letter to Sara’s principal asking him to divert her wages on her father’s behalf, however, her plan backfires and brings Sara together with her future husband, Hugo. They remove the ailing father from the clutches of the greedy and heartless woman who only married Reb Smolinsky to get diamond earrings.

**Shprintzeh Gittel**

A neighbor to the Smolinksys in Hester Street, she puts down her baby and proudly acts out Rabbi Smolinsky’s attack on the rent collector, on the front stoop.

**Max Goldstein**

Max is a self-made man, rich and successful, sent by Fania from California to woo her sister Sara. He falls in love with Sara and takes her out, and they have fun. She likes his touch and the intimacy, since she is starved for affection. He asks her to marry him. She is tempted for a moment, to have a home and to get out of poverty, but he
can only talk about money and himself, and she wants a more cultured life. She wants independence, and he makes fun of her learning. When Sara turns him down, her father, who would have thus been provided for, reminds her of the shame of being an unmarried woman and disowns her.

**Hannah Hayyeh**
Hannah is the washwoman on Hester Street who complains about slum landlords to the neighbors.

**Morris Lipkin**
Morris is Fania Smolinsky’s choice for a husband, a poor boarder at Zalmon’s place. He sweeps the corner drugstore, goes to night school, and spends time at the library. He writes Fania love poems that she reads to the girls on the stoop. He says that he cannot give her gifts but will give her his collection “Poems of Poverty.” When he tries to ask for Fania’s hand, Reb Smolinsky ignores him and shames him until he leaves. Reb finds another suitor for Fania, Moe Mirsky, a supposed diamond salesman. Later, Sara reads all of Morris’s love letters to Fania and gets a crush on him. When she follows Morris around and confesses her love, he calls her a kid, and she has her first broken heart.

**Moe Mirsky**
Moe Mirsky is the vain and selfish salesman who pretends to be a diamond seller and woos Mashah Smolinsky with diamonds borrowed from the jewelry store where he works. After Moe is fired, he gets a job as a shoe salesman. Although Mashah and the children are hungry, he spends money on new clothes and restaurants and abuses his wife for looking shabby. She loses her beauty and freedom and is unhappy at not having married the man of her choice, Jacob Novak.

**Muhmenkeh**
Muhmenkeh is the old herring seller of Hester Street. She is kind and helps the Smolinsky family by loaning them a feather bed so that they can rent out their front room. She shows them how to furnish the room with boxes and barrels, and she helps ten-year-old Sara start selling herring by giving her a few from the bottom of her barrel.

**Jacob Novak**
Jacob is the young pianist living on the corner who is supported by his father to study music.

Mashah Smolinsky falls in love with him when she hears him play as he prepares for his first concert. His father owns a big department store on Grand Street and persuades his son to ignore Mashah. She is not invited to the big concert. When Mashah is heartbroken, Jacob tries to woo her again, but Reb Smolinsky puts his foot down and throws him out of the house. Mashah is too scared to go against her father, and so she never sees him again.

**Abe Schmukler**
Abe, a rich clothing manufacturer from Los Angeles, marries Fania Smolinsky. Fania is rich but lonely, and her husband gambles. She has to lie to him because he is tight with money.

**Hugo Seelig**
Hugo is the handsome principal of the school where Sara Smolinsky teaches, young and full of energy, unlike the old-maid teachers. He is kind and attentive to all the teachers and students. He helps Sara’s class with pronunciation, and when Reb’s second wife sends a letter of complaint to him about Sara not supporting her father, he does not pay attention but instead becomes friends with her. They date and find that they are from villages in Poland only a few miles apart. His background of making his way in America as a Jewish immigrant parallels Sara’s, but it has not hardened him. He has lost the desperate greed of the ghetto but has remained a dreamer with refined sensibilities. He makes friends with Sara’s father by asking for Hebrew lessons, and he agrees to take the old man into the house when he marries Sara. He is portrayed as the ideal Jewish American.

**Bessie Smolinsky**
The eldest daughter, Bessie is called the burden bearer by her father because she is the main support of the family. She does not have time to think of herself or of marrying because Reb wants her wages to support him. She is jealous of her younger sisters, who do not have to work so hard and are encouraged to marry. She is older and unattractive and used to being a martyr like her mother. Her father finally marries her off to the older widower Zalmon, and she only agrees because the little boy Benny needs her as a mother.
Fania Smolinsky
The third Smolinsky daughter, Fania, falls in love with Morris Lipkin, the poet. She goes to night school and meets him at the library. When her father will not let her marry the man she loves, she marries his choice, Abe Schmukler from California, so she can be rich and get away from her father. She is miserable, however, with loneliness in her loveless marriage, though she looks grand in silks and diamonds. She tries to marry off Sara to another rich Californian.

Mashah Smolinsky
Mashah, the beautiful second Smolinsky daughter, has long golden hair and a love of cleanliness and beauty. She spends her wages on herself to be attractive to young men and is never concerned with her family's troubles. Liking to hear free music in the park, she is attracted by the piano music of Jacob Novak. Yet his rich father and her proud father team up to prevent the marriage, and she ends up living in poverty with Moe Mirsky, who is abusive to her and their three children.

Mrs. Smolinsky
Old before her time from working for the family and waiting on her husband, Mrs. Smolinsky alternates yelling at Reb and worshipping him. Worrying constantly about money, she nags and scolds everyone but is a good mother, even walking in the cold winter night to bring a feather bed to her freezing daughter Sara. Although his wife has good sense, Reb never listens to her, as he insists on making the decisions as the head of the family. She tells the girls tales from the old country when she was a beautiful young girl and a good dancer. Then she was healthy and had life in her, compared to her careworn face and shapeless body now. In Poland her wealthy father wanted a scholar for a son-in-law and was willing to support him. She fell in love with Reb when she heard him recite the books of the Bible and saw how his learning radiated from him. She brags about her rich dowry of feather beds, embroidered sheets, curtains, and tablecloth and tries to impress upon her daughters her belief that old handmade items are better than machine-made goods from stores. The tsar's pogroms on the Jews made them have to sell everything and escape to America. As Mrs. Smolinsky is dying of gangrene and blood poisoning, she becomes conscious of the plotting of the widow upstairs to take her place and warns her husband.

Rabbi Reb Smolinsky
The main antagonist of the story, Reb is an otherworldly scholar who loves studying and chanting the Torah all day, and he is also a tyrant who runs the lives of his overworked wife and four daughters, who are pressured into supporting him. His holy life both inspires and exasperates his family, for he earns no money and does not feel it is his duty to do so. As a man, according to Jewish tradition he is the only one in the family who can study the scriptures. He frequently reminds his family that only a woman who serves a man can get into heaven. When the rent is not paid, the rent collector steps on his Bible, and when he slaps her, he is arrested but let off because he is a religious man. The people see him as a hero, a David who fought a Goliath of a landlord. Coming from the Old World, where rabbis were treated with respect and supported by family and neighbors, he stands up for his religion and tradition. In Poland, he was a teacher who gave lessons in Hebrew and on the Torah, but in America, people are interested only in making money, not in his wisdom. Alternately admiring of the American dream and disillusioned by the godless America he finds, he, unlike the Jews around him, will not adapt to the New World. He is able to intimidate every daughter except Sara, whose will matches his. Reb is vulnerable when it comes to worldly matters. He is swindled when he buys a grocery store with no goods in it and when he marries a greedy widow, thinking she will take care of him. He bullies everyone in the family, beating them down and destroying their self-confidence. When Sara finds him on the street selling gum, forced by his wife to forsake his religious calling, she is indignant and helps him get back on his feet. He is like a helpless child in the world, and that is why Sara finally asks him to live with her and her husband, Hugo. He is a man both hated and loved. The sole link to the family's rich traditions, he is not easily dismissed, and in fact, Sara finds she can throw out neither her father nor their traditions.

Sara Smolinsky
The main character and first-person narrator of her own story, Sara is ten when the story starts.
and in her later twenties at the end. A fiery, determined girl with red hair, she takes after her father in terms of her love of learning, strong will, and ambition for a higher life. He calls her Blut-und-Eisen, “Blood-and-iron,” for she is the only one who resists his will and tries to become a person or individual, instead of a servant to the family. After witnessing the brutal way in which her father bullies her sisters into marrying men they do not love, she runs away from home at the age of seventeen, determined to live her own life and be an American. She supports herself working in a laundry ten hours a day, goes to night school, and then comes home to a dingy room to study late into the night. Hungry and cold, she does not give in to hardship because her hunger to better herself is greater. Sara gives up seeing her family while studying, and when her mother begs her to visit, she says she has to spend her youth on her education. She is lonely but self-disciplined, always envying the lifestyle of the rich Americans and desiring education, which can lift a person from the cycle of poverty. She suffers frequently from casting off her tradition, which nourishes her on a deep level, as she tries to embrace the American dream. Like her father, she is disillusioned by the shallowness and coldness of the New World, rejecting a rich suitor, Max Goldstein from California, because he is too self-centered and materialistic. While she does not want riches, she does want to avoid poverty so that she can have a life of culture and independence. She studies in college to become a teacher, battling the scorn of the richer students. She is crushed by the indifference of Mr. Edman, her psychology teacher, on whom she dotes, but finds understanding and encouragement from the older dean. Winning a college essay contest, she enters the world as an independent lady with a little money, teaching for a living, having the refined life she fought for. Her mother is proud of the teacher in the family, but her father casts her out when he finds she refused to marry a rich man who could have helped support him. She makes friends with the principal, Hugo Seelig, and they date. She decides to marry him, but her father needs her after her mother’s death, for he is helpless in the world and becomes ill. Hugo Seelig agrees to care for the father in their home. Sara worries that he will take over their home and be a tyrant, but she knows that he represents the whole weight of the tradition she has not been able to throw off, and she gives in.

