

Tevey the Dairyman

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/module/tevey-dairyman>.

Introduction

Sholem Aleichem, the pseudonym of Sholem Rabinovitch (1859-1916), was one of the greatest Jewish writers of modern times, a pioneer of literary fiction in Yiddish who transformed the folk materials and experiences of Eastern European Jews into classics of world literature. His most beloved character, Tevey the Dairyman, became the protagonist of stage and film adaptations, including the Broadway musical and film *Fiddler on the Roof*, securing his place in popular culture worldwide; even before that, though, Sholem Aleichem's stories featuring Tevey were appreciated as brilliant comic distillations of modern Jewish experience. This kit provides resources with which teachers can introduce their students to the character of Tevey and to the choices that have been made in presenting and performing this character over the years.

Subjects

Eastern Europe, Fiction, Film, Performance, Yiddish

Reading and Background:

- Several translations of Sholem Aleichem's Tevey stories are available in paperback, suitably priced for teaching; these include Hillel Halkin's in *Tevey the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories* (1987) and Aliza Shevrin's in *Tevey the Dairyman and Motl the Cantor's Son* (2009).
- A short biographical article on Sholem Aleichem can be found in the *YIVO Encyclopedia*, while Jeremy Dauber's *The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem* (2013) presents a full, appropriately page-turning treatment of the writer's life and legacy.
- Alisa Solomon's *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof* (2013) offers a robust, wide-ranging survey of the creation of the musical and its worldwide influence.

Resources

1: Short story with audio, Sholem Aleichem's "Tevey Strikes It Rich," 1895, Yiddish with translation.

Here, in the second paragraph of one of the earliest Tevey stories, Tevey sets the scene, and Sholem Aleichem gives the reader a sense of who he is as a character.

Suggested activity: Listen to the audio in Yiddish and have the students read along in English. Read the English aloud. Ask: what do you notice about the way the character, in the audio version, speaks? What impression does this passage—written and spoken—give us of Tevey as a character and storyteller? Why would Sholem Aleichem have Tevey begin this way?

Sources: Sholem Aleichem, "Dos groyse gevins," in *Ale verk Sholem Aleichem (The Collected Works of Sholem Aleichem)*, vol. 5 (Vilna, Warsaw: B. Kletskin, 1925), 16, retrieved from the Yiddish Book Center's Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library, <www.archive.org/details/nybc203813>, accessed March 1, 2016.

Sholem Aleichem, trans. Hillel Halkin, "Tevey Strikes It Rich," in *Tevey the Dairyman* (New York: Schocken, 1987), 3.

Israeli theater artist Shmuel Atzmon reading the work of Sholem Aleichem, *Tevey der milkhikher* (Tevey the Dairyman), Yiddish Book Center's Sami Rohr Library of Recorded Yiddish Books <www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/audio-books/smr-251SholemAleichemK...>, accessed March 1, 2016.

2: Short story with audio, Sholem Aleichem's "Tevey Strikes It Rich," 1895, Yiddish with



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translation.

This is an example of how Tevye transforms traditional Jewish sources when he quotes from them. The line he quotes, "*Hamavdil beyn koydesh lekhoyl*" is from a blessing said at *havdalah*, the ceremony marking the separation of the (holy) Sabbath from the (not as holy) rest of the week. The rhyme implies that just as God separates the holy from the commonplace, he is also responsible for separating the rich from the poor.

Suggested activity: If students are familiar with the *havdalah* blessing, ask them where this line comes from and how Tevye might be altering its meaning for his own purposes. Ask: why is he doing this, rather than just saying what he thinks straightforwardly? What does he achieve by drawing on traditional sources? Does Tevye's misinterpretation of the source suggest that he is ignorant of Jewish texts or that he is not sincere in his religious faith, or does it imply something else about his relationship to Judaism?

Sources:

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3: Video, Ruth Wisse's "Sholem Aleichem and the Resonance of Tevye," 2011.

