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“To Make Myself for a Person”:
The *Bildungsroman* in Modern Jewish-American Literature

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of Literature and Languages
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in English

by
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May 2012

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Keywords: immigration literature, Jewish immigration, identity, duality, assimilation,
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ABSTRACT

“To Make Myself for a Person”:

The *Bildungsroman* in Modern Jewish-American Literature

by

Kari Keeling

Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* and Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* share many similarities: they both feature young Jewish protagonists who immigrate to America in search of the better life they believe America can provide. Though their novels have similar trajectories, each author answers the still relevant question of how immigrants might successfully assimilate into American culture in contrasting lights. Cahan's protagonist, in a superficial sense, achieves the "American dream," while Yezierska's Sara achieves a more modest success. However, Sara ultimately navigates the trials of cultural assimilation and identity formation more successfully. Levinsky gains monetary wealth by adapting to American values of independence and class mobility, but Sara achieves the much more valuable goal of a confident identity by tempering her embrace of these traditional American values and not rejecting her cultural origins.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: DUAL IDENTITIES

The immigrant novel in American literature signifies an essential element of the American identity: the search for self, the exploration of what it means to be an American. From the time the first Englishmen arrived in America, American literature has become a source for understanding who we are in the context of a new national identity. Immigration texts come with a set of expectations that define the genre; the simultaneous struggle between assimilation and exclusion provides the main source of conflict in these novels.

Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers* and Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* share many similarities: they both feature young Jewish protagonists who immigrate to America in search of the better life they believe America can provide. Both protagonists face class, familial, and educational struggles in their efforts to assimilate to their new culture; therefore, the novels represent each author's personal take on the *bildungsroman*. Though their novels have similar trajectories, each author answers the still relevant question of how immigrants might successfully assimilate into American culture in contrasting lights. Cahan's protagonist, in a superficial sense, achieves the "American dream," while Yeziarska's Sara achieves a more modest success. However, Sara ultimately navigates the trials of cultural assimilation and identity formation more successfully. Levinsky gains monetary wealth by adapting to American values of independence and class mobility, but Sara achieves the much more valuable goal of a confident identity by tempering her embrace of these traditional American values and not rejecting her cultural origins.

Commonly referred to by scholars as Yeziarska's most accomplished piece of her early work and certainly her most popular, the semi-autobiographical *Bread Givers* features the trials

of young Sara Smolinsky as she struggles to help her family of six survive in New York City. Sara's family is headed by her devout father, who clings to the study of his religious texts and watches passively as his wife and four daughters work hard to keep their family afloat. Sara desperately yearns for the freedom and independence America seems able to offer her, but her father's refusal to adapt to their new cultural surroundings thwarts her attempts to adapt. Frustrated and seeking to flee her father's endeavor to marry her off for his own financial security, Sara leaves her family and works to make it on her own. Though she meets with many difficulties, she ultimately succeeds—yet she finds herself taking pity on her ailing father by the end of the novel, returning home to care for him.

Yeziarska scholar Lori Jirousek writes that the author's purpose in this ending is to “affirm the superiority of [her] own race” (26). On the other hand, scholars such as Schoen and Kraver interpret the ending of *Bread Givers* as an unsatisfying act of guilt which subverts Sara's success. Belluscio writes, “*Bread Givers* reveals limitations in the ability of Jewish American women to free themselves from the demands of ancestral heritage and succeed on their own terms” (198). My analysis, on the contrary, rejects these readings for a more favorable assessment of Sara's success. Sara's quick intellect provides her with the tools to make a living for herself in America without denying her cultural heritage. She does ultimately return to take care of her father, she does so on her own terms. She is neither fully assimilated to the American way of life nor completely faithful to her Jewish background; instead, she finds an identity which unites the two.

Like *Bread Givers*, Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* has autobiographical elements. Abraham Cahan's protagonist, David Levinsky, recalls his success story when he is fifty-two—the same age Cahan was when he began writing it. It becomes evident throughout the course of

the novel that Levinsky's "success story" is actually an account of how *not* to succeed. Cahan deftly examines the meaning of prosperity. By the end of the novel, it is clear that Levinsky—though an accomplished businessman and quite wealthy—is unsatisfied. He has failed to find the intellectual fulfillment and emotional connections he craves. The story of his Americanization is wrought with difficulties; he rapidly assimilates to the new culture, but he loses something of himself in the process.

Nancy Walker views *The Rise of David Levinsky* as a prophetic novel which centers on the American identity crisis by romanticizing nostalgic memories of past ideals and values. David, she believes, represents a man "alienated and hypocritical, uncertain of his identity in a country where he never comes to feel quite at home" (162). Critics such as Diane Levenberg believe that David's failure arises not from American corruption, but rather from within himself. Others, such as Chametsky, believe that in abandoning his Jewish values for American ones, David creates "a total contradiction between his two lives" (142). Because of this contradiction, he is able to succeed on American terms but not his own. This distinction raises the question of whether David's identity problem can be wholly attributed to himself and his past experiences, or whether it is complicated by his cultural duality. My analysis agrees with the latter assessment. David's personality and ego prevent him from successfully integrating his American heritage into his Jewish identity. It is revealed in the end that he cannot merge these two identities, resulting in his lack of fulfillment. He cannot take pleasure in his success because he has not satisfied the standards of achievement set by both sides of himself.

The structure of each narrative lends itself to a chronological and thematic analysis. Therefore, each chapter focuses on chronological stages in the characters' development as well as a thematic influence in their successes and failures. My second chapter, "Embracing America:

From Tradition to Possibility” focuses on Sara’s and David’s early influences and their increasing desire to find freedom from those influences in America. Sara’s problematic relationship with her father, the symbol of Orthodox Judaism in the narrative, is certainly the earliest and most central conflict in this part of the book. However, Sara’s relationships with the rest of her family and, eventually, her husband stand on their own merit as a testament to Sara’s drive for her own identity outside of them. She removes herself from them in order to learn about and negotiate her identity within the context of her cultural situation and only tentatively can allow a renewal of those relationships when she feels more secure in her independence from them. Like Sara, David’s familial relationships focus heavily on only one of his parental figures—his mother, who raises him as a traditional Jew after his father died. When David is eighteen, his mother dies violently at the hands of Gentiles, and he then relies on neighbors and older men in his synagogue to take care of his upbringing, but never truly feels as connected to them—and therefore, his origins—as with his mother. By voyaging to America, David begins to reject his early life and influences completely in his search for success in America. While he finds fiscal success there, he does not find relief from his feelings of disconnect.

The third chapter, “The Search for Self: From Greenhorn to Success,” follows Sara’s and David’s struggles through work and education. In Sara’s case, education is a more difficult achievement; as a dutiful Jewish daughter, her father expects her to work in order to support his religious studies. She is able to fully pursue her educational goals only after she leaves her family, and even then she must deal with hostility in her scholastic and work environments due to her gender, class, and ethnicity. However, she perseveres because education represents independence for Sara. David’s mother, on the other hand, expects David to pursue education to its fullest benefit. Though he and his mother are poor, even by lower-class standards, his mother

insists on sending him to the best schools—even if she might starve because of it. David is an intelligent child, but he soon leaves his home for America to pursue a safer and potentially more prosperous life after his mother dies. He never stops challenging himself and learning, which helps lead him to his financial success. Despite this material wealth, his rejection of his former religious studies leaves him in an intellectual void.

The fourth chapter, “Reconciling the Past and Present: From Independence to Wholeness” looks closely at the class mobility each character experiences. One of the main promises of America is the ability to move upward in class if one works hard enough. This promise has often been classified as one of the myths of America; however, both Sara and David do “move up.” Sara’s success is not as impressive, but it is no less laudable; her strong work ethic and resilience allow her to gain the knowledge and independence to support herself and ultimately her family. She comes back to her father a changed woman, one who can move within the past and the present without being constrained by the ideals and expectations of either. David’s wealth is more impressive—he is a millionaire at the age of fifty-two. However, his fulfilled dream of class mobility comes at a personal cost, as we see that by the end David can find no connection between his current self and the bright, eager youth he once has been.

Anzia Yeziarska’s *Bread Givers* is nearly autobiographical; Yeziarska also immigrated with her family to America from Eastern Europe. According to her daughter, Louise Levitas Henriksen, who wrote Yeziarska’s biography in 1988, Yeziarska was fuzzy on the details of her early life before her family came to America. Intentional or not, Yeziarska constantly re-invented her early history in interviews and re-tellings. Once she landed in America, though, her family—like Sara Smolinsky’s—lived in poverty on the Lower East Side in New York City. Her father was also a student of Talmudic studies and did not contribute to the family’s income; her mother

took odd jobs to try to keep them up and the children felt pressured to help. With slight variations in the story, Yeziarska's upward mobility follows Sara's: she pursued her education and independence fervently and desperately and eventually became active in immigration issues. Though many of her contemporaries believed Yeziarska to be a hardcore assimilationist whose grasp on English was shaky at best, "critics have finally begun to understand the complexity and irony inherent in Yeziarska's rhetoric, seeing the author more appropriately as a keen and perceptive writer who, in form and content, thoroughly questioned the cultural and national narratives surrounding the making of Americans" (Konzett 21). In fact, Yeziarska was quite interested in more than Americanizing her fellow immigrants; she seemed actively involved in altering the American status quo as well. Briefly, Progressive education proponent John Dewey and Yeziarska engaged in a love affair which Henriksen believed influenced Yeziarska's beliefs and writing (221-22). "Yeziarska's novel turns to Progressive education as an idealized social space within which merit takes precedence over such invalid social differences as wealth, attractiveness, and ethnicity" (Rhodes 150-51). In her character, Sara, Yeziarska exhibits feminist desires of equality which come up against the American patriarchal system in her quest for independence. Despite what was thought of Yeziarska's message at the time, *Bread Givers* focuses its critique on both traditionalism and modernization. Sara's determination, not America, pushes her through her education. Her struggles do not end when she leaves home—she is faced with roadblocks on both sides of the fence, creating the necessity for a new internal identity not based upon a set of cultural traditions or social mores.