Rosy Stein
Rosy is one of Sara’s ghetto students whose mother is happy with her progress under Sara’s care.

Yenteh
Zalmon’s oldest daughter, Yenteh, wanted her deceased mother’s fur coat that was given to Bessie. She does not like her stepmother, Bessie, and gives her a hard time, rejecting a dress that Bessie sewed for her as being too old-fashioned.

Zalmon
Zalmon, the old fish peddler, loses his wife and marries Bessie Smolinsky to care for his six children. She is miserable because he is fifty-six and smells of fish. She finally gives in because she loves his youngest child, who wants her to be his mother. Zalmon claims that his wife will not have to work, but Bessie has to sell fish all day, with fish scales in her hair, and she cares for the house and children as well. Zalmon pays Smolinsky four hundred dollars for Bessie so that Reb can buy a business for himself. Reb is swindled out of this money.

Zaretsky
Zaretsky is the old matchmaker who arranges marriages for the ghetto people. He finds Moe Mirsky and Abe Schmukler for Mashah and Fania Smolinsky, respectively.

Aby Zuker
Aby is one of Sara’s ghetto students, a bright boy of eleven whom she corrects when he says, “ain’t it?” He wants to be a lawyer.

THEMES

Immigrant Life in America
The high expectations of immigrants coming to America, and their subsequent disillusionment from living in poverty, are a major focus in Bread Givers. The Polish Smolinskys, like other immigrants from different parts of the world, are drawn to the United States by the promise of a better life. Persecuted in the Old World, they have heard glorious tales of freedom. Reb Smolinsky, in particular, is full of myths about the American dream. He tells his wife that she should not bring anything with her, for “in the new golden country,” “milk and honey flow free
in the streets” and “all America will come to my feet to learn.”

Continually inspired by the notions that anyone can be successful or a millionaire in America and that his daughters can marry rich men without dowries, Reb easily falls prey to scams, such as that of the suitor who pretends to be a diamond merchant, Moe Mirsky, and the ready-made grocery store he buys in Elizabeth with no groceries in it. He soon realizes that no one is impressed with his holiness and scholarship. The father is not respected as infallible in America. He is furthermore disappointed to find that America is a land of materialistic rather than spiritual values.

Sara describes the crowded tenement buildings with their lack of fresh air, standing in line at public baths, scrounging coal from garbage cans for the stove, the pushcart peddlers out in all weather selling their wares for a few pennies, the starvation, the sweatshops, the dirt, the constant threat of eviction if the rent is late, and the great fatigue and bitterness as people struggle to survive. Instead of getting out of the ghetto, many are stuck there for generations. Mashah’s children are starving, even as she did, and as her mother did.

The positive memories of the immigrant’s life are preserved in the form of the traditions they bring and maintain. Even though Sara rebels against her father’s strict Old World ways, there are times when she is charmed by his stories from the Torah, his chanting, and his high-mindedness. His face shines from within because of his devotion to his faith. Contrasted to the coldness of Americans toward her is the devotion of her mother, who walks in a cold winter night to bring her a homemade feather bed. The mother instills in her daughters pride in the beautiful hand-crafted sheets, tablecloths, and quilts of the old country. Neighbors sticking together as a community is a cultural value Sara does not find when she leaves the ghetto. Her life demonstrates the difficulties faced by the immigrant who is forever in between two worlds, the old and the new.

**Gender Inequality**

Feminist themes are strongly presented throughout Sara’s journey to independence. Reb, the patriarchal father, repeats to her over and over, “It says in the Torah: *A woman without a man is less than nothing. No life on earth, no hope of Heaven.*” The woman’s place in traditional Judaism is subservient to the man’s. Sara reflects on the fact that her father is bitter at having no son, for there will be no one to pray for his soul when he dies: “The prayers of his daughters didn’t count because God didn’t listen to women. Heaven and the next world were only for men.” Reb tells his wife and daughters that they should support his holy studies, and in this way, by waiting on him, they will earn their place in heaven.

The Smolinsky wife and daughters are the bread givers, or wage earners, of the family, but they are not allowed to keep their own earnings. All must go to the father for the household. He
also receives the best food, as though he is the only valuable person in the family. He expects to be given the only morsels of meat, while he sees his family eating thin soup. Sara sees this same prejudice when she is living on her own and starving. She goes to a cafeteria and orders stew but gets mostly potatoes. The man behind her gets large chunks of meat. She is told: “Don’t you know they always give men more?” Similarly, when she tries to rent a room, she is told that landlords do not like to rent to single females because women are more trouble. She is treated like a prostitute for wanting to live alone.

Although Bessie, Mashah, and Fania initially pick out men whom they love as husbands, they are threatened and bullied by their father until they give in to his miserable choices for them. Each is terribly unhappy but stuck with an unsuitable mate. When Sara hears her sisters describe their sad marriages, she declares that she will never get married: “At least I’ve no boss of a husband to crush the spirit in me.”

The father and the matchmaker arrange the marriages for the daughters. Sara is aware, even as her sisters are caving in to their father’s will, that in America, “girls pick out for themselves the men they want for husbands.” This is regarded as open rebellion by the father, and Sara has to run away to make her own life. She is cursed by her father when she does not accept Max Goldstein, a rich suitor found for her by her sister: “Woe to America where women are let free like men. . . . All the evils of the world come from them.”

Solitude, the author shows, is an important ingredient for becoming a person. When Sara runs away at the age of seventeen and eats breakfast at a bakery, she notes that it is the first time she has eaten alone in her life. Poverty and overcrowded conditions go together. Sara’s first luxury on her own is to have a room by herself, like her father has, for study. Self-sufficiency means not only supporting herself, working her way through school, but also mastering loneliness, which is the price she must pay to think her own thoughts.

Sara has to learn to accept herself as an individual. She fails at first, wanting to fit in. The other girls working at the laundry exclude her because she is not silly over boys, as they are; she studies on her breaks. When she wears makeup to look like them, she quickly wipes it off as a false mask. She thinks she will find her kind at college but is surprised by the carefree gaiety of the rich students. She is still the poor immigrant who has to work her way through school. Not until she receives encouragement from the dean as one of the “pioneers” and wins the essay contest does she begin to feel the fruit of her efforts.

The biggest temptation to turn aside from her goal comes when Max Goldstein proposes. He is rich and shows her a good time, and she is lonely. When he ridicules her study, however, she pulls back, thinking, “All great people have to be alone to work out their greatness.” Sara becomes a teacher and has her honeymoon with herself, “a person among people.” Her mother’s dying pride in her achievement allays her guilt: “You shine like a princess.”
STYLE

Bildungsroman

*Bread Givers* is fashioned primarily as a bildungsroman, or a coming-of-age novel, showing the emergence of a young person into adulthood. In the bildungsroman, the main character's growth is chronicled, step by step, from innocence to experience. The hero or heroine must discover how to negotiate the opposite qualities of life—success and failure, hope and disappointment, love and loneliness. The character must learn to accept responsibility for his or her own life, rather than living a life fashioned by society or parents. Often, the boundaries of class, gender, or background must be overcome. The formation of individuality is a key feature.

This novel form became popular in nineteenth-century Europe with such works as *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; *Sentimental Education*, by Gustave Flaubert; *David Copperfield*, by Charles Dickens; and *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë. A young man's journey might show the path to his place in society through temptations, obstacles, a search for meaningful work, and marriage. A woman’s journey traditionally revolved around her moral education, her trials, and finding a husband. Yezierska’s novel is emotionally more complex because Sara is overcoming the several barriers of gender, race, religion, and culture. It has a feminist angle in that she is more interested in her education and career than marriage, and she nevertheless finds a husband. She takes on herculean tasks to become herself and forge her own unique way to adulthood, from an immigrant waif selling herrings on the street to an American professional. The author shows us the price Sara pays for daring to be a self-made woman in an unsupportive environment.

Autobiographical Novel

*Bread Givers* is an autobiographical novel. An autobiographical novel is a piece of fiction modeled on the life of the author but fictionalized or changed in certain details. It is distinct from straight autobiography, which proposes to be a truthful account. Although most authors draw on their own lives to some extent for fictional material, the autobiographical novel depends
heavily on the author’s life in terms of the plot and protagonist. Some autobiographical novels, such as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, by James Joyce (1916), use a third-person point of view, as though witnessing the story from outside. Stephen Dedalus, the main character of Joyce’s novel, however, is basically a fictionalized Joyce. It is common for authors to use first-person narrative in the autobiographical novel, as Yezierska does. The “I” is thus the protagonist telling his or her own story from inside the story. This gives greater immediacy and a closer feeling of identification of the author with the main character. Sara Smolinsky, then, can tell the reader what it feels like to grow up in poverty, and these are likely Yezierska’s own feelings and experiences. Since it is fiction, the author is free to change incidental details around for the sake of better telling the story. For instance, Yezierska had brothers, but she makes the Smolinsky family have only daughters. She wanted to focus on the condition of the immigrant Jewish girl, and the boys would have diluted the circumstances and her message. Other examples of autobiographical novels include *David Copperfield*, by Charles Dickens (1850); *Of Human Bondage*, by William Somerset Maugham (1915); and *Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison (1952).

