

The Jew as Portrayed in American Jewish Novels of the 1930's

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By the 1930's, the realistic novel, dealing with the problem of man in society, was definitely established in America as the central core of literary activity. Literature was no longer regarded solely as an expression of ideas or beauty, but as a fundamental means of understanding man's social orientation. The novel became a mirror of society, and American novels by Jews about Jewish life, written during this period, may well serve as a historical mirror of the structure of American Jewish society.¹

Of course, it would be foolish to attempt to picture Jewish life in America, during any epoch, on the basis of fiction alone. Yet, an analysis of the novels may well serve as a basic historical tool in portraying the inner psychological panorama of attitudes and emotions that constitutes the background of this decade of American Jewish history. We may understand the ways in which Jews and the English-speaking Jewish writers viewed themselves; and this self image is significant, whether it be a realistic or a distorted one.

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Psychologically, the period of the 30's marks a most crucial decade for the subsequent history of American Jewry. From these novels it appears as a decade of emotional turmoil, or adjustment and decision — the crucible out of which emerged our present patterns

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¹ See *The New York Times Index* (New York: *New York Times*, 1930-1941); *The Book Review Digest* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1930-1941); *Readers Guide to Periodic Literature* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1930-1941); V. F. Calverton, "Literature As A Revolutionary Force," *Canadian Forum*, XV (1935), 221.

and structures. The Jewish novels written during this period eloquently dramatize this process of transition, even though they do so in a personalized and individualized form. In these works the Jewish characters are in constant search of a *modus vivendi*, a way of adjusting to the demands of the American scene. They are tossed on a stormy psychological ocean between two worlds, the Old World and the New, and are unable to steer a course consistent with either. This feeling of the emotionally lost, tempest-tossed Jew who cannot adjust his past environment to the present is most forcibly portrayed in *Unquiet*, by Joseph Gollumb; *All I Could Never Be*, by Anzia Yezierska; and *Aaron Traum*, by Hyman and Lester Cohn.²

These novels make us deeply aware of the problems and tragedies of cultural conflict and acculturation. With incisive detail, they describe the psychical repercussions of the Jew's attempts to adjust to a new cultural environment. It is, of course, true that by the 30's most Jewish immigrants had already, for good or ill, made their adjustment to the American scene. With the curtailment of immigration, however, an even more complex problem arose in terms of the adjustments that had to be made by the second generation of American Jews. It is this second-generation Jewish problem that is most fully dealt with in the American Jewish novels of the 30's.³

² See Hyman and Lester Cohn, *Aaron Traum* (New York: H. Liveright Co., 1930); Tess Slesinger, *The Unpossessed* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1934); Edward Dahlberg, *Those Who Perish* (New York: The John Day Co., 1934); Anzia Yezierska, *All I Could Never Be* (New York: Brewer Warren and Putman, 1933); Bernard Sacks, *If Tomorrow Were Today* (New York: R. Field, 1931); Joseph Gollumb, *Unquiet* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1936); Konrad Bercovici, *Main Entrance* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1932); Nat J. Ferber, *One Happy Jew* (New York: Farrar & Reinhart, 1937); Alberic A. Archambault, *The Samsons* (New York: Bruce Humphries, 1941); Aben Kandel, *Rabbi Burns* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1931); Myron Brinig, *This Man Is My Brother* (New York: Farrar & Reinhart, 1932); Meyer Levin, *The Old Bunch* (New York: The Viking Press, 1937); Ludwig Lewisohn, *This People* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1933), and also *Trumpet of Jubilee* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1937).

³ See Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (New York: H. Liveright Co., 1930); Cohn, *Aaron Traum*; Slesinger, *The Unpossessed*; Dahlberg, *Those Who Perish*; Albert Halper, *Sons of the Fathers* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1940); Beatrice Bisno, *Tomorrow's Bread* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1941); Sacks, *If Tomorrow Were Today*; Leon Zolotkoff, *From Vilna to Hollywood* (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1933); Gollumb, *Unquiet*; Henry J. Berkowitz, *The Fire Eater* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1938); Bercovici, *Main Entrance*; Ferber, *One Happy Jew*; Ben Hecht, *A Jew in Love* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1931); Kandel, *Rabbi Burns*; Myron Brinig, *Singer-*

THE SECOND GENERATION

The immigrant left the Old World behind him and could adjust as much or as little as he wished to the different patterns of American society. This process of adjustment often created pain and guilt.⁴ Still, in the novels this problem appears to be relatively mild and uncomplicated, compared to the inner psychic pain of the Jews of the second generation, who, in order to continue the process of Americanization begun by their parents, had to revolt against their own families and parental mores, while yet under the emotional jurisdiction of these forces. It is not difficult to imagine the guilt, hostility, and self doubt that would be engendered by a revolt under such circumstances. The Jewish novels of the 30's portray many Jews who are emotionally crushed by this problem.⁵