Abraham Cahan, too, was a Jewish immigrant who came to America—like David—as a young adult to escape the series of *pogroms* which had begun in Russia after the assassination of Alexander II in 1881 (Marovitz 1). Cahan well understood the religious education of his

protagonist but was “at least equally attracted to secular learning; he read philosophy in Hebrew more than he did the Talmud and had no wish to prevent his son from acquiring knowledge of the Gentile World beyond the physical confines of the *shtetl* (town)” (Marovitz 3). Cahan’s *David Levinsky* is less autobiographic than Yeziarska’s *Bread Givers*, but the early lives of Cahan and David are similar up to the point that David becomes a successful businessman and Cahan became a writer and social advocate especially for immigrant labor issues. Cahan’s interest in social justice naturally led him to a more complex understanding of immigrant assimilation experiences, and *Levinsky* can be seen as an authorial exercise in understanding the relationship between the Old and New Worlds. Like Yeziarska, *Levinsky* does not ultimately fall on the side of the assimilationist or traditionalist, instead suggesting too much of the former could lead to a divided and therefore incomplete identity. In the novel, the character of David can be contrasted with Yeziarska’s Father; while David assimilates too much, Father rejects the assimilation experience altogether. Both methods end in disaster for the characters who rely too much on external expectations of their surroundings—Father, that his family can continue their traditions with no change in a foreign environment; David, that America can offer him a successful and fulfilling life if he adapts completely to its customs.

Critics praise *Bread Givers* and *The Rise of David Levinsky* as gritty, realistic novels. Sara’s struggles and David’s cost of success both describe and complicate innately American ideas of class mobility—yet, their assimilation struggles add a layer of complexity to their stories. Both characters must question the principles of family and success from their original and adopted cultures and attempt to negotiate a beneficial merging of the two in order to survive and develop a confident identity. Often, responses to these novels debate whether cultural assimilation is a major factor in the characters’ fates, or if the characters reject or embrace

Americanization. My intent is to prove that environment is a crucial aspect of identity, and that assimilation is more complex than simply the “Americanization” of an immigrant. Sara’s ability to combine her cultural heritages in order to form an identity that allows her to support herself is indicative of a better understanding than David of how to not only survive, but also to thrive, in a foreign environment.

Sara’s and David’s stories are not simply relics of a past, relegated to the time frame in which Yeziarska and Cahan wrote. Today’s America has seen a similarly dramatic increase in immigration as the early 20th century, and with it, an onslaught of hostility from its natural-born citizenry. Some of this hostility is even government-ordained, with many border states passing strict laws with the goal of preventing and deporting illegal immigrants. Other states have attempted and even passed English-only laws in order to “preserve” our culture; however, the impact of these laws typically only makes life more difficult for those who have not or are still learning the language. With these modern-day hurdles in mind, stories of immigrant struggles in another culture with foreign values and a hostile citizenry are just as relevant today as they were a century ago.

CHAPTER 2

EMBRACING AMERICA: FROM TRADITION TO POSSIBILITY

Throughout the nineteenth century, immigrants flocked to America in increasingly larger numbers, encouraged by rapidly expanding industry, the advent of more comfortable and efficient ways to travel, and the promise of a better, different way of life. For most immigrants, the changes of the Industrial Age necessitated their leaving. In Europe, industrialization pushed skilled workers out of their livelihoods, forcing them to take work as unskilled laborers for far less pay. The population growth suffocated the cities, where people generally lived in unsanitary and poor conditions. The attraction of a new country was hard to resist: in its exploration westward and desire to become a strong economic force in the world, America could offer land and good jobs to crowded and starving Europeans (Berquist 3-4). As a result, cities grew exponentially. When Cahan arrived in New York in 1882, the city was in the beginning stages of the immense urban growth it would experience through the turn of the century: “The Statue of Liberty was not yet standing, Ellis Island was bare Only one clear sign of the titanic growth to come was in view, just to the right: the lofty towers and cables of Brooklyn Bridge, which was near completion” (Sanders 41). Through the decades to come, the immigrant work force contributed significantly to the extraordinary growth of America.

Cahan and Yeziarska were among many of the Eastern European Jews who emigrated due to worsening conditions in the latter part of the nineteenth century, especially in Russia. Fueled by anti-Semitism, violent uprisings against Jewish communities, or *pogroms*, broke out, inciting many to escape to safer places. Sara and David spend a surprisingly small amount of their story discussing these issues—Sara’s mother is nostalgic for her old wealth, but Sara remembers nothing of it, and David’s main motivation for emigrating seems to be economic.

Their contrasting perspective of wealth frames the characters in a different way—not only from their authors, but also from their parents. A generation removed from the struggles and fears their families faced in Russia, Sara and David’s primary focus is themselves: their identity, their independence, and their ability to assimilate. Already, they exemplify the characteristic of individualism in American life by removing much of their contextual histories to focus primarily on their personal stories.

It is significant to note, then, that both Sara and David are first-person narrators giving accounts of their own experiences. This perspective gives each story an emphatically subjective lens—even manipulative, Weinstein believes, in David’s case (49). Understanding how Sara and David perceive their own transformations sheds light on the psychological nature of the assimilation process; however, it cannot be denied that their self-involvement significantly characterizes their issues. For instance, David’s autobiography is bookended with his moral dilemma: the first and last paragraphs in *The Rise of David Levinsky* address exactly what he means for his readers to understand about his life: “David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher’s Synagogue seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak manufacturer” (372). David achieves material success and massive wealth, but his story is mired in self-pity—he is ultimately unsatisfied because he has either rejected or been rejected by all of what he finds meaningful in life. Sara, on the other hand, takes a more aggressive role in defining her experiences, especially toward the beginning of her tale as she insists on identifying the oppressive forces in her life. Her father is the target of most of this anger, which she most clearly announces when she first begins to understand herself as different from her sisters. “They couldn’t stand Father’s preaching any more than I, but they could suffer to listen to him, like dutiful children who honour and obey and respect their father,

whether they like him or not” (65). This type of information given by the narrators of their own tales is strongly biased and yet ultimately reveals their early stages in identity formation. To read Sara’s and David’s final reconciliation of their dual identities (Old World and New World) as a legitimate conclusion to their growth process, it is necessary to recognize the assimilation process as an intimate and strictly personal experience. Their subjective truths are essential in identifying the complications each must face as they come of age in an unfamiliar culture.

Therefore, *Bread Givers* and *The Rise of David Levinsky* exemplify a specific type of *bildungsroman*, one that follows its characters through their psychological and sociological growth experiences and works toward an individual identity that balances their Jewish origins with American culture. While the *bildungsroman* typically refers to any coming-of-age story where the main character wrestles with his or her identity through a growth process, Sara and David wrestle with the added element of an unfamiliar environment; their conflict with their cultural heritage as well as their exertions in trying to achieve success in America must come together to experience the emergence of self. Boelhower identifies the genre of immigrant literature as containing a few separate elements:

The poles of tension that ground the structuring of the fabula are OW (Old World) and NW (New World), both as locations and as sets of mental categories. Its three major moments are EXPECTATION (project, dream, possible world), CONTACT (experience, trials, contrasts), and RESOLUTION (assimilation, hyphenation, alienation). (5)

However, defining assimilation requires a more complex psychological journey. David Levinsky is extremely successful by American standards, but it is clear he does not see himself as a triumphant example of assimilation other than “in a superficial, casual way” (1). Sara, on the

other hand, achieves modest wealth and independence, but eventually goes back to her domineering father and takes care of him. She even concludes her story feeling “the shadow still there, over me” (297). Sara’s shadow represents the burden of the Old World, which David comes to regret throwing away in the end. Assimilation is therefore not as easy as throwing off one set of cultural values, mores, and traditions in order to accept another’s, but Sara and David both see leaving the old behind as the first step.

At first, the expectation of the immigrant experience overshadows their Old World reality. Both Sara and David experience moments of disappointed alienation in their new experiences in America, but they struggle more aggressively against their cultural origins toward the beginning of their narratives. Sara wrestles with her father’s stagnation and refusal to adapt to the American way of life and the rest of her family’s compliance to it, while David, who spends his childhood in Russia, must contest with being a precocious outcast in his community. The tension with their families, friends, and acquaintances incites them to pursue an identity outside of their communities. The search for identity begins by diverging from the identity made for them by the Old World culture and expectations from friends and family steeped in those traditions. Levinson explores this sense of divisiveness between the Old and New World in her discussion of the passing motif in Yeziarska’s narratives:

To “pass,” however . . . means more than merely improving your social graces—it requires severing one’s past life completely, and Yeziarska’s fictions repeatedly pose the question: If shedding the past requires relinquishing everything you hold dear (even your mother’s bridal shawl) but offers new opportunities for an economically better life, is it right or ethical to do so? (5)

The question of whether or not to shed their past in order to pass as Americans is the issue that both Sara and David must grapple with, and each character addresses it in a different way—although, it can be argued that they come to the same conclusion: that a negotiation between the Old and New World identities must be reached in order to create an individual set of morals and values that satisfies the self. On this problem, Chametzky writes that the protagonists must contend with a chasm between their “various worlds—Old and New, Talmudic and modern, Jewish and American.” Oh Cahan, Chametzky writes, “There was obviously a need for someone in his mediating position between cultures, able to explain one to the other, encourage the best elements of one upon the other” (75-76). In order to get to this point, however, Sara and David must first leave behind their Old World cultural identity. Sara and David then initially embrace the idea of America, which is made more attractive by its stark contrast to their previous experiences, by rejecting the people and traditions that are examples of their cultural origins.