A perspective on Tevye from Professor Ruth Wisse, a literary scholar.

Suggested activity: Have students watch this clip, as well as the ones in resources 4, 5, and 6, and ask them to compare Wisse's understanding of Tevye as a fundamentally autobiographical character and Samuel Kassow's of Tevye as "quintessentially Jewish" to Dan Miron's understanding of Tevye as an "irking nuisance" and Pauline Kael's as "a limited, slightly stupid common man." Can these perspectives be reconciled? Why would Sholem Aleichem have made Tevye both representatively Jewish and also unappealing or stupid? What does it mean to choose Tevye as the representative, or quintessential, Jew? Are there other characters—real or fictional—that could, like Tevye, represent the modern Jewish experience?

Source: Ruth Wisse, "Sholem Aleichem and the Resonance of Tevye" (Yiddish Book Center's "[Unquiet Pages](#)" exhibit, 2011), video.

4: Video, Samuel Kassow's "Sholem Aleichem's Tevye as a Quintessentially Jewish Character," 2011.

A perspective from Professor Sam Kassow, a historian, on the character of Tevye.

Suggested activity: See #3.

Source: Samuel Kassow's "Sholem Aleichem's Tevye as a Quintessentially Jewish Character" (Yiddish Book Center's "[Unquiet Pages](#)" exhibit, 2011), video.

5: Literary criticism, Dan Miron's *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking*, 2010.

A perspective on Tevye from one of the great scholars of modern Jewish literature, Professor Dan Miron.

Suggested activity: See #3.

Source: Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 397.

6: Film review, Pauline Kael's "A Bagel with a Bite Out of It," 1971.

A perspective on Tevye from one of the great film critics of the late twentieth-century, Pauline Kael.

Suggested activity: See #3.

Source: Pauline Kael, "A Bagel with a Bite Out of It," *New Yorker*, November 13, 1971, 133-139.

7: Film, Maurice Schwartz's *Tevye*, 1939, Yiddish with subtitles.

The first full-length film adaptation of Tevye was directed by and stars Maurice Schwartz, a legendary American Yiddish theater actor. In this scene, Schwartz-as-Tevye explains why he would not be comfortable in America.

Suggested activity: Have students watch the clip. Ask them: what are the key elements of Tevye's character as performed by Schwartz? In what ways does this Tevye match your vision of the character? In what ways does he differ from your vision?

Source: *Tevye*, 35 mm film, directed by Maurice Schwartz (1939; The National Center for Jewish Film, restored 1978, 1981), DVD.

8: Script and audio, Zero Mostel as Tevye in Jerry Bock, Sheldon Harnick, and Joseph Stein's *Fiddler on the Roof*, 1964.

When *Fiddler on the Roof* debuted on Broadway in 1964, the lead role was played by Zero Mostel, a celebrated (and formerly blacklisted) American-born comedian and actor.

Suggested activity: Before playing the clip, give students the relevant line from the script and ask a few of them to perform it. Ask them to read it "Jewishly." Talk about what features of speech sound Jewish. Have students listen to Mostel's accent and cadence and have them discuss his performance: in what ways does his voice sound Jewish?

Source: Zero Mostel in "*Fiddler on the Roof*: The Original Broadway Cast Recording," music by Jerry Bock, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, and book by Joseph Stein (1964; RCA, 2003), CD.

9: Film, Topol as Tevye in Norman Jewison's *Fiddler on the Roof*, 1971.

The film version of *Fiddler on the Roof* starred the Israeli actor Chaim Topol, who had headlined as Tevye in the original London production of the musical. He was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actor.

Suggested activity: Have students watch the clip. Ask them: what has stayed the same and what has changed, from Mostel's presentation of Tevye to Topol's?

Source: Topol in *Fiddler on the Roof*, directed by Norman Jewison (1971, United Artists; 2011, MGM), DVD.