

Abraham Cahan's "Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/module/abraham-cahans-yekl-tale-new-york-ghetto>.

Introduction

Abraham Cahan's English-language novella *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, published in 1896, is a work of realistic fiction that draws attention to Jewish immigrants' complicated negotiations of personal and cultural identity in New York at the turn of the century. It does so with humor, criticism, and compassion. The novel's plot centers on Yekl, known as Jake, a Jewish immigrant sweatshop worker. He is proudly charting a path toward Americanization through consumption of popular culture, acquirement of rudimentary English, and flirtations with assimilating Jewish women in the more sexually liberated environment of the American city. When Jake's wife, Gitl, and their son arrive in America, Jake is ashamed of her East European Jewish ways of speech and dress and sees her as everything he has been trying not to be. Although she tries to please him, he ultimately divorces her. He comes to regret the loss of this wife—the idea of her had connected him to the person he used to be.

This kit presents historical materials, images, excerpts from related literary sources, and even a thematically relevant song, to give context and richness to lessons about the novella.

Subjects

Fiction, Immigration, Marriage, New York

Reading and Background

- *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* is in the public domain, and you can [read it in full online](#).
- There have been several biographies and studies of Abraham Cahan and his writing. Of these, Ronald Sanders's *The Downtown Jews* (1969) offers a portrait of Cahan's career and the politics of his community, and Seth Lipsky's *The Rise of Abraham Cahan* (2013) describes Cahan's transformation from a small-town Russian Jew into an ambitious and influential journalist, strident political activist, and major literary figure.
- Teachers may wish to read other works in Abraham Cahan's oeuvre. Here are some places to start: *The White Terror and the Red: A Novel of Revolutionary Russia*, available in its entirety on [this page](#) at archive.org; his novel set amidst New York's garment industry, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, available in its entirety on [this page](#) at gutenberg.org; and *Grandma Never Lived in America* (a collection of his short fiction and English-language journalism).
- Those wishing to read literary criticism or historical criticism about *Yekl* may enjoy Aviva Taubenfeld's "Only an 'L': Linguistic Borders and the Immigrant Author in Abraham Cahan's *Yekl* and *Yekl der Yankee*," published in *Multilingual America* (1998), in which the author compares the Yiddish and English versions of the text, and Hana Wirth Neshet's *Call it English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (2008), which focuses on issues of language and dialect. Daliya Kandiotti's chapter on *Yekl* in *Migrant Sites: America, Place, and Diaspora Literature* (2009) discusses the novel through the lens of the late nineteenth-century style of imbuing literary works with "local color." This [essay](#) by Andrew R. Heinze, published by *Forward* in 2004, focuses on teaching *Yekl* to contemporary American undergraduates, and may offer insights on how readers unfamiliar with Jewish immigrant history can relate to the work.
- For more information on other writers excerpted in this kit: to learn more about Hamlin Garland, teachers may consult Keith Newlin's *Hamlin Garland: A Life* (2008); and to read up on William Dean Howells, see Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson's *William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life* (2005). For perspectives on local color writing, see Stephanie Foote's *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2001) or Philip Joseph's *American Literary Regionalism in a Global Age* (2007).
- Teachers interested in drawing further comparisons between *Yekl* and contemporaneous American literature may appreciate this [lesson from the National Humanities Center](#), which compares *Yekl* to Cleveland-born black author Charles W. Chestnutt's short story "The Wife of His Youth" (1900).



- The wonderful 1975 film *Hester Street*, adapted for the screen and directed by Joan Micklin Silver, is based on *Yekl*.
- The Great Jewish Books Teacher Resources kit by Feygi Zylberman Philips, "Divorce in Modern Jewish Culture," includes a discussion of the divorce scene at the end of *Yekl*.

Resources

1: Illustrated biographical sketch, Samuel Cahan's "Incidents in the Life of Abraham Cahan," June 11, 1922.

Abraham Cahan (1860-1951), the author of *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, was born in a shtetl in an area that is now Belarus but was then the Russian Empire. He received a traditional Jewish education and later matriculated at a Russian government-authorized Jewish school designed to Russify Jewish youth. In his youth, he became involved with underground revolutionary activities. In 1882, after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, he fled Russia for the United States. In America, Cahan became involved with politically activated Jews, and played a leading role in anarchist and labor groups.