David begins this process by separating himself from his community. Initially, he discusses why he and his mother are different from his neighbors. He notes of his childhood town, “Antomir, which then boasted eighty thousand inhabitants, was a town in which a few thousand rubles was considered wealth, and we were among the humblest and poorest in it” (4). Even in the impoverished Antomir, David and his mother are singled out as peculiar, unable to provide for themselves even the most modest of necessities. David’s father dies when he is young, so his family situation is much different from that of other Jewish boys, as well. His mother is not like other mothers; when David clumsily breaks a cheap drinking-cup they have just fixed, his mother only makes him “tell the story of the accident over and over again, wringing her hands and sighing as she listened. The average mother would have given me in a whipping in the circumstances. She did not” (4). Not only does David’s mother not hit him for

his mistake, she also internalizes her response; the only indication of her displeasure is shown through nervous hand gestures and barely audible noises. The distinction David makes here places his mother and him in contrast to the rest of the community, who are shown, often unfavorably, as violent and expressive. For instance, the bookbinder's "lame, tall wife . . . often hit me [David] with one of her crutches," and their daughter fights with him as well, with David typically getting "the worst of the bargain, often being left badly scratched and bleeding" (5). In school, David "was the scapegoat for the sins of other boys. When a pupil deserved punishment and the schoolmaster could not afford to inflict it because the culprit happened to be the pet of a well-to-do family, the teacher's anger was almost sure to be vented on me" (12). David attempts to hide these beatings from his mother, illustrating that his shame in being involved in these situations, even as the victim of them, is connected to the strongest example of non-violence he has in his life. Being raised by a mother who does not perpetuate the casual violence as the other families he knows, David feels guilty about the role violence takes in his own life. David makes it clear that this is decidedly different from the way most family dynamics in Antomir work, further removing them from the influence of their societal expectations.

When David asks for an explanation of why his mother never beats him "like other mammas do," she tells him, "Because God has punished you hard enough as it is, poor orphan mine" (2). Here, David sets himself up as a character with whom we should sympathize, a character who is separated from the rest of the Jewish community. However, the religious element to this punishment adds a layer of complexity; it not only predicts David's future success as a religious scholar but also signals the controlling hand of fate in David's life. God's attention to the young David provides a sense of expectation for the significance of his life, though we know from his opening words that David ultimately rejects a life of significance for

“power, the amount of worldly happiness at my command,” which leaves him unsatisfied (1). Religion is a strong influence in the young David’s life, so his rejection of it later is also representative of cutting the ties to his past. David’s mother embodies the tradition of the devout Jewish maternal figure, constantly praying, covering her hair with a kerchief, and ensuring David gets the best type of education (a religious one) despite their poverty. “Nor was she a rare exception in this respect, for there were hundreds of other poor families in our town who would starve themselves to keep their sons studying the Word of God” (17). This strict adherence and respect for Talmudic studies can be paralleled with Sara’s father’s situation, who feels it is a disgrace to his calling to focus on material rather than spiritual wealth, even when his family needs him to. David explains how valuable Talmudic study is to the Jewish way of life:

The Talmud is a voluminous of about twenty ponderous tomes. To read these books, to drink deep of their sacred wisdom, is accounted one of the greatest “good deeds” in the life of a Jew. ... If it be true that our people represent a high percentage of mental vigor, the distinction is probably due, in some measure, to the extremely important part which Talmud studies have played in the spiritual life of the race. ... A Talmudic education was until recent years practically the only kind of education a Jewish boy of old-fashioned parents received. (18)

Here, David not only expresses the deep significance of religious studies in Jewish culture but also clearly categorizes this among his Old World traditions. His use of “until recent years” and “old-fashioned parents” reveals a bias he holds against his religious studies, once again predicting his future deviation from them. David’s life in Antomir is heavily influenced by religious devotion and the pursuit of piety through intellectual study, and David is often

complimented on his impressive intellect; however, he very quickly learns that he is more interested in carnal temptations than his education.

David's mother insists that his *cheder* education (elementary instruction) be at only the best schools, even though she must scrimp, save, and even beg at times to keep him there. This is so that she can send David to a *yeshivah*, a seminary for Talmudic studies. There, David meets one of the Talmud readers who make reading the Talmud for sixteen hours a day their occupation (their wives support them—a parallel to the father in *Bread Givers*). David develops a strong affection for Reb Sender and admires his piety, but he cannot resist what he calls Satan impeding his focus on his studies.

The orthodox Jewish faith practically excludes woman from religious life. In the eye of the spiritual law that governed my life women were intended for two purposes only: for the continuation of the human species and to serve as an instrument in the hands of Satan for tempting the stronger sex to sin. Marriage was simply a duty imposed by the Bible To be in love with a girl who was an utter stranger to you was something unseemly, something which only Gentiles or “modern” Jews might indulge in. (29)

In what Marovitz describes as a sign of David's early struggles with duality, David's dilemma is developed here: he is very attracted to the opposite sex, beyond the scope that it is merely his duty, but these types of feelings are not allowed to those who adhere strictly to the traditions of the Jewish faith (140). Reb Sender admonishes him when he catches David's indulgence in temptations, but the violent death of his mother at the hands of Gentiles severs his relationship to his studies. The reason for this can be traced back to David's understanding of the faith's relationship with women; in this religious interpretation of women, the depth of his mother's

personality is reduced to procreation and sin. His grief is born from a profound affection for his mother, so the allure of religious studies which simplify his love for her disappears.

As the quality of life for Jews in Russia begin to deteriorate, culminating in the violent *pogroms*, David begins to think of the possibility of success in America. His musings are temporarily delayed when he falls ill and starts a flirtatious affair with one of his caretaker's children, Matilda. David finds himself unwilling to leave Matilda, despite once being excited about the prospect of America, but she tells him, "I have no time to bother with you" and encourages him to leave (55). Because of this devastating turn of events, he is less enthralled with America as he begins his emigration experience, "Who can depict the feeling of desolation, homesickness, uncertainty and anxiety with which an emigrant makes his first voyage across the ocean?" (57). His feelings of alienation and rejection in the Old World do not overshadow his fear of leaving it behind, nor does the New World assuage those isolating experiences. He tries to sleep in an American synagogue when he has no place else to go, but an elderly man stops him, saying, "I wish I could take you to my house, but—well, America is not Russia. There is no pity here, no hospitality" (66). Here, it is clear that David is balanced between two worlds that are not merely America and Russia, but also the old and the new, modernization and tradition. A Jewish man named Even eventually takes pity on him and arranges lodging, a haircut, a bath, and finally some money for him, but then tells him, "And now you must shift for yourself. That's all I can do for you" (70). Even pushes him in the direction of Americanization, making him shave off his side-locks, assuring him that one can be a good Jew even if he looks American. Even clearly wants David to make the transition on his own and his hesitancy to push David one way or the other once again emphasizes the personal and individualistic nature of the immigrant's assimilation experience.

David therefore gets his start in America and is faced with two options. “Alienated from his homeland by increasing waves of anti-Semitism, with no money to live and work outside the ghetto, the immigrant Jew . . . either quickly became secularized and attempted to escape from his East Side tenement, or he turned inward to the faith of his fathers” (Marovitz 198). David ultimately chooses the former and Sara’s father chooses the latter, but Yeziarska’s protagonist makes a new path entirely. David embraces Americanization but rejects his origins; Sara, at first, does the same, but coming back to take care of her father proves not only that she accepts the duality of her identity, but also that she now makes her own choices rather than let either of her cultural influences do it for her.

In Yeziarska’s *Bread Givers*, Sara’s father represents her most obvious ties to the Jewish culture. However, Sara does not remember much about her Polish origins. When she first introduces herself, she has lived with her family in the Hester Street tenement on the Lower East Side for most of her life and is acquainted with the American way of life, though the Jewish community around her continues to resist the modernization of their traditions. Again, spiritual over material wealth dominates these practices. Sara relates an argument between her father and mother that has occurred when they have been planning their move to America: her mother wanted to take more practical items, but Father made his family take only his books. He asks her, “What for will you need old feather beds? Don’t you know it’s always summer in America? . . . But my books, my holy books always were, and always will be, the light of the world” (9). Sara’s father firmly believes that his intellect and spirituality will provide a decent life for his family and becomes increasingly dogmatic about this idea. This is Father’s American dream: to not have to worry about material circumstances so that he can focus on his spiritual work. His refusal to note the difference in Old World and New World norms play a large part in his

inability to ever properly assimilate. His rationalization allows him to twist any circumstance to meet his understanding of how God works. Father's children fight for jobs to bring money and food into the house; their domain is clearly earthly concerns. Mother represents this dimension, which Father rejects as unnecessary even though he relies on it. "With watering mouths and glistening eyes we watched Mother skimming off every bit of fat from the top soup into Father's big plate, leaving for us only the thin, watery part" (10). Father benefits from Mother's worries while scolding her for them, which is why his instructions and speeches on choosing heavenly wealth over material concerns are only ever temporarily effective.