This process of acculturation and revolt seems, in many instances, to have had a deeply degenerating effect upon Judaism. Many of the younger Jews came to identify Judaism with the foreignness of their parents, and the aggression and hostility which they felt toward their elders were displaced onto Judaism.⁶ It is interesting to note that, throughout these novels, whenever Judaism is referred to, it is almost always Orthodox Judaism that is meant. Conservative Judaism is hardly mentioned, and the references to Reform are almost all derogatory.⁷ The only explanation which one may offer for this phenomenon is that, although the young intellectuals of the period

mann (New York: Farrar & Reinhart, 1929); Brinig, *This Man Is My Brother*; Levin, *The Old Bunch*; Ludwig Lewisohn, *Stephen Escott* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1930), *This People*, and *Trumpet of Jubilee*.

⁴ See Saul Traum in *Aaron Traum*; the author in *All I Could Never Be*; Hirsh Aaron in *Main Entrance*; Mayer Mar-Melstein in *One Happy Jew*; and Moses Singermann in *Singermann*.

⁵ See Aaron Traum in *Aaron Traum*; Sam Karenski in *Tomorrow's Bread*; David Levitt in *Unquiet*; Jo and Esther Bochere in *A Jew in Love*; Joseph, Louis, David, Sol, Harry, Rachel, and Michael Singermann in *Singermann*.

⁶ See Gold, *Jews Without Money*; Bisno, *Tomorrow's Bread*; Sacks, *If Tomorrow Were Today*; Hecht, *A Jew in Love*; Kandel, *Rabbi Burns*; and Brinig, *Singermann*.

⁷ Note the references to Orthodoxy in Gold, pp. 164-67, 185; Cohn, p. 70; Bisno, pp. 1-67; Brinig, *Singermann*, pp. 56-61. On Reform, see Halper, pp. 282-83; Kandel, pp. 3-8, 256; Brinig, *Singermann*, pp. 56-61.

were in a thorough process of revolt against Orthodoxy, they were as yet not free enough from the problem to accept a form of Judaism that they considered a compromise, at once upper-class and dilute. In *Rabbi Burns*, by Aben Kandel, we may perceive an exaggerated version of the venom and hatred that a Jew revolting against Orthodoxy could feel against those who, having made their peace both with America and with Judaism, had come to accept an American Judaism.⁸ One might also suggest that perhaps the propensity of many of the Jewish characters in these novels to favor left-wing, revolutionary movements may in part be accounted for by this more basic revolution against parents and religion (both of which might become symbolically identified with society).

Among the writers of the 30's, there were some who recognized this chaotic reaction as a transitional phase. For example, Ludwig Lewisohn was deeply convinced that the anti-Jewish reaction of many of the Jewish intellectuals in the 30's was merely part of a dialectical process which would eventually resolve itself in a return to a type of Judaism symbolizing "liberalism," not only in the religious field, but in politics and in the area of love and sex as well. Lewisohn was often critically upbraided for this "chauvinistic" viewpoint by the critics of the day. Nat J. Ferber was another writer who pointed out this trend as early as the 30's. With the perspective of history, one may marvel at their perspicacity.⁹

The Jew's image of himself was affected, however, not only by the inner turmoil of adjustment, but also by the external nature of a society then in the throes of a depression. In a society that tended to social disorientation and economic sickness, the Jew came to see himself as a sick and disoriented personality (so far, at least, as many of these novels were concerned). Many of these works deal with the Jew as epitomizing the warped and distorted personality of the times. In *The Unpossessed*, by Tess Slesinger, Bruno, the Jewish college professor, is a powerful symbol of this trend. In his person he epitomizes at once the Jew and the intellectual, both of which

⁸ Kandel, pp. 3-8, 255-57. Such references may be found on almost every page.