**Jewish American Novel**

The bulk of early Jewish American literature was written in Yiddish (a dialect, or nonstandard regional language, combining Hebrew and German) between 1885 and 1935 by immigrants, although there were other Jewish languages used for literature, such as Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), Hebrew, and Judeo-Arabic. Yiddish authors produced poetry, fiction, plays, newspapers, and journals for other Yiddish-speaking immigrants. These writers were influenced by the Jewish enlightenment, Haskalah, a secular movement brought over from Europe. This tradition laid the groundwork for the emerging Jewish writers in English. In *Bread Givers*, Yiddish expressions are translated into English for the ghetto speakers, while the narrator uses standard English.

Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912) was a landmark novel in which a Jewish immigrant tells of the process of becoming American. Antin portrays a girl who successfully assimilates into the American culture. The most important early Yiddish writer in America was Abraham Cahan, founder of a successful Yiddish newspaper, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, which was read by Yezierska’s family. He wrote the novella *Yekl* (1896) in an attempt to translate the Yiddish dialect into English, and this appealed to a wider audience. His novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) is important for outlining the familiar themes being explored at the same time by Yezierska and later writers concerned with assimilation. The hero, Levinsky, a Jewish immigrant, becomes a millionaire in America but finds that his life is empty when he divorces himself from his ethnic past. Sally Ann Drucker, in her article “Yiddish, Yidgin, and Yezierska: Dialect in Jewish-American Writing,” acknowledges Cahan’s groundbreaking work as having created the hybridization of American and Yiddish culture, but she finds that no Jewish writer of the time created a Yiddish-English dialect as convincingly as Yezierska’s.

Together, Antin, Cahan, and Yezierska are often credited as founders of Jewish American literature, but as the *Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature* points out, “They were transitional figures, lifting one foot out of their native Yiddish-speaking immigrant culture while, with the other, stepping toward the English-speaking American culture they aspired to.” After 1935, most Jewish American authors were born in America, and they continued to explore the secular themes and ethnic character types of immigrant literature. Except for Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Nobel Prize-winning Yiddish writer whose stories were translated, these authors wrote in English. Prominent Jewish novelists of the twentieth century include Bernard Malamud, whose novel *The Fixer* (1967) is about antisemitism in tsarist Russia, and Saul Bellow, whose *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970) is set in contemporary New York with a misanthropic Jew who has been through the Holocaust. Tillie Olsen, Grace Paley, Joseph Heller, and Philip Roth are other well-known Jewish mainstream writers. These authors separate Jewishness from Judaism and discuss issues outside of Jewish history, such as the problem of finding meaning in the modern world. American Jewish authors before World War II disconnected themselves from European Judaism and focused primarily on American issues. After World War II, another avenue of Jewish literature explored the Holocaust and its aftermath for Jews and for humanity as a whole.

Characters in Jewish American novels often question, explore, love, hate, and celebrate their background, as does Sara Smolinsky. They are often ambivalent about their Jewishness and
divided within themselves. Like Sara, they look for love and approval but face rejection, prejudice, and misunderstanding. Even for those born as Americans, being a Jew in its positive or negative aspects is consciously addressed as an act of identity, for ethnicity no longer means an inherited place (outside of Israel, established in 1948), as it had to Jews in previous centuries. Like Sara, characters decide for themselves who they are. Yezierska must be credited as a first-generation writer of the Jewish American novel who set the stage for the subsequent secular expression of what it means to be Jewish in America.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

East European Immigration to America

More than twenty-three million immigrants came to America from eastern Europe, Italy, and Greece between 1880 and 1920, resulting in the largest influx of immigration in American history. These immigrants were largely seeking refuge from upheavals in their native lands. For the Jews in Russian Poland, many hardships contributed to one-third of the Jewish population’s coming to America, the largest Jewish immigration that had ever taken place. The Russian tsar had confined Jews to the Pale of Settlement, covering part of Poland, Byelorussia, the Ukraine, and Lithuania. Yezierska’s family came from a shtetl, or small town, in Poland within this region. Economically the people were squeezed out of their professional roles and wealth, and jobs became more menial and harder to find. Universities were closed to Jews. Famine, cholera, and starvation were common. Pogroms, or attacks of violence, committed by Cossacks, troops loyal to the tsar, disrupted and destroyed the towns. In Bread Givers, Mrs. Smolinsky describes how much of her father’s wealth was used in bribing the Cossacks to leave them alone. Conscription into the Russian army was another way the tsar broke up the shtetls, for a Jewish boy would be forced to serve for twenty-five years, thus taking him away from his religious practices. The latter point, more than famine or the feared pogroms, was the reason Reb Smolinsky left for America—to avoid conscription and preserve his religion.

Orthodox Rabbinic Judaism

In America, there are several branches of Judaism: Reform Judaism, the mainstream Jewish religion of nineteenth-century America until the eastern European immigration; Orthodox Judaism, shown in Bread Givers; Conservative Judaism, combining practices of the first two types; and Hasidism, or Jewish mysticism. In Bread Givers, Reb Smolinsky is a rabbi, or religious teacher, who studies and teaches Orthodox Jewish law, the predominant tradition of eastern European Jews. The ancient oral traditions of Judaism were written down once Jews began dispersing all over the world, and rabbis taught and interpreted through their study to other Jews. The Torah, or Jewish scripture, along with the Talmudic commentaries on religious practice and the codified Mosaic law in the Mishnah and Gemara, are the holy books Reb Smolinsky studies. Every detail and aspect of life is covered in rabbinical writings (called halacha, or “the way”), hence Reb’s constant lecturing on his family’s behavior. In the Polish Jewish village, closed to outsiders, the father, as head of the house, and rabbi, as respected teacher, were expected to be learned upholders of the prescribed practices. Later Reform movements in Judaism softened the strictness of these laws to fit contemporary life. Smolinsky, however, threatens his daughter by asserting that he will not live with her in her home unless she agrees to the strictness of Jewish law. This worries her, for she had hoped to create her own home.

Lower East Side of Manhattan

New York was the port that immigrants came through on their way to settling in the United States, and many were forced to stay there because they had no means for moving elsewhere. The immigrants in Yezierska’s day were not like many of the well-educated immigrants today, who are world citizens, traveling back and forth from America to their homelands. The late nineteenth-century immigrants fled from intolerable situations in their countries and could never return. They fled from poverty into poverty. Many were peasants and laborers without skills who brought no savings and spoke no English. They settled in ghettos with their own kind.

The Lower East Side of Manhattan was dominated by east European Jews after 1880. They were crowded into tenement buildings, described by Moses Rischin in The Promised
City: New York's Jews, 1870–1914

as multistory buildings with four apartments to a floor and little ventilation. The buildings were jammed together along city blocks with only air shafts between buildings. Bread Givers speaks of the windows that look out on air shafts, with no view but other buildings. There were no green places, and the dirt and odor and heat were oppressive. There were shared toilets, and one had to take a bath at a public bathhouse. The tenements were owned by slum landlords who made substantial profits because housing was short. They evicted anyone unable to pay, and the fear of this was always hanging over the heads of the poorest residents, as it does with the Smolinskys. Like them, families seldom used all the rooms in a flat, instead having to sublet to boarders to make the rent, creating extremely dense numbers in small spaces. As a working girl, Sara is willing to pay extra for a room of her own, having never been alone through her first seventeen years.

East European Jews were small in build compared to other immigrants and, like Sara, had trouble persuading employers to use them for physical work in factories. They most often sold wares from pushcarts or worked home industries, making clothing and other items. Sara Smolinsky describes the settlement houses in the ghetto that offered relief to the poor in the

1890s: Poor working girls without education or skill, like Sara Smolinsky, can only find jobs as domestics, or in sweatshops, factories, or home businesses, or as pushcart vendors on the streets. Most upper-class women do not go to college and are still supported by husbands or family; if they work, they usually do so as volunteers for charities and causes.

1920s: Women of all classes begin to seek professional careers, but they are still a minority. They attend schools or colleges, like Sara does, to qualify as secretaries, teachers, nurses, actresses, and writers. In general, however, like Yezierska, they have to choose between career and family.

Today: All professions are open to qualified women. It is the norm for women to juggle families and careers at the same time.

1890s: Unregulated immigration to the United States reaches a peak volume, with millions of refugees coming from eastern and southern Europe.

1920s: In 1924, the National Origins Act sets up national immigration quotas to control ethnic populations in the United States, especially those from southern and eastern Europe.

Today: The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 abolished national quotas. Most immigrants coming to the United States are from Asia and South and Central America. Illegal immigration is a frequently discussed problem.

1890s: The Lower East Side of Manhattan is crammed with poor immigrants living in unhealthy conditions in tenements.

1920s: The Lower East Side gains mythic status with the release of Yezierska’s hit film Hungry Hearts. Conditions in the ghetto there inspire urban reform movements, with professors at Columbia, like John Dewey, leading the way.

Today: The Lower East Side, also called “The Big Onion,” is a trendy area with a mix of ethnic cultures whose residents increasingly include students and young professionals. Although one can visit the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, in 2008 the neighborhood is put on an endangered list by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.
form of various social services and education. They were charitably established by rich donors to help new immigrants settle and assimilate. Sara and Fania take advantage of the night-school programs to learn English and other subjects that their parents think are a waste of time, for old-timers like Reb Smolinsky do not want to assimilate into the American culture.