Despite this, Father's overzealous preaching sours Sara almost entirely on the notion of religion. When Sara is young, her father is portrayed as a tyrannical, controlling presence in the lives of his wife and four daughters. Father's constrained beliefs about gender roles play a large part in this. Sara comments on Father's room being off-limits, "Of course, we all knew that if God have given Mother a son, Father would have permitted a man child to share with him his best room in the house" (9). The resentment in young Sara defines her perspective of her father throughout the first part of the book, finally giving her the impetus to leave her family in order to live a life independent of his Old World traditions. Sara's hatred of her father softens later, showing that her simplistic portrayal of his domineering nature is flawed. Schoen writes of the complications in his character:

He, like his daughters, is caught between two opposing ways of life. Clinging to the ideals of his heritage, he spends his days in prayer and study, realizing all the while that his role is no longer respected, driven by frustration to hit the irreverent landlady who desecrates his Holy Books. He, too, fears poverty in a community

that does not support its scholars and clutches at the only resource at his command—his daughters. (68)

While Sara is still young, however, she feels a strong burden to take care of her family. In the first chapter, despite the fact that she is just ten years old, Sara writes that “From always it was heavy on my heart the worries for the house as if I was the mother” (1). She later swallows her pride and digs through other people’s ashes to find coal for her family after she upsets her mother by wasting potato peels, illustrating that her resentment of her father is not merely a consequence of his rejection of her. She is willing to work hard and suffer to support her family—she does not mind that Father believes her domain is earthly and not spiritual. Rather, Sara’s intellect contributes to their quarrel. As David states in *The Rise of David Levinsky*, spirituality and intellectual pursuits are traditionally tightly connected in Jewish communities. Sara’s father cannot separate the two, but Sara’s frustration comes from her growing realization that intellect can buy her earthly rewards as well.

Sara becomes aware of her cleverness when she sells herrings. Her first real experience making money is one she controls; she does not earn a paycheck at a factory, but rather buys and then sells the fish at a higher price, making twenty-five cents profit, giving herself much more control in the earning process. In this exercise, Sara quite literally finds her voice, which is “like dynamite. Louder than all the pushcart peddlers, louder than all the hollering noises of bargaining and selling” (21). This act is a quintessentially American moment and a defining aspect of coming of age; by realizing that she can manipulate money to make more money, she embarks on a capitalistic endeavor. Sara understands that selling fish takes more than a pail of herring and a price—her personality evokes a strong response from those around her and creates a crowd around her station, all of whom comment on the discrepancy between her determination

and age. Sara's accomplishment gives her a strong feeling of elation and sparks the beginnings of her removal from Old World traditions. "I was always saying to myself, if I ever had a quarter or a half dollar in my hand, I'd run away from home and never look on our dirty house again. But now I was so happy with my money, I didn't think of running away, I only wanted to show them what I could do and give it away to them" (22). Of course, as established previously, Sara's narration is biased, but in her mind her eventual escape from her family is not born from a lack of devotion to them. Instead, this episode indicates her recognition that making money is not an entirely despondent enterprise and that she is intelligent enough to take to it quickly. The purpose of this event, then, is to establish a foundation of respect for her own individual creativity and drive, as well as foreshadow her reason for leaving. Her growing respect for her own intelligence later strengthens her irritation with her father's stifling ways.

The biggest example of her father's absolute domination over his daughters' lives is his involvement in their romances. As Sara tells us, Father systematically ruins Sara's three sisters' chances at happiness with their chosen lovers. He rejects Berel Bernstein's proposal to Bessie because Bernstein refuses to support him, his stubborn pride prevents him from accepting Mashah's piano player after his father is clearly disturbed by Mashah's family's poverty, and he refuses to acknowledge Fania's poet altogether. Instead, Father plays the matchmaker for his daughters, marrying both Mashah and Fania in the same day—the first to a wealthy jeweler and the latter to a clothing businessman from California. Both matches turned out to be poor ones. Mashah's husband is a liar who is only a salesman in a jewelry store and immediately after the wedding is fired for letting Mashah wear the diamonds he was sent to sell. Fania's match exposes himself as a gambler who leaves Fania lonely. Later, Father marries Bessie to Zalmon, an old widowed fish-peddler looking for a young wife to mother his six children. Father again

uses his twisted logic to blame his children for their poor luck in marriage: “As you made your bed, so you must sleep on it,” he announces (85). When Sara points out that he is the one who makes the matches for her sisters, he only silences her—if he cannot make a superior argument, he silences his opponent in order to maintain his belief in his authoritative intelligence. This technique frustrates Sara more than anything else her father does, as her logic is dismissed and rejected even though she has confidence in it.

Sara’s desire to succeed, to make something of herself in America, is juxtaposed against her father’s failure to do so. Even though Father is obsessively concerned with the corruption of America and insists on keeping the Old World traditions alive in his household, he does try and fail to participate in the capitalistic role, as is seen in his matchmaking business and later the failed grocery store he buys. His naiveté and inexperience, coupled with his failure to let go of Old World conventions, predicts this failure. He characterizes his relation to America spiritually, casting himself in the role of David and the landlord’s collector lady (exemplifying America’s capitalistic enterprise) in the role of Goliath (26). Sara, however, understands American capitalism more effectively (as seen in the herring episode). When she earns money, she feels “independent, like a real person” (28). She uses this relationship to justify her desire for independence in her romantic life as well. “I’d want an American-born man who was his own boss. And would let me be my own boss” (66). Belluscio calls this “a feminist riff on the assimilative/sexual desire of the male characters of chapter 3, who wish to claim ownership of Americanized women as part of their project of social mobility” (193). This statement recalls David Levinsky’s sexual politics—his obsession with finding companionship mirrors his foundering sense of self-worth in a complicated capitalistic society. Sara’s opinion on this matter illustrates her desire to be an Americanized woman, albeit one who does not aid in another man’s

social mobility. She wants to be her own boss, which in this sense signals her ambition to create her own social mobility project.

Sara's astute commentary on how success works in America situates her as a keen observer of New World values. Sara's mother says, "Only millionaires can be alone in America," but Sara later proves that one can live alone without being rich. Sara's parents also express anxiety about industrialization. Mother explains that one cannot find the beautiful things in America that she left at home. "In America, rich people can only buy, and buy things made by machines. Even Rockefeller's daughter got only store-bought, ready-made things for her dowry" (33). This anxiety stems from the modernization of economy in Europe that pushed many immigrants to America, only to face the same types of problems a few decades later. The nostalgia for handmade items made by skilled craftsmen develops this fear of modernization which inhibits Sara's family's assimilation. Sara, however, shows no fear of industry; her constant questioning of her mother about "home" is evidence of her removal from it. Though she has grown up immersed in the culture, she has the advantage of having only secondhand nostalgia from her parents; for Sara, home is now America. This gives her the benefit of eagerness when facing her own decision to further experience America. Her breaking point comes after Father's embarrassing investment in a fully stocked grocery store that turns out to be empty. The loss is significant, but Father still scolds Sara for trusting a girl two cents for a box of rice. Sara's intelligence is provoked by her Father's refusal to see his own hypocrisy. She grabs her things and prepares to leave. As she does so, her father tells her, "In olden times the whole city would have stoned you!" She replies, "Thank God, I'm not living in olden times. Thank God, I'm living in America!" As she runs out the door, she narrates, "The Old World had struck

its last on me” (137-38), signaling her firm rejection of the hold her father and culture has on her life. She emphatically embraces the individualism of America as she does so.

CHAPTER 3

THE SEARCH FOR SELF: FROM GREENHORN TO SUCCESS

Sara's and David's individualistic choice to venture out of their homes and into America (Sara's leaving her mostly Jewish ghetto in the Lower East Side and David's immigrating to the New World and leaving his religious studies behind) represent their desire to embrace the new type of life that America can offer. The religious constraints of Sara's and David's Jewish families and friends are rejected or ignored as the characters enter the second phase of their narratives. This transition is a gradual removal, however. David writes of the voyage to America which can be metaphorically attributed to his anticipations for his new life. "Day after day passes and all you see about you is an unbroken waste of water, an unrelieved, a hopeless monotony of water. You know that a change will come, but this knowledge is confined to your brain. Your senses are skeptical" (57). In the next paragraph, he performs his usual religious devotions, signaling that truly the changes he will go through in America are confined only to his head; his heart is still with God and his old life. On the other hand, Sara more subconsciously allows the past to define her path to the New World. Right after Sara leaves her father, she says, "All the way on the train to New York, Father's curses still rang in my ears. The flame of his eyes scorched their bitter wrath into my eyes. The hand with which he struck me still burned on my cheek" (139). Even as she begins her new life independent of her father, his words and presence go with her. As Sara and David venture further into America, the remnants of their old lives both haunt and propel their current ones.

David's first impressions of America are divisive. Repeatedly, he writes, "America was not Russia," and he attempts to come to terms with this realization (67). The peddler who regretfully informs David he cannot give him a place to stay for the night goes on "to show how the New World turned things upside down, transforming an immigrant shoemaker into a man of

substance, while a former man of leisure was forced to work in a factory here” (66). This welcome again underlies the principle of change to David. Instead of the glorious opportunity America was painted to be, the peddler shows David a more balanced perspective of what America can offer. More importantly, he emphasizes that America requires some sort of trade. David must re-invent himself if he wishes to take control of that trade and mold it into a positive one. Most of all, David *will* have to change, will have to trade in something he values for something he wants, but the peddler advises him to make a conscious choice about what kind of trade he will make if he wants to be successful.

One of David’s landladies, Mrs. Levinsky, represents a maternal figure to him (she also has three children of her own). David finds Mrs. Levinsky’s name intriguing because they are not related at all, and it is indeed curious as her treatment of him represents a cross between the Yiddish mother figures David has been familiar with from Russia and a new American mindset. For instance, though her sayings and songs are Yiddish (“far above average”), Mrs. Levinsky teases David about his beard until he finally shaves it (75-77). The extremes of her position mirror David’s predicament at this time.

The orthodox Jewish faith, as it is followed in the old Ghetto towns of Russia or Austria, has still to learn the art of trimming its sails to suit new winds. It is exactly the same as it was a thousand years ago. It does not attempt to adopt itself to modern conditions as the Christian Church is continually doing. It is absolutely inflexible. If you are a Jew of the type to which I belonged when I came to New York and you attempt to bend your religion to the spirit of your new surroundings, it breaks. It falls to pieces. The very clothes I wore and the very food I ate had a fatal effect on my religious habits. (76-77)

Mrs. Levinsky is the first in a series of symbols of the discrepancies David faces. Engel writes, “The halves of David’s life ‘do not comport well.’ This is the *discrepancy* (the word must occur two-dozen times in the novel) which makes his rise a fall, and which describes the peculiar nature of Levinsky’s unhappiness: his inability to make some inner, unifying sense of a life that has been European and American, traditional and modern, faithful and apostate” (37). Unlike Mrs. Levinsky, David cannot incorporate modern beliefs into his traditions. He must reject one and accept the other, and the anxiety of his transition here predicts his failure of identity later.