Cahan began his writing career with a Russian journal in New York, and then, shortly after learning English, with such outlets such as the *New York Sun* and the *New York Press*. Cahan went on to publish several novels and short stories in English which garnered him much attention as a realist writer of "ghetto fiction," representing the tough realities of immigrant life in New York. In the Jewish world, however, Cahan was most famous as the editor-in-chief of the large and influential Yiddish newspaper the *Jewish Daily Forward* (*Forverts*), which he helped to found in 1897 and edited from 1903 until his death in 1951.

In the English-language press, Cahan enjoyed a reputation as a representative of Jewish immigrants to the United States. This illustration from a 1922 profile of Cahan in the *San Francisco Chronicle* provides some biographical information on Cahan while revealing his status as a colorful figure who had earned respect from the English-reading public.

Suggested Activity: Have your students study the illustration and discuss: how is Cahan represented in the sketch of his arrival in New York City (top left), and how does he look different after ten years (top right)? What might the artist be implying when he writes that Cahan, "Discovered America ten years after his arrival in New York"?

How do Cahan's transformation, and the vision of America ("The Land of Realities") as seen in the top right, compare to *Yekl*'s? (Note that the title of the article in which this image appears is, "One Man's Progress from Realism to Realities: Remarkable Recital of How Abraham Cahan Discovered America Ten years After Disembarking in New York," seemingly making reference to Cahan's evolution from being a proponent of literary *realism* to actually confronting *realities* upon settling in New York and seeking to improve the lot of the people there.)

The artist says that Cahan's message to his Jewish readers is, "Become Americans." What do you make of this? Was this the message of *Yekl*?

Source: Samuel Cahan, "Incidents in the Life of Abraham Cahan," illustration for Charles W. Wood, "One Man's Progress from Realism to Realities: Remarkable Recital of How Abraham Cahan Discovered America Ten Years After Disembarking in New York," *San Francisco Chronicle* (June 11, 1922).

2: Essay excerpt, Werner Sollors's "Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture," 1986.

In his work of cultural criticism, Werner Sollors argues that American identities are formed through negotiations between descent (attention to ethnic, racial, and familial heritage) and consent (cultural and political affiliations that subjects choose for themselves, sometimes out of a desire to belong, even if such affiliations go against familial heritage). He analyzes works of American literature, including Abraham Cahan's *Yekl*, to show that the business of navigating between these poles is central to American culture.

Suggested Activity: Have your students read the passage and discuss: to what extent do you think Sollors's concepts of descent and consent are evident in Jake's struggle to define himself in his new American setting? In what cultures is Jake trying to take part? What elements of these cultures does Jake feel pushed and pulled by?

Source: Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 6.

3: Commercial document, "Prepaid Steamship Ticket Record," March 24, 1924.

In *Yekl*, Jake has, for years, been paying installments on his wife's ticket to travel from Europe to America. As time passes, his wife seems more and more distant to him, removed from the realities of his American life.

This artifact is a record for a prepaid steamship ticket, issued March 24, 1924, for a second class ticket from Hamburg to Philadelphia. The purchaser, Carl Mach in Philadelphia, had bought a ticket for his wife, Zofia Mach, who was living in Poland. The record explains that he had been saving for the ticket and paying in installments through the People's Bank in Philadelphia for five years, and that the total cost of the ticket amounted to \$143.

Suggested Activity: Have students observe the artifact and see if they can puzzle out what information it provides: who has bought what, for whom, what are the dates and locations of travel, what class on the ship will the passenger be in, and how much money has been spent. (Talk with students about how that would be a great deal more today, considering inflation.)

Then give them this prompt for discussion: think of a time that you pursued a long-term goal. What was it like, at the beginning, to imagine the end goal? How did your feelings about the goal change as you pursued it over time? Now think of yourself five years ago. How have you changed since then? Now consider Yekl's situation. What do you think it was like to save for passage for his family over five years? How do you think the amount of time Yekl saved for his wife's ticket affected him and his relationship with his wife?

Source: "Prepaid Steamship Ticket Record," bought by Carl Mach for Zofia Mach (Philadelphia: Lipshutz/People's Bank, Foreign Department, March 24, 1924), part of the Passage Order Book Records held at the Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center, found in Donna Pointkouski, "Bank Records: Another Resource for Tracing Immigrants" on her blog "What's Past is Prologue" (March 21, 2009), <<https://pastprologue.wordpress.com/2009/03/21/bank-records-another-resource-for-tracing-immigrants/>>, accessed February 10, 2018.

4: Photographs, Jacob Riis's "How the Other Half Lives," 1890.