American Attitude toward Immigrants in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

The myth of the American melting pot, which imagined the races of other countries being blended together into a new American stew, made it easier for early immigrants to be accepted. Many of these were the pioneers who settled the West and earned their places as Americans. The late-nineteenth-century refugees from eastern Europe, however, had to face greater barriers and prejudices. They did not farm and settle in the West because the frontier was closed, and they were not farmers. They were not welcomed by other groups in the cities because they competed for jobs. Furthermore, they were strange, with different religions, customs, and languages.

The melting pot idea began to change. New racial theories developed by European writers gave superiority to the northern white races and were adopted in America as well. Americans began to believe that the truest American was a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant and that immigrants who wanted to be assimilated had to learn how to look and act as such. Bread Givers shows Sara Smolinsky dealing with these problems, as Anzia Yezierska did when she had to anglicize her name to Hattie Mayer. Sara is aware that to be an American she must shed her Old World look, her native tongue, her emotional reactions, her ethnic markers. At college she sees the clean-cut kids who seem rich and carefree but cold. She has to learn reason and restraint to be accepted. This, in turn, makes her alternately yearn for and hate her own heritage. Cleansing herself of her upbringing makes her into a woman, but she has to chop off a lot of herself to fit into what she perceives as a shallow stereotype.

White Americans, feeling threatened and overwhelmed by other racial types, through the National Origins Act of 1924, set quotas on how many could enter the country from different regions. These quotas were only liberalized after the 1960s, when multiculturalism began to be a new norm in America as well as in the rest of the world, with boundaries being shattered by technology.

John Dewey

In 1917 when John Dewey, the famous philosopher and educator, was teaching at Columbia, Anzia Yezierska went to him for help in getting certified to teach full-time. She was in her late thirties, and he was twenty years older. Yezierska was still attractive and a magnetic woman, and he apparently fell in love with her as she attended his classes. Although it is not certain what the relationship was, his love poems to her have been published (The Poems of John Dewey, edited by Jo Ann Boydston, 1977). He became a mentor, and his encouragement was the push she needed to become a serious writer. They were very different—he the cold New Englander, she the passionate and exotic Polish Jew with flaming red hair. He did not tell her to become Americanized and fit in; he encouraged her to write about her ghetto experience. Married to an activist wife who was his partner, Dewey believed in rights for women. He liked Yezierska’s strength and honesty. While Dewey felt love, Yezierska idealized Dewey as the older wise man. She began to use an older Dewey figure in almost all of her stories. In Bread Givers, he is glimpsed in the dean of Sara’s college, who opens his home to Sara and tells her that she is a pioneer who will succeed. Dewey helped Yezierska publish, and after that she quickly became famous.

Dewey participated in debates on educating immigrants. There was fear in the country about the loyalties of so many foreigners, and one school of thought was that the immigrant should be Americanized in school, to have the foreign elements taken out. Dewey took a different stand, believing that immigrants brought their own gifts to the country and could enrich the culture.

Dewey’s personal encouragement and his liberal thinking, partly derived from Ralph Waldo Emerson, emphasized the process of becoming an individual. He preached self-reliance. Dewey believed that education could bring about social justice. One of his poems (“Generations”) describes Yezierska as a spokesperson for the mute masses of immigrants; her life could have the purpose of informing Americans and encouraging those immigrants following in her footsteps. This is
the calling she indeed embraced, as inspired by Dewey’s sympathy and recognition.

**CRITICAL OVERVIEW**

*Bread Givers*, published in 1925, came on the wave of Yezierska’s fame in the 1920s following her recognition for *Hungry Hearts* and *Salome of the Tenements*, both of which were made into films. At the time of the publication of *Bread Givers*, critics generally had the same points of praise and criticism as they did for her earlier work. *New York Tribune* contributor Samuel Raphaelson, quoted in Carol B. Schoen’s book *Anzia Yezierska*, lauds her ability to render Yiddish into poetic English but feels that the story repeats from her earlier works “a theme of which we have grown weary—the story of a poor East Side girl who Americanized herself by sheer force.” The Jewish audience was less pleased by the Yiddish dialect. Joseph Goer, writing in the *Menorah Journal*, complains that the book is “pandering” to Americans who want to laugh at the Yiddish dialect and at Judaism (quoted in Schoen). *International Book Review* contributor William Lyons Phelps, quoted in Alice Kessler-Harris’s introduction to *Bread Givers*, summarizes the depth and realism that many critics admired in Yezierska’s work: “One does not seem to read. One is too completely inside.”

The book went out of print with the loss of interest in Yezierska in the 1940s and 1950s. At that time, she was not thought to be a serious author. Not until the 1960s, when ethnic and women’s literature became important, was she rediscovered. Kessler-Harris, the scholar from Columbia responsible for getting *Bread Givers* reprinted, remarks in her foreword to the book, “Persea’s edition of *Bread Givers* appeared in 1975 not to wild acclaim but to steady success.” Yezierska was finally justified after her death, 1975 not to wild acclaim but to steady success.”

CRITICISM

**Susan Andersen**

Andersen holds a Ph.D. in English and teaches literature and writing. In this essay, she explains why Yezierska kept writing and rewriting fictionalized versions of her ghetto origins, including *Bread Givers*.

Anzia Yezierska wrote version after version of the archetype she could not erase from memory. She describes this image in *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*: “I saw myself, a scrawny child of twelve, always hungry, always asking questions.” Yezierska had a need to create a myth for herself through writing, a bridge between the Old World and the New. She kept retelling the story of the immigrant waif, because by focusing on the difficulties of assimilation into a new culture, she could be the mouthpiece of the ghetto. She was a skillful storyteller and did not feel compelled to tell her life exactly as it happened. She had two failed marriages, a daughter, and six successful brothers who were left out of her fictional plots because they were not an important part of the story she wished to tell. Mary Dearborn states in *Love in the Promised Land: The Story of Anzia Yezierska and John Dewey* that Yezierska imaginatively “distorted” the facts in her semiautobiographical writings: “Facts simply did not matter to her; what she was after was the emotional truth.” This explains why she felt that her mission would be lost in the luxury of California and why she refused to sign a Hollywood contract that would make her rich but take her away from her roots: “Writing is
everything I am... It's my search for a meaning" (Red Ribbon on a White Horse).

All of Yezierska’s writings are heavily autobiographical. Sara Smolinsky’s journey in Bread Givers (1925) is the earliest and fullest account of her ghetto upbringing. Her later struggles as a writer are detailed in the fictionalized autobiography Red Ribbon on a White Horse (1950). Sara, like Anzia Yezierska, determines early in her life to avoid the limited and tragic stories of the Jewish women around her and to make her own stories. Sara’s goal is to “make [herself] for a person.”

Rabbi Reb Smolinsky, Sara’s father, is the main antagonist to her desire to live for herself. Reb is the most powerful storyteller of the family, one whose tales Sara must fight with her own. Reb’s wife and daughters truly are charmed by his tales from the Torah, by the folktales he tells at supper, and by his chanting of the beautiful and poetic verses in Hebrew that are Sara’s earliest lessons in literature. He is further celebrated as “the speaking mouth of the block” when he wins the court case against the landlord. The neighbors are so delighted that they act out his David-versus-Goliath victory on the tenement stoops.

Reb’s high-handed way of using his wife and daughters to support him is excused by his belief in his calling: “Am I not their light? The whole world would be in thick darkness if not for men like me who give their lives to spread the light of the Holy Torah.” He not only creates his role but also designates the role of his children by naming them Burden Bearer, Empty-head, and Blood-and-iron. He tells them their place: “It says in the Torah, only through a man has a woman an existence. Only through a man can a woman enter Heaven.” Sara is at first intimidated by this story, for her father looks “as if he just stepped out of the Bible” in his coat, skullcap, and beard.

Mrs. Smolinsky believes in her husband’s religion and holiness; Sara reports, “Mother licked up Father’s every little word, like honey.”
On the other hand, when he forces Bessie to marry the fish peddler, Mrs. Smolinsky cries out, “Woe to us women who got to live in a Torah-made world that’s only for men.” The women are inscribed into a story that does not honor them but makes them subservient. In an essay in Women of the World: Jewish Women and Jewish Writing, Judith Dishon gives examples of the kind of stories Reb Smolinsky might have told his household about women in Hebrew proverbs and tales and other medieval texts. In these stories, women are lazy, deceitful, fickle, light-headed, rebellious, and vain, and they take men away from God.

In traditional Rabbinic Judaism only men could study the Torah, and Hebrew, the language of learning, was likewise for men. The women had their own religious books in the vernacular Yiddish that taught them their duties. In fact, Yiddish was considered something of a woman’s language, since it was the language spoken in the home for everyday matters. According to Shmuel Niger, in “Yiddish Literature and the Female Reader,” much of the literature in Old Yiddish was written by or for women. In the Jewish enlightenment, called Haskalah in the later nineteenth century in eastern Europe, Yiddish rather than Hebrew became the primary language of Jewish secular literature. Sara’s father tells the religious Hebrew tales, while her mother tells historical stories of the Old World dances, weddings, and pogroms in Yiddish. These are the inherited stories from mother and father.

Martin Japtok explains in “Justifying Individualism: Anzia Yezierska’s Bread Givers” how Yezierska’s language in the novel illustrates her piecing together of her own story. Ghetto speech is portrayed in the Yiddish idiom, rendered in English, while the narration is in American English. These two languages represent the integration of the ethnic world she comes from and the American world she aspires to. Both English and the Yiddish dialect are secular tongues, however, as opposed to the strict, religious Hebrew world of her father. This attempt at making a hybrid language that can tell her story is analogous to her making a hybrid self.