His lustful nature, which he has been trying to fight so as not to shame God, finally creeps further into David’s consciousness as his traditions lose hold. A peddler named Max tells him, “Do you know, Levinsky, you have an awfully fine figure. You are a good-looking chap all around, for that matter. A fellow like you ought to make a hit with women. Why don’t you learn to dance?” (79). This compliment makes him both “wince and blush” because he realizes the seriousness of the topic but still feels the impropriety of it. In fact, he is almost pleased as he remembers Maltida’s complimenting him in a similar manner. Later, the reader sees that it is in fact his lust which promotes his fall from piety. After this statement from Max, David challenges himself to use his wit and intelligence to seduce Mrs. Levinsky, reflecting his earlier challenge with a fellow scholar of the Talmud to memorize as much as he had. These conflicts, while externally competitive in that they focus on another opponent, are in actuality internal battles. David is challenging himself, rather than Mrs. Levinsky’s or his fellow scholars’ challenging him. David’s competitive personality brings out his desire to succeed in America when he finds himself being called a “greenhorn,” a derogatory term given by immigrants to other, newer immigrants who show naiveté when faced with American customs. He fails in his challenge to seduce Mrs. Levinsky as he fails to memorize as much of Talmud as his fellow scholar, but it is

significant that his first attempt at impurity is directed at an older, mother-like figure with the name Mrs. Levinsky. First, she is a safe target: he expects her to be devoted to him as his own mother was. Mrs. Levinsky also represents the threshold into independent American society, as his mother propelled him into manhood through Talmudic studies. Once he has battled Mrs. Levinsky and his lustful nature, he transitions into accepting his newfound freedoms in America. One of the peddlers whom David found “revolting” says of David, “Look at Levinsky standing there quiet as a kitten . . . One would think he is so innocent he doesn’t know how to count two. Shy young fellows are the worst devils in the world” (84). Even the most improper of the peddlers finds something debauched in David’s countenance, predicting David’s eventual “yielding to Satan” (84). This angst and divisiveness between David’s Old and New Worlds creates his modern self.

The modernity of Cahan’s writing in *David Levinsky*, as in virtually all his fiction, begins in his customary historical subject, which is an episode in that epochal process that is often called “modernization”: the transition of the east European Jews from the traditional world of *shtetl* (small town) and ghetto to the new world of open society, city, life, and industrial labor. (Engel 38)

In his modernization, David will find wealth, power, and influence—but he will have to trade part of himself as the cost. The reader already knows from the opening lines what David’s fate is: loneliness, emptiness, despair—the price of selling out to the modern. “In Cahan’s fiction it is ironically not the pious Jew who suffers the pangs of longing and loneliness, but the secularized individual, the Jew who sloughed off his Judaism as though it were an old coat and thus left himself bare to face the world alone” (Marovitz 198). David’s modernization is what ultimately causes his loneliness, then, not his failure to adopt American customs. In *Bread Givers*, however,

Sara's father is victim of the same problem: unlike David, though, he resists modernization but ends up just as miserable and alone (despite his uncaring new wife) until Sara takes him back in. David learns that he is unable to resist the allure of modern American ideas, but the crux of his journey lies in finding that his acceptance of them is just as detrimental.

David's loneliness is both what impels him to embrace America and the result of his fall into America's clutches. "In my loneliness I would look for some human element in my acquaintance with these women" (85). Marovitz writes of the oft-used term "greenhorn" to refer to David that new immigrants were called that "because they were ignorant of American ways; it was a term of ridicule by earlier immigrants toward the naïve and embarrassed newcomers, who wanted to outgrow its stigma as quickly as possible" (17). Clearly, David feels alienated, a not unusual or particularly novel emotion for him. As he was different from his peers in Antomir, so he is different from the peddlers in America. Being a "greenhorn," though, implies some lack of knowledge on David's part, and since David has always understood himself to be intelligent, the term is one he wants to shed quickly. The title of the chapter in which David grapples with his sexuality and begins to break with his religious upbringing is aptly called, "A Greenhorn No Longer" (78). Using his cleverness, he finds a way to fit into American society even if he is still looked down upon by his peers: his reaction to the peddlers believing he is a young devil is simply a reminiscent equivalent of "Not yet" (84). He is more comfortable with his sin than he is with his naiveté, but then again, David has made it clear to this point that he is no stranger to the flaw of excessive pride.

Thus, David starts his secular education. Not only does he learn more about the opposite sex in his dalliances with them, but he also begins to attend evening school. He reads the English Bible, among other books, and learns to love grammar and mimic the mannerisms of his teacher,

evidence of his desire to learn the “rules” in order to better assimilate. He observes Election Day—a pivotal moment, where a man tells him, “There is no ‘can’t’ in America” (90). Still in poverty, David grows more optimistic about his place and possibilities in his new home. A fellow ship passenger, Gitelson, catches up to David “with a triumphant snicker, pulling out his cuffs so as to flaunt their gold or gilded buttons” (100). He has found financial success and now professes to lead a wealthy, extravagant life. David likes Gitelson even though Gitelson brags quite a bit about his newfound success, but it steadily becomes clearer to David that though Gitelson “continued to address me as Mr. Levinsky and tried to show me esteem as his intellectual superior . . . he gradually took a respectfully contemptuous tone with me” (102). David is faced with the realization that all of his intellect and scholarship, which was highly esteemed in Russia, is worth less than Gitelson’s fancy buttons. Again, David’s poverty and lack of cultural or financial success in America reveals his inferiority, something with which David is uncomfortable. Even though he is uninterested in Gitelson’s line of work (cloak-making), he accepts his offer to join the cloak business. Soon David is content with his work and fulfilled by his success at it—but this cannot last for long.

At his loss of innocence and religious preoccupations, David becomes greedy and self-serving. He tries to marry a girl, Gussie, for her money in order to go to school. He becomes dissatisfied with his wages as his working skills increase and leaves for a larger factory—symbolizing not only his desire to move upward financially and socially in America, but also his need for bigger, better opportunities. The factory is run by German-Jewish immigrants, however, who feel themselves superior to David because he comes from Russia. After an incident where David spills milk and ruins a garment, one of the brothers who run the factory calls him a “lobster” (129). Walker interprets this as a double-offense, mentioning that the insult lobster not

only implies clumsiness but also “not kosher” (146). As a result, David begins dreaming of beginning his own cloak-making business, and after some consideration puts his plan into action, thereby fleshing out his Americanization to include the persona of the American businessman.

Walker writes of this stage of David’s upward mobility, “Books 8-10 constitute the heart of Levinsky’s ascension to success in the garment manufactory. They detail his shady practices, his art of manipulation and deception, his readiness to take serious risks on the chance of lucrative profits, and his capacity to learn as he goes” (146). His adoption of underhanded business practices and showy techniques underlies his further immersion in the success of his American dream, and he is eager to show his old acquaintances how far he has come from his “greenhorn” days. David goes to see the peddler Max who earlier has suggested he learn to dance for much-needed money and decides, “As he had always seen by shabbily clad, I decided to overwhelm him with a new suit of clothes” (153). In his ever-present desire to be seen on top, David perhaps subconsciously inverts his experience with Gitelson and how impressed he had been upon viewing his once-intellectual inferior in a fancy suit, once again showing how much he relies upon external stimuli to validate himself and his choices. When he invites a buyer to lunch, he metaphorically refers to the resulting situation as a “baptism of dismay,” creating the sense that he has only transferred his strong religious background into an obsession with modernization and Americanization (179). The energy and passion David now puts into his business replaces what he once put into the intellectual life of Orthodox Judaism. David’s lunch with the buyer gives him the zeal for his new religion, American business practices.

This scene portrays David at, simultaneously, his most manipulative and honest. Weinstein notes that David cleverly manipulates his reader in the same way he manipulates the buyer, by openly, unflinchingly, but most of all, shrewdly, telling the truth.

One may argue that David's credibility lies in his openness and frankness. Indeed, he presents his faults frequently and freely. . . . Yet the display of these and even other traits appears to be a form of dissembling on David's part as if he were calculatedly impressing us with his honesty. Shrewd businessman that he is, he allows some of his "failings" to show through in a manner that disarms us and thus wins for him a necessary credibility, so that we will respond favorably to him. (48)

In the same way as he manipulates the reader with honesty, he openly admits to his "slow-spoken, slow-witted" Philadelphian buyer that he has never been to such an expensive restaurant to lunch before and therefore is not certain of the mannerisms and expectations required of him. At first, the buyer is confused, but David disarms him by continually making jokes on his expense—again, as he disarms the reader by presenting his flaws at his own expense—until the buyer laughs and agrees to show David how to behave. The buyer is put at ease by David's manner and agrees to lunch with him again, as well as to place orders with David's business. The psychological technique David employs in this scene is therefore two-fold: it fools both the slow-witted businessman and the naïve readers.

The ability to disarm others becomes more necessary as David employs harsher and more questionable tactics in his business in order to amass greater wealth. He appropriates other designers' creations and overworks his employees but slyly manages these ethical quandaries by knowing how to keep people happy while increasing his own profit margin. At this point, David has become a wealthy and powerful figure in American society, assimilating effectively by rejecting his origins in favor of the American promise of success. This transition is the sacrifice of identity predicted by the peddler at the synagogue when David first arrives, and it ultimately

leads him to a rich but unhappy fate in America. However, as seen earlier in Yeziarska's character Father, resistance to assimilation can be just as detrimental. If resistance and acceptance both lead to the same place, Sara's journey is crucial to understanding if and how assimilation works.