In 1890, Jacob Riis, a police reporter and photographer for the *New York Tribune*, published a collection of his photographs of the slums, streets, and saloons populated by New York's poor. He titled it *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*. These images, supplemented by succinct, unsettling descriptions, served as a catalyst for social reform. With his photographs, Riis, who was himself an immigrant to the United States from Denmark, shines a light on the same harsh realities that Cahan describes in the gritty passages of his realistic fiction. The images in this resource have been selected to align with the following passage from *Yekl*:

"He had to pick and nudge his way through dense swarms of bedraggled half-naked humanity; past garbage barrels rearing their overflowing contents in sickening piles, and lining the streets in malicious suggestion of rows of trees; underneath tiers and tiers of fire escapes, barricaded and festooned with mattresses, pillows, and featherbeds not yet gathered in for the night. The pent-in sultry atmosphere was laden with nausea and pierced with a discordant and, as it were, plaintive buzz. Supper had been despatched in a hurry, and the teeming populations of the cyclopic tenement houses were out in full force 'for fresh air,' as even these people will say in mental quotation marks" (1896 edition of *Yekl*, 27).

Suggested Activities: Have your students compare the photographs to the passage. Ask them: how is the experience of observing the same scene through fiction and through photography different? What do you think are the political and social aims of these works, and what do you see as the artistic aims?

Source: Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890).

5: Novella excerpt, Abraham Cahan's "Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto," 1896.

In this scene from *Yekl*, the title character, his name now Americanized to "Jake," visits a dancing academy that occupies the space of a former sweatshop. The room is packed with immigrant Jews of the Lower East Side, still in their work-clothes, learning how to dance and behave with acceptable Yankee manners around their age-mates of the opposite sex. Jake has been recruited by the dancing master to ask if Mamie, one of the prettiest girls there, would deign to give an awkward but well-connected businessman a whirl, as he stands forlorn and neglected in a corner of the room. This dialogue presents the negotiation between Jake and Mamie, in which, in the first line, he offers to waltz with her if she dances with the businessman.

The language here is of particular interest. We learn earlier that "English was the official language of the academy, where it was broken and mispronounced in as many different ways as there were Yiddish dialects represented in that institution" (36). Meanwhile, Mamie's English is a step above, with the narrator telling us that "Like the majority of the girls of the academy, Mamie's English was a much nearer approach to a justification of its name than the gibberish spoken by the men" (40). We see the two kinds of English, and a bit of Yiddish, in this dialogue.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students to read the passage and consider the language presented therein. Ask them to describe the voice of the characters depicted in this scene. What differs between the two characters' language, and indeed the language of the narrator? Ask them to give specific examples of word choices and constructions in the excerpt. Why might Mamie's speech, and that of the rest of the women, hew more closely to "proper" English than that of the men? Do they find Yekl's speech to truly be "gibberish"? What point is Cahan making by using that word, and is it fair?

Also consider Cahan's footnote. (Note that "getzke" does not only mean a "crucifix," or more literally, "a little idol." It can also be used to mean a "spoiled child," and seems to also carry this connotation in this dialogue.) Why does Jake drop in a Yiddish word here? And why would Cahan use words with which his audience was not familiar, meanwhile including glosses for some of these words? What does the presence of the footnote tell them about the intended audience? Ask your students to go through their version of the text. Where else does Cahan include footnotes? What kinds of things does he explain with footnotes, and what does he leave unexplained?

Even with the footnote, students may find this passage, and the novella as a whole, linguistically challenging at times. Do they find it to be, and what about the text makes it so? Do students think it may have been less or more challenging for readers when it was first published? Ask students to find examples of Cahan's portrayal of immigrant speech patterns in other moments in the book, and to think about how he uses his characters' varying dialects as a way to develop his characterizations, storyline, and theme. What approach does Cahan take to reproducing the speech of his characters, and what alternate approaches could he have taken?

Source: Abraham Cahan, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896), 41.

6: Music, lyrics, and recording of song, Mikhl Gordon's "Di Bord," 1868.

When Jake reunites with his wife Gitl in America, his appearance has changed dramatically since his wife last saw him. One of the most significant signs of his new, secularized, Americanized appearance is that he has shaved his beard. "O! a lamentation upon me! He shaves his beard!" Gitl cries in the novella (73).