When Sara leaves home for good she tells her father, “I’m going to make my own life. . . . I’m American!” Trying to find her own place in America, however, proves more than she imagined. She does not get along with the other working-class girls in the laundry, who scorn her for studying on her breaks. When she finally goes to college, looking for the Americans she thinks will understand her, she finds she has nothing in common with their squeaky-clean lives, their materialism, their lack of sympathy, and their time to play. And yet, the study of psychology opens a door in her, as she learns that her years in the slums were not wasted; they contain “treasure chests of insight,” her buried treasure. Just as Yezierska mined her ghetto years as her personal treasure, so Sara finds that her background has made her who she is.

She learns what to do with her treasure when the dean of the college befriends her. He is an older man who influences Sara, the way John Dewey influenced Yezierska. The author puts Dewey’s message in the dean’s mouth: “Your place is with the pioneers. And you’re going to survive.” Dewey had written love poems to Yezierska, envisioning her as speaking for generations of mute immigrants. Dewey’s confidence in her gave her the push she needed to be a writer. She would make her own story, and it would speak for all the ghetto dwellers that could not tell theirs. Similarly, Sara finds her voice and is able to tell her history to an American audience in the essay contest.

Yezierska won fame and success when Samuel Goldwyn bought the film rights to her first bestseller, Hungry Hearts, in 1920. She was brought to Hollywood, was given a huge salary and office, oversaw the making of the film, and was signed on to be a salaried writer. She was promoted as “the Sweatshop Cinderella,” a pose that she helped create but that imprisoned her at the same time. As she tells in Red Ribbon on a White Horse, “I felt like the beggar who drowned in a barrel of cream.” The screenwriters trivialized her work, making it into a stereotype with comic jokes, and she was too numb to write in such an atmosphere. In an amusing scene in Red Ribbon, between Yezierska and the ever-cheerful Will Rogers, he tells her to drop the sad Cinderella act and have a good time now that she’s rich and famous: “Gal! You’re like a punch-drunk prize fighter, striking an opponent no longer there. You’ve won your fight.” Critics said similar things every time Yezierska published another book about the ghetto.

She fled Hollywood and settled in New York, closer to the life that gave her creative material. She lived in poverty and loneliness for much of her
life and turned it into fiction. Although she was in touch with other intellectuals, at times she would get a job as a waitress or visit the ghetto. Why did she hold on to this story of deprivation? Blanche Gelfant’s essay “The City’s ‘Hungry’ Woman as Heroine” suggests that “the hungry heroine feels passionately alive.” Yezierska felt not alive in Hollywood but drowned in a barrel of cream.

In Bread Givers, instead of assimilating completely into American culture, Sara Smolinsky returns to the hungry masses of the Lower East Side to teach ghetto children, as Yezierska had. Sara feels guilt when she sees the hungry pushcart sellers. She wants to help raise others. There is another guilt as well. She cannot completely reject her parents’ stories and write hers as if there is no relationship: “Can a tree hate the roots from which it sprang?” As Alice Kessler-Harris writes of the author in her foreword to Bread Givers, “She never did reconcile the dichotomies in her life,” such as trying to be both American and Jewish, both writer and woman, and that is precisely the value of her message. She writes of a life in process. When the author first began to write, as she says in Red Ribbon, she saw herself in the ghetto people: “I plucked out of the contradictions of a human being the living seed of a story.”

Yezierska may have fudged facts, like her age, or withheld facts, like the existence of her daughter. Why, then, did she not fantasize a resolution to the immigrant’s contradictions? The ending of Bread Givers does come close to such a resolution. It suggests that Sara and her fiancé, Hugo Seelig, both Americanized Jews who teach in the ghetto they escaped, are trying to work out an equal marriage and to honor both the past and the future. But Sara makes it clear that it will continue to be a juggling act of the burden she will always carry as a Jew.

Yezierska thus did not consider her struggle or story of ghetto origins to be over once she had won public recognition. Her point was, how does a person create a hybrid identity in a new country? The only way that she could exist as a person was through her writing, and therein she was constantly exploring and creating that delicate bridge between the Old World and the New. She had to stay on that bridge and avoid the temptation of simple closure that Hollywood held out to her: “Nothing would stop me. I’d live my life writing and rewriting my story” (Red Ribbon).

Yezierska’s quest as a writer is better understood by an audience of the twenty-first century, as many face the problem of creating hybrid identities in an increasingly multicultural world. The idea of ethnic identity as a constant that one must preserve is upheld by Reb Smolinsky, but this notion from the Old World could not help Sara with her challenges in the New, for in America and the modern world, ethnicity is, as Werner Sollors explains in “The Invention of Ethnicity,” a constructed or invented reality, ever shifting. Mary Dearborn details in “The Making of an Ethnic American Self” how “Yezierska’s life provides a case study of the invention of ethnicity in American culture.” Yezierska and her generation of immigrants were indeed pioneers in this effort. As Magdalena Zaborowska, in “Beyond the Happy Endings: Anzia Yezierska Rewrites the New World Woman,” concludes, “By persisting in her defiance of the official narrative inscribing her as a woman, a Jew, and a writer, she opened a possibility of happier endings for the women writers to come after her.”


Renny Christopher

In the following excerpt, Christopher uses Bread Givers as a basis for explaining an interpretation of an insatiable appetite for rewards in American culture.

... Sara Smolinsky, Anzia Yezierska’s semi-autobiographical heroine in Bread Givers, has, like many of the characters in Yezierska’s novels and short stories, an insatiable hunger. Ellen Golub best interrogates Yezierska’s use of the central metaphor of her generation: hunger. For the promise of America, its language, its natives, and her rapidly Americanizing Lower East Side of New York, she has but one metaphor. For beauty, language, love, achievement — for all the desires she confronts in the immigrants’ name, issues of the mouth color and define her prose. (Golub 1983, 51–52)

As Sara says at one point during her struggle for upward mobility, “I hated my stomach. It was like some clawing wild animal in me that I had to stop to feed always.”

Golub goes on to describe Yezierska’s heroines as speaking,
in a communal voice, of a fire that cannot be quenched in their souls, of a hunger that food cannot sate. Theirs is a permanent sense of alienation and aloneness. And though they insist on breaking down the barriers to their desire, their tragedy remains the paradoxical desire which is fed on hunger... The saddest moment [for these heroines] is when that dream is achieved and yields little more than longing for the old days when the heroine was young and hopeful. (Golub 1983, 53)

The similarity to Martin Eden is clear: his saddest moment is the same as theirs. Further, this insight points out one of the great problems with “the American Dream”: it is one built of hope, but it is none too specific about what is to be hoped for. Any definition of a goal is going to be unsatisfactory, since the only attainable goals within American culture are material, and, as Golub points out, Yezierska’s heroines, “with their bellies full... hunger even more intensely. Still wailing their desires in the language of the mouth, they betray their longings to be more psychological than physiological” (1983, 54).

Each of these heroines, attempts to attach herself to America by filling her hungry mouth with American culture and language....Those who hunger for beauty in Yezierska’s world are twice as hungry as those who hunger for mere food. Theirs is a spiritual yearning of the heart and soul to possess an American aesthetic, to achieve the clean spareness which they deem patrician. (Golub 1983, 58)

But nothing will ever satisfy these hungers, because the only real rewards in American culture, and the only ones American language is designed to describe, are material, not psychological or spiritual. Further, they are rewards granted only to individuals who, in order to achieve them, must do so alone, leaving behind the people they were once a part of.

The structure of the novel reflects the protagonist’s upward mobility: Book I, “Hester Street,” consists of chapters that describe the life of the family—the stories of Sara’s sisters, into which Sara as a character (rather than as narrator) actually enters very little. This section of the book is situated in the collectivity of working-class life. It is the story not of an individual, but of a family, and that family’s struggles with poverty, and the conflict between the old-world father and his new-world daughters. The focus of the narrative turns to Sara herself only in Book II, “Between Two Worlds,” which describes her lonely struggle for upward mobility, which is achieved, but not happily, in Book III, “The New World.” Thus the narrative goes from the family to the individual, from the working class to the middle class, from community to solitude, following the trajectory of the protagonist’s life.

When Reb Smolinsky protests his wife’s plan to take in boarders because it means he will have to give up having a room to himself to study in, she replies, “Only millionaires can be alone in America,” but it is precisely a desire for aloneness (perhaps first inspired by her father’s desire) that impels Sara on her journey. When she tells her father she’s leaving, he says, “I didn’t send you to work at the age of six like some poor fathers do. You didn’t start work until you were over ten. Now, when I begin to have a little use from you, you want to run away and live for yourself?” This is precisely what Sara wants. She answers, “I’ve got to live my own life.” Her core value is possessive individualism: to break away from the collectivity of her working-class family and pursue her own self-determined goals. When she sets out in the city to find work, a room of her own, and schooling, she thinks, “I, alone with myself, was enjoying myself for the first time as with the grandest company.” Her quest for a room isn’t easy: “For the first time in my life I saw what a luxury it was for a poor girl to want to be alone in a room,” but she finally succeeds. “This door was life. It was air. The bottom starting-point of becoming a person. I simply must have this room with the shut door.” Once she starts school, she has to close that door and shut her surroundings out of herself; she has trouble concentrating through the noise of the building and the neighborhood, and tells herself she simply must “shut your ears to the noise,”—that is, isolate herself from the community.
This aloneness, a positive value for study, also costs her dearly, because it results in a permanent isolation and sense of outsidership. Once, when her mother travels all the way in to the city to see her just briefly, she reflects, "How much bigger was Mother's goodness than my burning ambition to rise in the world!", and when she says she can't come visit her mother because she has to study for college, her mother asks, "Is college more important than to see your old mother?" Although Sara doesn't admit it outright, yes, it is more important to her, as she goes on with her solitary struggle and does not visit her mother for six years.