⁹ See Lewisohn, *Trumpet of Jubilee*, the section entitled "Apocalypse"; Ferber, pp. 307-8. Note the criticism of Lewisohn in *The Book Review Digest*.

appear as sick, weary, and expendable in a period of economic contraction and social disorientation. Bruno believes in the "Idea" of a magazine that he would like to publish (to do his share to help save the world), but when a friend threatens to turn the "Idea" into a reality by buying a filing cabinet for the proposed literary endeavor, Bruno ponders:

The fine aristocratic stupidity of the Nordic No Jew, he reflected, could see anything so straight, so clear A Jew, if he had any brains at all, had twice as much as anyone else; he saw all sides at once and so his hands were tied, his brain stood still, he couldn't leap here and he couldn't leap there . . . the Jew is born to think, as he must live, . . . on his own peculiar subterranean Jew-level. Every Jew a dual nature, split personality . . . an idiot . . . a genius, a dementia praecox. (pp. 39-42)

This pattern is repeated in many other novels.¹⁰

A SEARCH FOR MESSIAHS

In a society that gave rise to a large measure of fascism and anti-Semitism, the Jew, as portrayed in the novels of the period, often came to internalize the accusations made against him. Some Jews spent their lives in a futile attempt to combat anti-Semitism by trying to refute its charges, some Jews pleaded guilty, and some simply reversed the charges by claiming the imputed defects as virtues. Most of these reactions can best be seen in *Those Who Perish*, by Edward Dahlberg. This book might well be subtitled: "Jews in Search of a Faith They Cannot Find." The novel deals with the rise of fascism and its effect upon the Jews of America. Fascism seemed to force the marginal Jew back to a Jewishness which he no longer possessed, so that, like a character in a Pirandello play, the Jews in this work search for an inner substance which they cannot find.¹¹ In Dahlberg's work, as in many others, it is interesting to note that it is the marginal Jew who is most affected by anti-Semitism. To

¹⁰ Slesinger, pp. 39-52, 335-38; Dahlberg, pp. 122 ff.; Edwin Seaver, *The Company* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1930); Bercovici, *Main Entrance*; Hecht, pp. 3-4, 5-6, 143-44; Brinig, *This Man Is My Brother*, pp. 15-16, 150 ff. See also Ferber, pp. 307-8.

¹¹ Dahlberg, pp. 12, 143, 230 ff.

such people, anti-Semitism, even when it did not affect them directly, still produced a terrible psychic reaction that haunted their lives. To a person who had no Jewish loyalties which could serve as a buffer or a rationale, anti-Semitism was totally invidious and incomprehensible. Thus the reaction of most Jews to anti-Semitism in these works is predicated on the emotion of guilt. One person felt that it was the "kikes" who were responsible for anti-Semitism; another thought that the German Jews more or less deserved the treatment which they were receiving from Hitler; a third believed that Jewish Communists were at fault; and another, that it was the existence of the Jew that caused anti-Semitism.¹²

In a society that bred economic insecurity, many Jews hungered for psychological security and emotional roots. It is clear from the many novels dealing with the left-wing proletarian movements of the time that many Jews joined such movements not on the basis of rational motives, but on the basis of deep emotional longings for some faith that would bring meaning and stability to their lives. Even such a proletarian writer as Michael Gold, when he writes of his "conversion" to the revolution, makes it amply clear that the dominant motive for such a move was not rational, but a deep longing for emotional security. He says in *Jews Without Money*:

I developed a crazy religious streak. I prayed on the tenement roof in moonlight to the Jewish Messiah who would redeem the world I spent my nights in a tough poolroom. I needed desperate stimulants I don't want to remember it all A man on an East Side soap-box, one night, proclaimed that out of the despair, melancholy and helpless rage of millions, a world movement had been born to abolish poverty. I listened to him. O workers' Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah. (pp. 308-9)

Not only the revolution, but Zionism and even assimilationism were used in this same fashion as a source of security and emotional fulfillment in a troubled world. An interesting sidelight on this search for stability and security is that even though the young often revolted against their parents, there was almost a universal tendency to venerate elderly grandparents and to regard them as strong and

¹² Brinig, *This Man Is My Brother*, pp. 150-252; Dahlberg, pp. 17, 35, 143, 230 ff.

faultless patriarchal figures. Their rigid devotion to the past and their unwillingness to become involved in the swirling process of adjustment made them appear as stalwart symbols of security and stability to persons ravaged by change and doubt.¹³

There remains one final concept that seems to characterize many of the Jews encountered in these works. This is a conception of the Jew as an eternal watchman of the skies, as a psychological wanderer ever searching for new Gods and new Faiths. He is a marginal man, never satisfied with the clichés that seem to satisfy everyone else. Sometimes this skepticism is found in noble human beings, sometimes in a base and corrupt individual, but time and again the Jew is an idealist seeking a Messiah, a wanderer seeking a home, a poet seeking himself. One wonders if this is more than a stereotype of the Jew.

¹³ Hecht, pp. 141-45; Brinig, *This Man Is My Brother*, pp. 5-15, 218-19, and also *The Flutter of an Eyelid* (New York: Farrar & Reinhart, 1933), pp. 43-45; Cohn, pp. 14-15.

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