When Sara first leaves her father, she—like David when he first arrives in America—also oscillates between reliance on her family and independence, but she quickly finds no place for her with her sisters. In fact, she finds her sisters in worse situations than her own, despite having no place to go and no means to support herself. Bessie is miserable and works hard in her new hectic life with her husband and step-children. When Sara tells Bessie that she has run away from their father, Bessie responds, “Thank God you had the courage to break away. If I'd had your sense, I wouldn't have sunk into Zalmon's fishwife,” thus validating Sara's impulsive decision (142). Later, Bessie's husband demands that Sara go back to her father, not wanting another “*Americanerin*” in his house (144). To Zalmon, Sara's rejection of family symbolizes the self-centered and untempered independence of Americans. Mashah's bread giver, Moe, spends his money on himself rather than his family, leaving Mashah and their children in poverty. When Mashah says she cannot support Sara as well, Sara takes umbrage at this assumption: “You think I've come to hang myself upon your neck? I can get a job quicker'n lightning. If I stay with you, I'll pay for my eating” (147). Sara is insistent upon crafting her own identity especially in contrast to her father, who has taught his daughters to expect others to “hang on their necks.” Sara plans to support herself now—and only herself. Even if she is still immersed in the life of her family, she is interested in creating a mutually beneficial relationship with them on her own terms, exchanging pay for food and shelter. Sara becomes so infuriated at the way Moe treats Mashah, though, that she lashes out at him in anger. Nevertheless, even in her fury, Sara still

blames Mashah for not having “the grit to stand up for herself” and decides to leave in “hopelessness” (151).

The flaw in Sara’s single-minded pursuit of independence, however, must later be addressed; the slowly developing ideas of what it means to be a self-supporting woman in American society have now become so concrete and firm in her mind that she has adopted the dogmatic judgment of her father, filtering everyone she knows and their choices through her own beliefs before declaring them worthy to participate in her plan. Her eventual removal from her family entirely is very much reminiscent of Zalmon’s pronouncement that her adoption of American ways would make her selfish and wild. Though her pursuit of independence is necessary and crucial to her survival and assimilation, Sara’s core beliefs have not yet become her own. She has rejected one set of traditional Old World ideologies for a modern American lifestyle, which is echoed by the title of Book II in *Bread Givers*: “Between Two Worlds.” Sara’s early years are spent struggling against her father’s overbearing views; her education and work experience will now temper that dissatisfaction as she realizes that the American way of life, while different, is just as difficult and overbearing. Her life on her own is simply another kind of struggle against domineering attitudes.

The first issue is renting a room. “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” (158). Sara treasures her privacy, but she finds many people unwilling to rent rooms to girls and others unwilling to rent private rooms for girls (and who suspect Sara of unworthy deeds for asking). Finally, Sara must use her assertiveness: “Look only to me!” she commands one woman. “You’re a smart woman. You ought to know yourself on a person, first sight. Here, I give you a month’s rent in advance” (159-60). The money finally gets Sara the room—but her dwindling finances remind her of her next challenge,

a job. She must force a man who thinks nothing of such a scrawny child to see her as a worthy ironer; then, she proceeds to register for night school and struggles to study through the noise and dirt of her new dwellings. Sara learns that she must find the privacy and quietness she treasures so much within herself, instead of seeking it out in the world. She tells herself, “As you had to shut your eyes to the dirt, so you must shut your ears to the noise” (164). This internal motivation encourages her to begin internalizing and formulating more intelligent and studied opinions about the Old World and New World. Her education is more than vocational training; she begins to educate herself on what it truly means to be an assimilated Jewish immigrant in a New World—and it is not quite what she has in mind.

Hunger remains a large part of immigrant life, even when they transition from their old home to their new. Hunger, both metaphorical and literal, propels David and Sara to work hard and make changes in order to get ahead. An episode in *Bread Givers* reveals that food is a patriarchal commodity. After Sara, in her intense hunger, ruins a shirt she is ironing, she is forced to pay for it from her wages and faces weeks of only dry bread to sustain her. Before this happens, she rushes to the cafeteria and buys a bowl of beef stew in hopes to satiate her during the weeks ahead.

My anxious eyes leaped to the faces of the servers. I tried to see which one of them served the stew. My portion depended on her mood of the minute. If I'm lucky to strike her when she feels good, then the spoon will go deep down into the pot and come up heaping full. If she feels mean, then I get only from the tip of the spoon, a stingy portion. God! She holds in her hands my life, my strength, new blood for my veins, new clearness in my brain to go on with the fight. Oh! If she would only give me enough to fill myself, this one time! (167-8)

The server gives Sara a small, thin portion, but the large man behind her receives a large portion filled with meat. Sara stands her ground and demands her portion be larger: “But why did she give more to the man just because he was a man? I’m hungry” (169). Sara’s questioning of the status quo begins in the same way her questioning of Father did earlier in the novel. In her new life, in which she envisions wealth and satisfaction, she instead meets only with hunger and injustice. The large man is a direct contradiction to her belief that in America, women did not have to remain subservient; they could be people with jobs and money and independence, too. Instead of bowing under the pressure that these patriarchal injustices are in every culture, though, Sara stands her ground. She might starve, but she will not quit.

In the midst of breaking down her idealized view of America, Mother comes to give her pickled herring and a feather bed. Sara is overjoyed and asks how she can return the favor, and Mother only wants Sara to visit. Sara, however, is adamant about staying to attend to her studies: “I could see you later. But I can’t go to college later” (171). Unfortunately, when Sara finally does visit towards the end of the novel, her mother is on her deathbed and dies soon after she speaks to Sara for the last time. In Sara’s prioritizing her education above her family, she is still rejecting her past in favor of her present, and as such, rejecting her family and origins in favor of the possibility of America—even after the setback she experienced that day. Yet, her mother—symbolic of those origins—emerges as her comfort when her new dreams begin to fray. “Long after she had gone, I felt her still in the room” (172). Sara’s mother, her past, provides comfort but most of all the energy she needs to keep moving forward. When Fania visits Sara, though, she is no longer the sister of her past:

I glanced at my stylish sister. Was this dressed-up, grand lady the same Fania who was once loved by the poor poet Lipkin? Gone was the innocence of young

dreams from her eyes. Good eating, good sleeping, and the sunshine of plenty breathed from her face. And she held her head high, as if she didn't come from the same family as the rest of us. But for all her shine, I could see in the shadowy places under her eyes thread lines of restlessness. (174-5)

Fania has found the female version of the American dream, the ideal that Father and Mother had in mind for all their daughters—marriage to a wealthy American businessman who still honored Jewish tradition. However, despite her superficial riches, Fania reveals that life with her husband is stressful and that they argue constantly over finances. She is lonely. Like David, she rejects her intelligence now that she is rich, admitting that she cannot even look at books now. Sara, when offered the chance to be set up by Fania with a man like her husband, tells her sisters that she could not marry such a man. She has come to realize that success for her is not defined by the success of other people, whether it be her father or an American millionaire. She declines the offer to go home for a visit with Fania and Bessie as she has lessons to study, and Fania makes an apt comparison: “Let’s leave her to her mad education. She’s worse than Father with his Holy Torah” (178). Sara’s obsession with her new values mimics Father’s obsession with his old ones and predicts Sara’s later softening when she finds her father going through his own hard times. Despite their conflict, Sara’s and Father’s personalities and approach to life are much the same; “like a soldier in battle,” they systematically pursue their beliefs with stubbornness and determination (178).

Sara finds that she does not fit in at school or at the laundry where she works. Her co-workers believe her selfish and hard-hearted for deserting her family, and her classmates find her tedious because she constantly interrupts lessons with questions. She feels lonely and tries to fit in by looking like the other girls. She buys make-up and does up her face. “On the outside I

looked like the other girls. But the easy gladness that sparkled from their eyes was not in mine. They were a bunch of light-hearted savages who looked gay because they felt gay. I was like a dolled-up dummy fixed for a part on the stage” (183). Sara recognizes that external trappings are not all that is needed for effective assimilation, as David has to realize during his lunch with the Philadelphian buyer. Though he looks the part, his personality dispels an awkward situation he did not know much about. Sara learns to do this in a less manipulative manner by giving up her attempt to fit in and making real friends who are impressed by the person she already is. Sara mentions a couple of times that her goal is “to make myself for a person” (66). When Fania sends Max Goldstein to her, she writes in the letter, “You don’t live. You don’t eat. You don’t dress like a person,” but Sara must reject Goldstein because her criteria for personhood is not marriage and children but rather education and an income (185). She may not have made herself into a person yet, but she will—and she will do it only in her dogged way through the only means she trusts—herself.

Refusing Max Goldstein brings Sara closer to her father in her imagination, as he has rejected worldly success for godliness and education. When Sara finally does come across her father, though, he is furious that she rejected Goldstein. He bashes her dreams of education and changing the world, spits on the imagined freedom women have in America, and becomes to Sara “a tyrant from the Old World” (205). Sara pleads with her father she wants love in a husband, not money or success—a modern sentiment her father cannot understand. Father gives her up, insulting her in the process, and Sara realizes the uselessness of trying to plead her case with him: “He was the Old World. I was the New” (207). Although America has not been as easily conquered as she had imagined, Sara firmly plants herself against her origins. If she cannot find a place to fit into America, she knows she can find a way to fit into the New. Once

she knows that her father will not accept her because she has not married a wealthy American businessman, she finally understands that America is not part of the New World, either. The New World is created by people such as her, people who want to develop their own techniques to succeed and find fulfillment. “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” (208). Only when Sara fully “makes herself for a person” will she finally find the wholeness she is looking for.