She's tempted when a man sent by her sister courts her; she's overwhelmed by him because, "My one need of needs, stronger than my life, was my love to be loved." Yet clearly Sara's assessment of herself is wrong; she does not give in to that need, but rejects the suitor, because his values are purely materialistic. This disillusion Sara: "The man seemed to turn into a talking roll of dollar bills right there before my eyes." Her father comes to castigate her for refusing her suitor. He says to her, "Why do you hold yourself better than the whole world?", and although Yezierska seems to endorse Sara's answer, "I have to live and die by what's in me," her father's perspective has truth to it. Sara does try to be "better" than the others of her world. When she finally returns to her family after her absence of six years, she wonders, "would they understand that my silent aloofness for so long had been a necessity and not selfish indifference?" Why should they understand any such thing? When she returns to find her mother dying, her sister Fania asks her, "Was that what they taught you in college, to turn your back on your own people?", and indeed, this is what she has been taught in college—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.

Yezierska emphasizes throughout Books II and III Sara's incurable aloneness. The title of chapter 15 is "On and on—alone." That chapter ends with these lines: "Knowledge was what I wanted more than anything else in the world. I had made my choice. And now I had to pay the price. So this is what it cost, daring to follow the urge in me. No father. No lover. No family. No friend. I must go on and on. And I must go on—alone." In the next chapter Sara arrives in college, only, once again, to find out that she does not fit in. The other students are not poor immigrants, and she is always set apart from them. She reflects, "Maybe I'd have to change myself inside and out to be one of them" (50 years later Richard Rodriguez will echo this: "education requires radical self-reformation"). Sara does not succeed in fitting in: "I was nothing and nobody. It was worse than being ignored. Worse than being an outcast. I simply didn't belong. I had no existence in their young eyes... Even in college I had not escaped from the ghetto."

She does transform herself, however, and learns to devalue the person she was before, in the same way that Martin Eden learned. "I had learned self-control. I was now a person of reason," which means that she's learned to distance herself from herself: "The fight with Father to break away from home, the fight in the cafeteria for a piece of meat—when I went through those experiences I thought them privations and losses; now I saw them as treasure chests of insight." She makes one friend at college, the dean. One day she asks him, "Why is it that when a nobody wants to get to be somebody she's got to make herself terribly hard, when people like you who are born high up can keep all their kind feelings and get along so naturally well with everybody?" This is the closest that Sara comes to a class critique. What she is noting is the effect of privilege and lack of privilege, but she doesn't carry that analysis further than this single comment. The dean answers "All pioneers have to get hard to survive... And you're going to survive." His answer is misleading—pioneers blaze the way for others to follow; Sara, however, is pursuing individual mobility, blazing a trail for no one. All working-class people who become educated and "successful" do so without leaving a trail behind them for a large segment of the working class to follow, because to do so would be structurally impossible. Capitalism requires a working class and can allow some, but not all, to move out of it. The dean’s metaphor smacks of the American myth, and Sara buys into it because, for all her oppositional consciousness, she doesn't really have a political analysis, any more than Martin Eden did.

The dean tells her she will survive. Survive, however, in what sense? She triumphs by finishing college successfully and returning to the city as a teacher, "changed into a person!" That is, a
“person” of middle-class manners, means, and education. For 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, and for “the first time in my life I asked for the best, not the cheapest,” and when her mother dies, she defies custom by refusing to tear her clothes—the new suit she has bought. When Sara gets the beautiful room of her own she has longed for, it is, significantly, empty, as is the life she’s worked so hard to achieve: “nothing but a clean, airy emptiness.” Even her attitude toward solitude, which she saw before as a punishment, has changed: “The routine with which I kept clean my precious privacy, my beautiful aloneness, was all sacred to me.”

The novel does not have a happy ending. Although Sara has achieved upward mobility, the ending is, as Gay Wilentz calls it, “a Jewish lament rather than . . . a happy-ever-after” (1991, 35). Sara asks herself, “Now I was the teacher. Why didn’t I feel as I had supposed this superior creature felt? Why had I not the wings to fly with? Where was the vision lost?” Perhaps because she’s discovered that teachers are not “superior creatures” after all—that the very idea of superiority is hollow and false. When she meets a kindred spirit in Hugo Seelig, the school principal, she tells him, “Years ago, I vowed to myself that if I could ever tear myself out of the dirt I’d have only clean emptiness,” and although what she’s describing is her apartment, she is also describing her life.

Wilentz points out that most critics of the novel, in particular Alice Kessler-Harris and Carol Schoen, have interpreted the ending as representing reconciliation, “with Sara having it both ways.” Wilentz reads it not as a “neatly packaged” happy ending, but as one which exposes the “elements of incongruity” in Sara’s trajectory. Sara, like Yezierska herself, is uneasy in America, not accepted, as an immigrant Jew, as an equal. “Just as Yezierska herself never resolved the conflict, the novel also does not reconcile difference, although it appears to superficially. The sense of loss and the tone of lament which pervade the novel are not easily mitigated by Sara’s triumphs at the end” (Wilentz 1991, 39). Further, he insists that even “mediated cultural assimilation inscribes loss throughout the novel, and dialectically, it is precisely in the apparent resolution of the last chapter that Bread Givers’ ‘fairytale’ ending deconstructs” (39). I would suggest, further, that any reading of the ending of the novel as “happy” is simply a reading which overlays upon the text the fulfillment of the myth we’ve been so conditioned to expect in American narratives. To read Yezierska’s text in this way is to ignore the details of the text itself in favor of the myth. Wilentz goes on to quote the crucially important passage in which Sara looks at the people she’s left behind, those still in the ghetto, still poor, still suffering:

But as I walked along through Hester Street towards the Third Avenue L, my joy hurt like guilt. Lines upon lines of pushcart peddlers were crouching in the rain. Backs bent, hands in their sleeves, ears under their collars, grimy faces squeezed into frozen masks. They were like animals helpless against the cold, pitiless weather.

In the midst of this reflection, Sara runs into her own father peddling chewing gum, thus emphasizing the fact that Sara’s journey has been one of only individual upward mobility. Nothing of the hard world she left has changed. If “joy hurt[s] like guilt” for the narrator, any happiness imputed to this ending must be read into it over the evidence that the narrator presents most forcefully.

Wilentz points out that “Sara’s lament for her people is not only for the cruelty of a system that locks people in poverty, but also for what one must leave behind to succeed” (1991, 40). Indeed yes. Thus Sara shares Martin Eden’s problem—she was well-fitted for the struggle, but the end of the struggle leaves her unsatisfied with what she has achieved, leaves her lost and as metaphorically at sea as Martin Eden is literally at sea. When Sara goes home to her empty room, there are roses which Hugo has given her. “I didn’t want them if they were only for me,” she thinks, but of course they are only for her, because she’s become an individual, a middle-class model of possessive individualism. And there is no happiness to be found in this state, when the ghetto still exists so nearby.

Thomas J. Ferraro writes that “In narrating Sara’s life story, Yezierska seems to be as drawn as her protagonist to a conservative denouement: it is Yezierska, after all, who seems incapable of imagining for her any other solution to the disappointments of teaching” (1990, 579). I see this, however, not as a conservative ending but a radical one—a refusal to capitulate to the...
Horatio Alger myth (the novel might have ended with Sara’s triumphant graduation, at which she wins a prize and receives the acclaim of her classmates; this is where a true Horatio Alger story would have ended), an exposure of the structural problem of individual upward mobility in a class-based society. A refusal of a resolution for the protagonists of both of these novels constitutes on the part of the writers a refusal of the American myth of happy upward mobility, and makes these novels oppositional texts which call for a different way of reading, and for a discourse which, contrary to the celebratory tone of the dominant American discourse, recognizes loss within “.”

Source: Renny Christopher, “Rags to Riches to Suicide: Unhappy Narratives of Upward Mobility: Martin Eden, Bread Givers, Delia’s Song, and Hunger of Memory,” in College Literature, Vol. 29, No. 4, Fall 2002, p. 79.

Gay Wilentz

In the following essay, Wilentz classifies Bread Givers as Jewish immigrant writing and defines its place and impact on the genre as a whole.

In “Immigrant Fiction as Cultural Mediation,” Jules Chametzky examines the interaction between the Jewish immigrant and American culture through the literature. “Mediation,” in this case, reflects the dialectical relationship of Jewish historicity and the demands of a new national identity. While the desire to assimilate was strong—especially for those coming from restricted shtetls—the immigrants were aware that attempts to assimilate into the dominant culture often precluded adherence to a centuries-old culture which has existed only because of its adherents. Exposing this clash of cultures, Jewish immigrant fiction functioned “as mediator and creator of culture, a meaningful way of being in the [new] world” (59). Chametzky presents an interpretive model for examining the oppositional nature of much Jewish immigrant writing, particularly that of generational conflict within the Jewish community. Unfortunately, he does not include any Jewish women writers in his study—although he does suggest that someone should examine “fathers and daughters, starting with the intensity of Anzia Yezierska’s Bread Givers” (67).