This popular satirical Yiddish song, "*Di bord*" ("The Beard"), by poet and songwriter Mikhl Gordon (1823-1890), illustrates the potentially dramatic significance of secularizing Jews shaving their beards. The song, written by a *maskil* (an adherent of the Jewish Enlightenment), pokes fun at pious Jews, as a wife committed to tradition laments her husband's self-grooming decisions.

Suggested Activity: Read the song together with your students, including the English translation. Ask them which lines they find particularly funny, and why. Then listen to the recording (or watch it being performed [here](#), by a group of London musicians). Try singing it together afterwards. Ask them how they think the music underlines the humor of the lyrics.

Then discuss: why is the wife in the song so upset about the beard? What might it represent to her? Might her husband be making related changes in his life without her consent? To what extent might the husband's apparent religious choices impact the life of his wife and perhaps their shared household? In what ways do you think the scenario and tone of the song are similar to or different from the parallel scene from *Yekl*? Ask your students to write a new verse to the song from the perspective of Gitl, or an "answer verse" from Jake.

Source: Mikhl Gordon, "*Di bord*," in Eleanor Gordon Mlotek, ed., *Mir Trogn a Gezang: Favorite Yiddish Songs of Our Generation* (New York: The Workmen's Circle, 1972), 128-129.

Mikhl Gordon, "*Di bord*," performed by Rachel Weston (voice), Josh Middleton (accordion), and Ben Pitt (violin), from video "Rachel Weston sings Di Bord, accompanied by Josh Middleton Ben Pitt" (YouTube channel silverAJ, January 5, 2016), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIDfqWUPBow>>, accessed February 10, 2018.

7: Illustration, Jacob Epstein's "Gitl" in Hutchins Hapgood's "The Spirit of the Ghetto," 1902.

In 1902, Hutchins Hapgood (1869-1944), a non-Jewish, Harvard-educated author and journalist who was raised in the Midwest, published *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, containing his attempts to understand and interpret Jewish immigrant life and society

in New York. His profile of Abraham Cahan in the book includes a description of the novel *Yekl* and this illustration of Gitl, drawn by **Jacob Epstein** (1880-1959), himself a New York native and the son of Polish-Jewish immigrants. Illustrating *The Spirit of the Ghetto* was Epstein's first major commission—he would eventually settle in London and become one of the most lauded portrait sculptors of the twentieth century.

Suggested Activity: Have students first create their own illustrations of Gitl, or write down a description of the character and how they might expect to portray her in a picture. Then, invite them to compare their illustrations, or descriptions, to this one. Ask students if they think this portrait exoticizes Gitl or depicts her in a realistic light, if they think it represents her as powerful or disempowered, and if they think it is accurate to the descriptions of Gitl in the story. What do you think Epstein hopes readers will learn about immigrant culture from this image of Gitl?

Source: Jacob Epstein, "Gitl," in Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1902), 250.

8: Newspaper excerpt, "Gallery of Missing Husbands," *Forverts*, December 10, 1913.

During the height of Eastern European Jewish settlement in America, the trauma of immigration took an enormous toll on the stability of Jewish families. One significant consequence of mass immigration was wife abandonment: men who left behind wives and children until money could be saved for passage might ultimately never send for them, or might shirk the burden of feeding their families by "disappearing." Jewish charitable organizations in a number of American cities devoted considerable resources and energy to curbing this problem, including, by 1911, the establishment of a National Desertion Bureau. Jake's divorce from Gitl to marry Mamie is part of this larger phenomenon.

The image below is of the "Gallery of Missing Husbands," a regular feature in the *Forverts* (*Jewish Daily Forward*) that solicited the community's help in finding men who had deserted their wives and families. The headline above the men's portraits reads, "A galerye fun fershvundene mener - Oyb ihr derkent zey, un veyst vu zey zaynen, lozt visn zeyere froyen durkh'n 'forverts'" ("A Gallery of Missing Husbands - If you recognize them, and know where they are, let their wives know through the *Forverts*").

Suggested Activity: Examine the artifact and discuss: what do you find unusual, if anything, about the publishing, composition, or wording of this newspaper item? Why do you think immigration and Americanization precipitated the breakdown of families? How does *Yekl* help to illustrate this phenomenon? What other reasons, aside from those observed in *Yekl*, might account for this phenomenon? Why do you think Jewish social institutions like newspapers and charities were invested in solving this problem?

Source: Anonymous, "A galerye fun fershvundene mener" (New York: *Forverts*, December 10, 1913), 8. Digitized by the Historical Jewish Press (JPress) project of the National Library of Israel and Tel Aviv University.