Both David and Sara present themselves as exceedingly honest, or as Weinstein writes, “psychologically real” characters, presenting their flaws openly and freely (Sara’s hotheadedness, David’s lustfulness) (47). However, while they internally dissect their flaws to present to the reader, their motivations remain glaringly external while still caught in their identity struggles. Sara and David both need to find a way to support themselves, but they are internally immobilized by the glamor and frustrations of American wealth and beauty. The “American dream” is much different than it was portrayed in the Old World, so they both have to find ways to make their own path to success. The means they choose to do it must be internally reckoned, as the external influences of their origins and the external draw of their idealizations have been destroyed. In this, Sara finds success—but David is pulled too deeply from where he has come to reach fulfillment.

CHAPTER 4

RECONCILING THE PAST AND PRESENT: FROM INDEPENDENCE TO WHOLENESS

During Yeziarska's and Cahan's time, Americanization was a term used frequently among immigrants and groups which supported their assimilation into American society. Both Cahan and Yeziarska had issues with total assimilation, raising questions in their political activity and writings about where and how the immigrant's origins should come into play during the assimilation process. For Sara and David, the main characters of *Bread Givers* and *The Rise of David Levinsky* respectively, Americanization plays a unique part in their coming-of-age; following the process of the *bildungsroman*, the characters break from their families and explore themselves and their moral code as they struggle through obstacles (primarily education and work, but other factors in maturing) toward independence. In the context of the immigrant, though, the *bildungsroman* is complicated by the presence of conflicting moralities and traditions, catching the immigrant between two worlds and two sets of societal rules and expectations. Americanization was to ease the immigrant's journey during this time of anxiety. As David learns the proper way to lunch from his Philadelphian buyer, so Americanization proponents intended to serve as those teachers for other immigrants.

Both Cahan's and Yeziarska's contemporaries saw them as assimilationists, protesting the poor working and living conditions in the ghettos as a way of encouraging their peers to live the American dream (Konzett 19). *Levinsky* and *Bread Givers*, however, shows that their political concerns went much further than simply social justice, as Sara and David explore the cultural and personal implications of the American assimilation experience. For instance, "Americanizers often viewed intermarriage optimistically. In 1909, Americanization proponent Ellwood Cubberly emphasized that success with immigrants meant to break up with their groups or settlements, to assimilate and amalgamate these people as part of our American race"

(Jirousek 27). Proponents of Americanization saw themselves accepting immigrants by wanting to integrate them into America's national identity, but Yeziarska resists this type of Americanization in *Bread Givers* by ultimately reuniting Sara's familial group—dismissing their need to reform or refine themselves with this type of assimilation. Levinson writes, "Although Yeziarska grapples with this issue to some extent in a number of her short stories and novels, there is never a sense of final reconciliation between the Old World and the New" (5). To some extent, her charity towards her father at the end of the novel does seem like a setback after all she has accomplished; it is certainly not what "Americanizers" had in mind when thinking of Americanizing assimilation. The reader's expectations for this event likely involve some retribution or justice towards the tyrannical man who controls his family's life to their ruin. Sara's father, though, was a highly respected religious man in the Old World; like David, he studies, reads, and prays while females work to support his divine calling—a revered tradition in traditional Jewish life. David's mother works tirelessly to enable him to study, and David's recollection of this time in his life is not without his own struggles. American life, however, sees an immobile man, chanting and studying religious works all day while his family engages in hard, physical labor to support him, as strange and slothful. The family's landlady even ridicules Sara's father for his laziness. Sara, though, eventually understands that her father's traditional ways and thwarted expectations confine and frustrate her father. In the same way Sara's father is perpetuating the values he has been raised with, Sara feels equally frustrated when her own expectations of American life are thwarted. Her motivations are now her own, not perpetuated by traditional or modern values, and they are what stand between her and her father's fate. Because of this, Sara, in a great act of kindness, helps the man whom she has hated so thoroughly throughout her childhood.

Cahan, too, shows the complexities of assimilation through the ironically-called “rise” of David Levinsky; although David has assimilated quite successfully, adopting American mannerisms and manipulating the business world to gain great success and power, David is quite openly depressed and blames it on wasting his intellect and spirituality in his rush to the top. While Sara declares herself part of the New World (and does not mean America by that, but rather, an unexplored identity), David cannot escape the Old World. In the final pages of his narrative, he asks himself, “Am I happy?” and soliloquizes on the ease of his life and the great lengths he has gone to be where he is now; however, he concludes that he is lonely and sometimes even longs for “the very days when the doors of that restaurant were closed to me and when the Canal Street merchant was a magnate of commerce in my estimation” (367-68). Because he rejects a crucial aspect of his identity for the success he earned in America, he is at a loss when faced with his past. David’s longing for the past, as miserable as it was, represents a desire to go back and integrate the two parts of himself: his past and his present. Cahan’s commentary here suggests that Americanization can be dangerous to the psychological health of the individual. Although outspoken on immigrant rights and social justice, Cahan heavily criticized the idealization of wealth and an easy life that was so much a part of the desire that propelled immigrants to seek upward mobility. Cahan devoted a good portion of his energy and writing to socialism and labor issues, so he did see potential in the American work force for easier upward mobility; however, the character of David raises the past as an issue. Immigrants must grapple with the two sets of cultural influences and therefore the dual identity that status gives them; ignoring one entirely in order to adopt the customs of the other will not sufficiently assimilate them into their new homes. Their ability to live satisfactorily in their new culture requires them to merge the two identities, to create a new type of person, as Sara does.

To fully understand the complexity in Sara's successful assimilation, it is important to see how others fail. Sara's father fails because of his refusal to accept his current circumstances, but David also fails because of his complete rejection of his past. Elahi writes, "Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* shows how a mobile subject—the individual disconnected from national, ethnic, and even familial home—has the potential to re-imagine and transform not only his or her identity, but the identity of a nation, or at least to contribute to its transformation" (108). David and Sara use their feelings of isolation from the Old World and in the New World to re-imagine their identities, but Sara ultimately finds reconciliation to be the most successful means of transformation, while David realizes too late what he has lost and finds it futile even to try to reconcile the two halves of himself again.

Once David throws himself whole-heartedly into profit and business, he states,

I had no creed. I knew of no ideals. The only thing I believed in was the cold, drab theory of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. This could not satisfy a heart that was hungry for enthusiasm and affection, so dreams of family life became my religion. Self-sacrificing devotion to one's family was the only kind of altruism and idealism I did not flout. (265)

David sees nothing in himself from before. His naïve intellectual wonder and his devout spirituality are shed; in their place are visions of wealth, status, and power. Survival of the fittest is a powerful modernizing force, a Darwinian picture of the kill-or-be-killed modern industrial society that abused laborers and glorified the capitalists who made their wealth from dehumanizing others to mere parts in a machine. David now falls in the latter group, often using shady and immoral business practices to line his pockets with more cash. "Society at large presents an accurate reflection of his own corrupt values" (Marovitz 148). David's past self has

disappeared into the shadows of American society. He even becomes alienated from the same friends who helped him in the beginnings of his success, such as Gitelson and Max. Seeing women he once pursued, like Matilda and Gussie, also causes him discomfort.

Towards the end of his narrative, David sees Shmerl, the teacher from his youth who would pinch him because he could not take out his anger on the other boys. David does not desire vengeance, and he even intends to help the poor man who seems disheveled and too old. He then thinks that perhaps he should extract vengeance upon his old teacher for the cruelties done to him in his youth, but he rejects that idea as well. In the end, he does nothing. He decides that the spell of the past “was broken irretrievably” (353). This scene contrasts the path Sara takes with her father when the roles are reversed. Though, by the end, Sara and David are both wealthier and more powerful than their tormentors once were, neither choose to use their power to seek vengeance. Sara, however, takes care of her father; she responds to his plight with kindness and love. David remains immobile, bring further irony to the “rise” in the title of his narrative. Though financially upwardly mobile, David never takes advantage of his growth and intellect to, as Sara writes it, make himself “for a person.” Ignoring his past is further evidence that he will not traverse the new ground Sara does, and though he has followed the strictures and rules of American life, he still cannot find a place within it. He is too afraid to become anyone else.

His love life reflects his loneliness; like his mother, the women David becomes most attracted to leave him in some way, reflecting his unworthiness of their affections. Other than Matilda, three significant women represent parts of David’s dueling identities in America. “Dora symbolizes sacrifice for the family, Fanny embodies traditional Judaism and authority, and Anna represents art, socialism, and Zionism” (151). His failure with these women reflects his failure to

be anything other than superficial, greedy, and incomplete. David's lack of companionship represents the missing piece in himself. David may dress and act the part, but he still feels as if he is an imposter in his new surroundings. "This self-consciousness is an indication of the degree to which Levinsky remains an outsider. Despite David's control over commerce, culture stands aloof to him, does not let him in" (Elahi 121). Though David attempts to ingratiate himself into society, he does so only on the level that aids his business. His personal life remains frighteningly bleak and miserable.

In the final pages of his manuscript, David writes,

I can never forget the days of my misery. I cannot escape from my old self. My past and present do not comport well. David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher's Synagogue, seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak manufacturer. (372)

Unlike Sara, David never sees his past as anything other than problematic; that is perhaps crucial to understanding why he never wants to go back to the part of himself he leaves back there. Internally, though, he realizes that person from the past is still part of him—and he seems to detest it. The picture of himself as a successful man has always been more alluring, even when he was a child learning how to fight the other children so that he could stay on top. The callous and cruel David who narrates the novel seems to be "nothing but a machine," connecting him to the modernizing industry which alienates and de-humanizes (Marovitz 207). His intellect and spirituality are overridden by his need to dominate. David fails to assimilate, despite his wealth, because he fails to recognize the duality, both personal and the cultural, as integral parts of his identity, as well.