Unequivocally, Chametzky reads immigrant discourse as male and, along with other Jewish [male] critics, has set up a male paradigm for immigrant experience: “The gender Specificity of the language of fathers and sons cannot be written off merely as linguistic shorthand” (Dearborn 73). Using female-centered discourse to expose Jewish immigrant experience, we can discern how intrinsically tied this experience was to the immigrant’s gender. Exploring the experience of women as well as men enhances our perception both of how male writers mediated between Jewish immigrant and American culture and of how Jewish women attempted—not always successfully—gender as well as cultural mediation in the New World. Appropriating Chametzky’s notion of “cultural mediation,” I examine how Yezierska illustrates the dilemma of the Jewish immigrant woman whose conflict between living her life as an Americaner and retaining the strength and sustenance she receives as part of the Jewish community is further exacerbated by her desires for independence as a woman. Moreover, I (re)read the novel’s contradictory ending in relation to Yezierska’s dis-ease with any possibility of mediated existence in the “promised” land.

In “America and I,” Yezierska wrote of her conflicting feelings for this supposed paradise for beleaguered Eastern European Jews: “Where is America? Is there an America? What is this wilderness in which I am lost?” (Open Cage 25–26). For the Jewish immigrant, the New World promised freedom from the racial/religious oppression of European society. This oppression, which ranged from exclusion to pogrom, remained as bitter memories in the hearts of immigrant Jews who believed in the chance for a better life in spite of ghettos, abject poverty, and Anglo-American prejudice. But as many Jewish immigrant writers have recorded, the price of Americanization was high—the loss of Jewish traditions and the rich, cultural life of the shtetl. For the Jewish woman...
immigrant, this conflict of culture took on an added dimension: not only was she forced to deal with the prejudices of the dominant culture but also with the patriarchal traditions of the Ashkenazi Jewish community. In Bread Givers, Anzia Yezierska transforms her own paradoxical experiences as an immigrant daughter of America to expose us to the double bind of the Jewish woman, whose freedom from the rigid strictures of traditional Jewish culture left her rootless and thrust her into a hard and prejudiced world which kept her always a stranger. It is through the protagonist's stormy relationship with her Old World father that Yezierska presents the dialectics of mediation for the Jewish woman and gives us special insight into these immigrant daughters for whom the quest for identity entails both gender and cultural considerations.

Bread Givers has its place as part of the genre of Jewish immigrant writing; it shares a tradition with such positivist works as Henry Roth's novel, Call it Sleep, and Mary Antin's autobiography, The Promised Land. All are concerned with the Jewish immigrant's experience in the New World and the possibility of a successful and fulfilling life in this alien culture. The title is a direct translation of the Yiddish term, broit gibbers (the women who make both physical and metaphorical “bread” for the home), and much of the dialogue incorporates both Yiddish words and syntax. Sara Smolinsky, Yezierska's persona, is the youngest daughter of a Talmudic scholar who believes that “only through man can a woman enter heaven.” In this way, he justifies marrying off his first three daughters to apparently rich men they don't love while stifling any suitors without money. The core of the novel is the cultural/generational conflict between father and this youngest daughter who has inherited his “Blood and Iron” personality. The other women, the mother and other daughters, bow down to his will and support his Hebraic study as they try to rise out of the poverty of the ghetto. Unwilling to succumb to her father's demands, Sara breaks with her father. She leaves behind her suffering mother, and works her way through dirt, despair, sweat shops, and night school to finally gain a college degree. As a teacherin she fulfills her ambitions to be part of America, falls in love with an Americanized Jew who feels a desire to retain his Jewish culture, and after the death of her mother, is reconciled to her father. Through familial and cultural mediation, she finds a way to be true both to her culture and the American ideal of independence, at least on the surface. But it is here that Yezierska breaks with the two works mentioned above. Yezierska’s “fairy-tale” text has strong elements of incongruity inscribed in it, and the novel ends as a Jewish lament rather than in a happy-ever-after.

Encoded in the novel are the cultural conflicts at the heart of Jewish immigrant experience. The promised land, as Mary Antin hopefully called it, turned out for many to be a furthering of cultural isolation and poverty. For the men of stature—that is, the scholars of the community—life in America was poverty without the status of community leader and spiritual guide. The dominant capitalist culture hardly prized a learning of Torah or the scholar's position as community exemplar. Nevertheless, Sara's father, Reb Smolinsky—or, revealingly, Yezierska's own father—held on to these values and traditions, and as in the European shtetls, the burden of financial responsibility fell on the women and children. In contradistinction to the shtetl, however, one (especially a woman) could make even a subsistence living only with great difficulty in America. In the old country the women gained little status for their economic role; in America, where the ability to make money constitutes success, the women still remained subservient—the only difference was that the traditional scholars were also denied an esteemed place in society. Irving Howe comments on how the Jewish woman's role as economic provider questioned the mandate of Anglo-American society that woman be solely wife and mother. Jewish expectations emphasized maternal roles, but “the position of the Jewish woman was rendered anomalous by the fact that Jewish tradition enforced a combination of social inferiority and business activity” (265). Counterpoised in this novel are the duty of the wives and daughters to support the family and their acceptance of the secondary status consigned to them. The duty of the daughters also includes marrying men who have been successful materially or remaining at home to work if no suitor rich enough appears—a distortion of the Jewish tradition of extended family involvement in mate selection. Against this rigid system that insists “God did not listen to [the prayers of] women,” Sara revolts.

In Bread Givers, Reb Smolinsky represents the rich traditions of Old World Jewry as well as the hypocritical and patronizing airs of Jewish patriarchy in the New World. (Here, the use of the term “patriarchy” is inscribed by its gendered “other,” since Judaism is a matrilineal culture).
It is understandable that modern readers (particu-
larly feminist ones) might dismiss Reb Smolin-
sky as a petty tyrant who sells off his daughters
and respects nothing but a distorted love of
Torah and a hypocritical desire for material
wealth. Even the younger “Americanized” Jews
within the context of the novel show little respect
for these patriarchs. When a young man, Berel
Bernstein, asks to marry Smolinsky’s eldest
daughter Bessie, they begin to barter about
“price”—what Reb will lose if Bessie marries.
Bernstein responds angrily: “Aint it enough that
your daughter kept you in laziness all these years?
You want yet her husband to support you for the
rest of your days? In America they got no use for
Torah.” We might feel sympathy for this older
man, so insulted, if he weren’t himself so money-
 grubbing. His attitude is that his children are
there to make sure his study is uninterrupted; he
appears to care little about their own welfare.
Even with his wife he is both condescending and
verbally abusive. As they argue, he yells:
“Woman! Stay in your place! You’re smart
enough to bargain with the fish-peddler. But
I’m the head of this family.”

Although this narrow depiction of Reb
Smolinsky is a valid one, it may very well ignore
Yezierska’s purpose as well as the dialectical
structure of the novel. More than a hypocritical
petty tyrant, Reb is a portrait of the learned
scholar described earlier in this essay—lost in
an America that has no respect for Talmudic
pedagogues and that sees Jewish culture in gen-
eral as negative and alien. There is another side
of this man that Yezierska takes great pains to
show us. He is described by Sara as “a picture
out of the bible” and his language is full of the
parables that have been passed on for genera-
tions. In Yezierska’s earlier short story, “Chil-
dren of Loneliness” (1923), a precursor to Reb
Smolinsky is portrayed as a “mystic stranger
from some far-off land” with a “thousand years
of exile, thousand years of hunger, loneliness
and want” sobbing in his voice (Open Cage
155). Reb is perceived by his family as a prophet
of old; in spite of his treatment of his wife, she
revokes him because, in some ways, he encapsu-
lates the Jewish collective spirit which has
allowed them to survive generations of persecu-
tion. As her father prays, Sara watches her
mother: “Mother’s face lost all earthly worries.
Forgotten were beds, mattresses, boarders, and
dowries. Father’s holiness filled her eyes with
light.” He becomes a hero after a fight with the
landlady and stories resound about him in the
Jewish community. As they elaborate on
the reason he hit her, they reveal that in their
minds his bravery was an act against the Ameri-
canized Jews who have forgotten their people:
“She stepped on the Holy Torah.” After Sara
leaves home and is isolated from her community,
hers father comes to see her. She characterizes
him thus: “He seemed to me like Isaiah, Jeremiah,
Solomon, and David, all joined together in one
wise old face. And this man with all the ancient
prophets shining out of his eyes—my father.”

This scene reinforces the dialectical quality
of the tensions developed in the novel, for it is at
this point—when Sara is finally open to her
father—that he once again attempts to force
her into marriage and the strictly defined roles
for women. He refuses to understand how
closely bonded in spirit he and his daughter
are. This conflict eerily foreshadows Yezierska’s
own life when, after the publication of Bread
Givers, she returned to her father’s home only
to hear him tell her: “He who separates himself
from people buries himself in death. A woman
alone, not a wife and not a mother, has no exis-
tence” (Red Ribbon 217). For the protagonist
Sara, this last attack from her father gives her
the strength to respond to him in kind. Her eyes
have his “stony hardness” and she appears to us
as obsessed as he is with her own dreams of
independence in a world “where women don’t
need men to boss them.” To some extent, Sara is
as fanatical as her father, and her rift with him
and her community is tied to this ideal vision of
America and American women. She flings her
angry farewell at her father: “Thank God, I’m
living in America! You made the lives of the
other children! I’m going to make my own life!”