9: Novella review and excerpt thereof, William Dean Howells's "New York Low Life in Fiction," 1896.

William Dean Howells (1837-1920) was a prominent novelist and literary critic who promoted literary realism. In 1892, curious about the Jewish neighborhood on the Lower East Side, Howells sought out Abraham Cahan, who was at the time the editor of the Jewish socialist publication *Arbeiter Zeitung* (*Workers' Newspaper*). Cahan visited Howells's home and the famous author was surprised to find that Cahan was not only knowledgeable about immigrant life, but was also well-read in realist literature. Howells encouraged Cahan to write about the Jewish immigrant experience for a broader American readership. *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* was written in response to this encouragement.

In his review of *Yekl*, Howells compares the book to Stephen Crane's first novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, a sharply realist work in which the life of a poor girl from the Bowery neighborhood of New York is ruined due to the drunkenness, dissolution, and dire circumstances of those around her.

The entire review is presented in this resource, and the teacher may wish to project that—the first image that appears—to give their students a glimpse at the startling headline and a sense of the way the article was laid out, with a portrait of the article-writer at its center (we get a sense of the authority of this figure from the illustration, and its caption, "America's most famous living novelist as he appears in his latest and best photograph by Cox"). However, the text in the whole review is too small to read—scroll down to actually read an enlarged excerpt of the review with the students, taken from the end of the article.

Suggested Activity: Before reading the review excerpt in this resource, have your students write their own review of *Yekl*. In it, ask them to describe the novel to an audience that has not read it, compare it to at least one other work that they think it is similar (or dissimilar) to, and recommend it (or not). Then, when they read the excerpt of the review by Howells, ask the students to compare

it to their own. How are their perspectives on *Yekl* similar to or different from that of Howells? What kinds of expectations do we have of literature today, and why might they differ from those of Cahan's period?

Also pose these questions concerning the review by Howells: why do you think Howells sees Cahan's subject matter as "picturesque" and "outlandish"? Do you think this made potential readers hesitant to read the work, or do you think it was a selling point? Do you agree that the novel is more tragic than comic? Do you agree that it is written from an "American" point of view?

Source: William Dean Howells, "New York Low Life in Fiction" (New York: *New York World*, July 26, 1896), 18.

10: Review excerpt, "Notes and Comments," *The Israelite*, 1896.

The Israelite was an English-language Jewish newspaper founded in Chicago in 1854. It was the leading organ for Reform Judaism in America in the early twentieth century.

Suggested Activity: Have your students read the text and discuss the following questions: what praise does the reviewer have for Cahan's work, and what concerns? Are these artistic criticisms, criticisms emanating from a concern about the image of Jews in the public sphere, or both? Why do you think the author may have these concerns? Do writers have a responsibility to think about the social impact of their writing, beyond artistic and aesthetic concerns? If so, do you think Cahan's portrayal was irresponsibly unflattering? What "favorable part" of the lives of immigrant Jews might Cahan have left out of his book?

Source: "Notes and Comments," *The Israelite* (Chicago: July 30, 1896).

11: Short story excerpt, Hamlin Garland's "Among the Corn-Rows," 1891.

Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto is often contextualized as part of the local color movement, a literary mode within the broader framework of literary realism popular in the late nineteenth century. "Local color" writing focused on the dialect, customs, history, and landscape of a particular region, at a moment when the country was unifying under an industrial, capitalist economy and regional differences were dissipating.

This excerpt, from Hamlin Garland's short story "Among the Corn-Rows," is an example of local color writing focusing on a different region and culture, that of the American prairie and the farming folk who called it home. The story sets up a contrast between a young newspaper editor, Searidge, who is deeply moved by the South Dakota landscape, and Rob Rodemaker, a frontier homesteader who must actually make a living from the land and consequently has little time for contemplation of its inherent poetry.

Hamlin Garland, like Abraham Cahan, was influenced by novelist William Dean Howells. The full text of "Among the Corn-Rows" may be found in Garland's collection *Main-Travelled Roads*, digitized [here](#) by Google Books.

Suggested Activity: Have students read the passage and discuss: in what ways is this writing similar to Cahan's work? How does it differ? Based on this excerpt and *Yekl*, how would you characterize local color writing? Why do you think local color writing was so popular in the late nineteenth century?

Source: Hamlin Garland, "Among the Corn Rows" in *Main-Travelled Roads* (New York: Harper & Row, 1891), 90.