In leaving her tyrannical father, however, she
must also give up the rest of her family, particu-
larly her mother. When her mother comes to see
her, she asks Sara: “Is college more important
than to see your old mother?” Sara answers, “I
could see you later. But I can’t go to college later.”
Sara’s sisters, who beg her unsuccessfully to visit
their mother with them, clearly indicate which
parent she takes after: “Let’s leave her to her
mad education. She’s worse than Father with his
Holy Torah.” Within the historicity of the immi-
grant self-made American compounded by the
scholarly traditions of Judaism, Sara runs head-
long into her studies, ignoring the other aspects
of her life. It is significant to note that both these
symbols of fulfillment (even though they represent opposing cultural values) are inscribed as male. As many early feminists, Sara sees her way toward success within a male-structured environment; one might go so far as to say that Americanization, in addition to the denial of Jewish culture, is seen in this work as a denial of a community of women supporters. Kessler-Harris notes: “On the way to successful Americanization lay another kind of anguish. Becoming an American cut women off from their culture and their past. It brought the fearful recognition that they were adrift in the world” (xiv). For Sara, this feeling of being adrift from her community is exacerbated by the attitudes and, at times, overt racism of the Americans. They ridicule her at her ironing job, and the teacher at night school ignores her. Most painfully, the students at the college where she has worked so hard to win acceptance, look right through her as though she doesn’t exist: “[I was] like a lost ghost. I was nothing and nobody… Even in college, I had not escaped from the ghetto.” Pertinently, Sara is at a dance when she realizes the extent of her outsider status. Because of her childhood of poverty, her physical presence, and her perceived “Jewish” difference, Sara is isolated from the happy dancers—she is not one of them. Her sexual identity is then marked by her cultural difference.

Much of Jewish fiction worldwide has focused on the outsider status of the Jew; as with other “minority” literatures, Jewish immigrant fiction has also addressed the loss of culture in the attempt to assimilate. Often, the shocking irony is that no matter what one gives up, s/he still remains an outsider to the dominant culture. What adds to the complexity of Bread Givers is that Sara’s flight towards Americanization is intricately bound to her fight for independence as a woman. And as I noted above, her identity as woman has been developed by her cultural/ethnic background, isolating her even more from the world she hopes to attain. For on the surface of this novel, Sara succeeds in the Anglo-American world she longed to penetrate, but like Yezierska, Sara finds the rewards empty because of the loss of her cultural identity. The subverted vision of Sara’s apparently successful integration into American culture and the layers of loss ascribed to it is brought into stark relief by the novel’s ending. At the end of the novel, teacher Sara finds happiness with Hugo Seelig, a native-born Jew and the principal at her school; through his love and desire to learn Hebrew from Reb Smolinsky, she is reconciled to her father and has mediated a place between her own culture and the dominant one. In this way, she gains her rights as an independent woman choosing the man and career that she wants and is still a part of her ancient heritage. As an old man, her father finally begins teaching her “the wisdom of Torah” and glows once more with the possibility of passing on the traditions to her Americanized Jewish lover:

“I thought that in America we were all lost… And yet my own daughter who is not a Jewess and not a gentile—brings me… an American. And for what? To learn Hebrew. From whom? From me. Lord of the universe! You never forsake your faithful ones.”

Even in his joy, the father sees his own daughter as a double-self, to paraphrase W.E.B. DuBois, in spite of her and her husband’s adherence to Judaic traditions.

The tensions of Jewish immigrant experience, so graphically portrayed, appear to be relieved by the end of the novel. Sara has mediated between cultures as the narrative resolves difference. Most critics of Bread Givers agree that the novel ends in reconciliation—with Sara having it both ways. In fact some critics, like Alice Kessler-Harris and Carol Schoen, see the ending as too pat, too happy-ever-after to be believable; they do not see the conflicts in the novel appropriately resolved by the neatly packaged ending. But is the ending so neatly packaged? I pose a (re)reading of this ending by exposing the elements of incongruity in Sara’s successful move towards Americanization. As a persona for the author Yezierska, Sara’s experience reflects the dis-ease that Yezierska felt in her adopted land. As an immigrant daughter of America, Yezierska did manage for a time to fulfill her goal for success in America, yet as an alien and a Jew, she was never accepted into that world as an equal. Both the biography written by her daughter, Louise Levitas Henriksen, and Yezierska’s own autobiography, Red Ribbon on a White Horse, attest to the alienation she suffered. Just as Yezierska herself never resolved the conflict, the novel also does not reconcile difference, although it appears to superficially. The sense of loss and the tone of lament which pervade the novel are not easily mitigated by Sara’s triumphs at the end. Earlier moments in Sara’s linear move towards her goal expose hidden opposition to her progress. One such event is the death of Sara’s mother. When Sara finally returns home after college to be with her mother, she finds her dying. Sara’s belief that she could
regain the lost time away from her family is shattered by her mother’s death, and she is further estranged from her community by her refusal to tear a rent in her only suit, as is Jewish burial custom. The loss of her mother is symbolic of the other losses Sara suffers as she makes her uneven journey toward the dominant culture. Living away from her community, she feels disconnected, homeless, apart from life. She thinks back to the kitchen in Hester Street: “Even in our worst poverty we sat around the table, together, like people.”

Even mediated cultural assimilation inscribes loss throughout the novel, and dialectically, it is precisely in the apparent resolution of the last chapter that Bread Givers’s “fairytale” ending deconstructs. The title of this chapter is “Man Born of Woman,” taken from a Torah passage Reb Smolinsky recites: “Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble.” At the opening of this chapter, Sara walks through the ghetto and sees her own happiness as an affront to her people who still suffer the degradations of poverty:

But as I walked along through Hester Street towards the Third Avenue L, my joy hurt like guilt. Lines upon lines of pushcart peddlers were crouching in the rain. Backs bent, hands in their sleeves, ears under their collars, grimy faces squeezed into frozen masks. They were like animals helpless against the cold, pitiless weather. (emphasis added)

Sara’s lament for her people is not only for the cruelty of a system that locks people in poverty, but also for what one must leave behind to succeed. The melancholy tone of this chapter is oppressive, hardly the cadences of young love and familial/cultural reconciliation. But it is the last paragraph of the novel which most forcefully undercut the narrative’s conclusion, unraveling the chapter’s neatly tied ends and collapsing the ideology of mediated assimilation. We close the book with Hugo and Sara questioning whether her father, unhappy in his surroundings, should come and live with them. She leaves the decision and “the problem of father—still unresolved.” But as they walk away, they hear the “sorrowful cadences” of her father’s voice, and Sara utters the last line of the novel as she hears the “fading chant”: “I felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn’t just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me.”

The ending of the novel deconstructs the notion of cultural mediation which, for Sara, is finally untenable. Referring to the character David Levensky in Abraham Cahan’s novel as one who has attempted mediation, Chametzky acknowledges those for whom mediation did not work: “He tried to put together the phenomenon of biculturality; trying to see if the two parts of his life might fit together. Levensky at the end of his narrative concludes that they do not comport well—and so the feeling of fragmentation and cultural unease we are left with” (63). This “cultural unease” that Chametzky refers to is starkly manifest in Yezierska. For Sara—and for Yezierska—as for many immigrant Jewish women and their descendents, the desire to dissociate oneself from those generations and that historicity is impossible. Sara’s recursive memory of the culture that both sustained and restricted her as a woman is posited in contradistinction to a hegemony which has sought to efface her and her community. This dis-ease with which Sara moves into the margins of the dominant culture signifies an (un)mediated difference that resists the external reconciliation of the text.

In her poem, “Yom Kippur 1984,” Adrienne Rich poses the question, “What is a Jew in solitude?” (75). Over fifty years earlier, Anzia Yezierska wrestled with the same question, attempting to reconcile the Jewish immigrant woman’s desire for assimilation (Americanization) with the rich but constricting life of her community and culture. For Yezierska, and perhaps for her literary daughter Rich, culture (and gender) identity cannot be mediated to erase difference. Bread Givers—which challenges notions of independence and the rights of woman along with what is lost in the journey toward assimilation—is finally not a tale of reconciliation but a novel of lamentation. And this lament is born of the collective memory of diaspora Jews. For the author, and for the generations of (women) Jews “in solitude,” the conflict is still left unresolved.


Sources

Chametzky, Jules, et al., eds. Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology, Norton, 2001, p. 120.


**FURTHER READING**

Dearborn, Mary V., Pocahontas’s Daughters: Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture, Oxford University Press, 1986.

Dearborn considers the possibility of a female ethnic literature as part of mainstream American literature. Dearborn discusses the “Pocahontas marriage” between the exotic ethnic woman and the white American man, a pattern in the fiction of Anzia Yezierska, making her relationship with John Dewey part of a myth of acceptance.


Goldsmith discusses the symbolism of character dress in Yezierska’s fiction as representing the desire of the immigrant to assimilate into the new culture. A large portion of the essay addresses Bread Givers.


Handlin’s influential and award-winning scholarship on immigrants in America is here focused on Jewish immigration and assimilation in the United States. Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 deal particularly with Yezierska’s generation: why they fled Eastern Europe, the conditions in America, and antisemitism.


This biography by Yezierska’s daughter draws on personal and family memories of the author’s life and work. Here is detailed what Yezierska left out of her autobiographical fiction: her two husbands, daughter, and other family members. Although it was difficult having a mother like Anzia, Louise recalls their warm and intimate relationship.