When Sara begins college, she too realizes that she is unlike the others. Facing physical education, for instance, exhausts her already work-wearied body, and when she gets overly frustrated she breaks the hurdle the teacher has been forcing her to jump. Sent to the dean, Sara explains her situation with anger, and the dean merely gives her permission not to go to physical education. Significantly, this permission is one of the first acts of mercies she has received from a male authority figure.

Even though the understanding dean provides her an ally, Sara still recognizes her alienation from the others. At a dance given by the freshmen class, she notes, “The whirling joy went on and on, and still I sat there watching, cold, lifeless, like a lost ghost. I was nothing and nobody. It was worse than being ignored. Worse than being an outcast. I simply didn’t belong” (219). Again, Sara understands now that she is no more part of the Old World than the New World, but she persists. As she tells her father, she is something new—as he is something old. She is an unexplored creation, an original plant that has yet to bloom. This plant analogy continues in her despair, when she throws herself on the ground and asks, “Will I never lift myself to be a person among people?” Then, she presses her face “against the earth” (220). Struggling to emerge, to be re-born, Sara metaphorically employs the words “lift” and “earth,” which are similar to David’s ironic “rise.” Sara is not simply striving to meet some standard, whether it be traditional or modern; she wants to grow into something different, stronger, and better than either of the worlds can offer her. Belluscio writes, “Sara’s Jewish American identity is actively claimed, but in a sense, it is also forced upon her. Hence, as early as the 1920s, there is a nascent sense that a new generic approach is needed to handle the contradictory threads of ethnic female experience” (199). Sara’s journey is not simply one of effective assimilation but a journey to create a new type of identity altogether.

Sara's psychology class lets her analyze and re-contextualize her past in a more positive light; her learning experience puts her ahead of the rest of her classmates. Her ability to apply real-world experiences to the psychological concepts she is being taught gives her an edge and an unquenchable thirst for more. Unfortunately, she comes up against the teacher, Mr. Edman's, indifference when she tries to discuss her extracurricular work on the subject and becomes dejected once more.

How I had dreamed of college! The inspired companionship of teachers who are friends! The high places above the earth, where minds are fired by minds. And what's this place I've come to? Was the college only a factory, and the teachers machines turning out lectures by the hour on wooden dummies, incapable of response? Was there no time for the flash from eye to eye, from heart to heart? Was that vanishing spark of light that flies away quicker than it came unless it is given life at the moment by the kindling breath of another mind—was that to be shoved aside with, "I'm too busy. I have no time for recitations outside class hours"? (224)

Sara's reaction to Mr. Edman's inability to participate in an intellectual discussion with her mirrors the modern industrialized society that characterized America. Just as Sara's working experience transforms her into an easily-replaceable part of the machine whose only design is to complete the job, so Mr. Edman and the other teachers are overworked and underpaid in order to more quickly and efficiently process the students. College has become a factory, not an oasis, of learning. Despite Sara's attempt to escape from her father's traditionalism, she comes to find modernization does not hold any appeal for her either. Significantly, Sara finds herself getting along better with the older professors filled with wisdom because she has lived more in her

young life “than these psychology instructors did with all their heads swelled from too much knowing” (231). She becomes friends with the dean, as David learns to ingratiate himself with influential people. Sara’s friendship is sincere, though; she wants nothing other than the comfort of the older man’s conversation. The dean tells her, “Your place is with the pioneers. And you’re going to survive,” once again impressing the importance of Sara’s emerging new path (232).

Once Sara graduates from college, she returns to New York. Upon her return, she writes, “Sara Smolinsky, from Hester Street, changed into a person!” (237). The confidence she finds in her unique perspective at college encourages her to finally see that adopting competing ideologies is not the path to success; rather, her endeavors led her to a new person entirely, not of one world or the other and at the same time defiantly a product of both. However, toward the ending of *Bread Givers*, this new person leads to much controversy. Sara’s character has been found by several critics to inconsistently do two things: marry and return to her father. Schoen writes, “The choices that Sara makes are never perfect and her guilt is never completely assuaged. Only in the ending does Yeziarska’s clarity of vision abandon her” (73). Believing Sara’s guilt to get the best of her, Schoen sees the ending as imperfectly realistic, but not growth. Belluscio writes, “In the final analysis, *Bread Givers* reveals limitations in the ability of Jewish American women to free themselves from the demands of ancestral heritage and succeed on their own terms” (198). Thus, despite all that Sara has accomplished, the guilt of leaving her family in such dire circumstances haunts her until she gives up her independence and returns under the rule of a husband and her father.

As Sara enjoys her new wealth and comfort, she muses, “Once I had been elated at the thought that a man had wanted me. How much more thrilling to feel that I had made my work wanted! This was the honeymoon of my career!” (241). Though Sara’s success is much more

modest as a schoolteacher than David's status as a millionaire through the cloak industry, she is elated enough to want to share it with her past—her family. Unfortunately, she finds her mother dying. As she quickly passes, Sara cries to herself, "O God! What can I do to atone?" (245). After her mother's death, Sara decides, "I had failed to give Mother the understanding of her deeper self during her lifetime. Let me at least give it to Father while he was yet alive. And so, every day, after school, I went to see him" (257). Father, however, cannot be consoled by mourning his wife's death in the company of his daughter; he quickly marries the widow Mrs. Feinstein who is only after Father's lodge money. Mrs. Feinstein is horrified when she finds out that Sara's father refuses to earn money to keep her up, and Father is horrified to find Mrs. Feinstein is not the doting, kind woman she is before they married.

Sara is in a quandary. Her sisters refuse to support her father now that he has married a woman they all disapproved of, but Sara questions whether this is the right decision. In stark contrast to her running away from her familial obligations, Sara as an adult with means now wonders what her duty to her father is. Readers might view this as a step back from where Sara had been, independent and free, but Sara actually wants to accomplish what David fails—uniting her two selves. To do that, she must come to terms with her past and reconcile that with her duties at present. After taking psychology, she learns that though her experiences in her parents' household might have been dark, they give her more life experience than the other students; therefore, growing up the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi aids her in her quest to break from those traditions and earn her own way. Sara wonders, then, what she owes her father for this.

In the midst of these problems, Sara meets the principal at her school, Hugo Seeling, a Polish immigrant such as herself. Hugo and Sara get along well and reminisce about the past and their trials to get where they are now. Hugo and Sara's coupling thwarts the Americanization

suggestion of intermarriage, and Sara's return to nurse her father and protect him from his new wife when he falls ill suggests that her guilty conscience has won. The emptiness of her apartment and the freedom of her paycheck are replaced by familial ties and new relationships. The victory of her conscience is not necessarily a setback, though. Sara needs to welcome people into her life. Most of all, reconciling her past and present gives Sara a fuller sense of self.

Sara does not give up everything for her father or Hugo, though. In a touching scene, Sara brings Hugo to her father to learn Hebrew. Her father says,

I thought in America we were all lost. Jewishness is no Jewishness. Children are no children. Respect for fathers does not exist. And yet my own daughter who is not a Jewess and not a gentile—brings me a young man—and whom? An American. And for what? To learn Hebrew. From whom? From *me*. Lord of the Universe! You never forsake your faithful ones! (294)

Sara's father touches on the complexity of assimilation well in this passage. Jews, gentiles, Americans, and children are all lost, with contradictory expectations and traditions. The harrowing journey from all they once knew to a foreign place is a common experience for all in the modernizing world. Sara's father correctly identifies his daughter as not a Jew or a gentile; she is something in between. She is her own person. An American who desires to learn the past from a man who spent all his days resisting everything Sara and Hugo represents the reconciliation of Sara and her father, of America and Poland, of tradition and modernization, and of the past and present.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS

At the time Yeziarska and Cahan were writing, the beginning of the twentieth century, America had already witnessed nearly a century of rapidly increasing immigration numbers. European immigrants made up a large percentage of these new American citizens, often trying to escape the crowding in European cities and poor living conditions. Industrialization in Europe also pushed skilled laborers into lesser-paying, unskilled jobs; therefore, the land and jobs America could offer attracted Europeans who struggled to find sustainable work. In the case of immigrants such as Yeziarska and Cahan, many also fled from their homes to avoid persecution. America offered safety, more land, better wages, and an opportunity to start again.

The way these characters choose to adapt is both a personal and social experience. Both David and Sara mention being called greenhorns by other Jewish immigrants as they pursue the American dream of wealth and independence. They both exhibit clumsiness in adapting to their new lives; for example, Sara naively believes she can find someone willing to let a room to a single female, and David still pursues his spirituality and purity in spite of the others mocking him.

To come of age, Sara and David must break away from their past and learn the social mores of their new environment. The complication and anxiety in these *bildungsromans* come from the resulting dual identities. The traditions and Orthodox nature of their Jewish past clashes with the secular modernism of America; as a result, Sara and David face the problem of how to combine these identities successfully and effectively. David fails; he readily admits that he becomes too obsessed with the wealth and power America gave him in return for his past. Sara succeeds only because she is willing to accept her past as part of her present. She will marry a man from her home country of Poland, but one who will allow her to be the independent woman

she still wants to be. She returns to take care of her ailing father but on her own terms and with a confidence that allows her to remain unaffected by his words. The identity she creates is also unique; it does not follow the principles of the Old World or the New World. While she adapts to both worlds eventually, she does not subscribe fully to either's agenda. She will not be a dutiful Jewish daughter and wife, but she will also not allow the temptation of America's wealth to consume her past as David does.

Boelhower writes that in the genre of the American immigration novel,

There is never acculturation pure and simple but rather the presentation of a pluricultural reality depicting minority culture with specific languages, world views, customs, and memories . . . In light of genre expectations, the reader is led primarily to naturalize these differences as an integral part of the American experience. Through the genre model then, one must root a mythic conception of the American dream within a specific historical context, which means requalifying the Dream each time there is a new immigrant protagonist, with a specific response in a specific location. (12)

There is no one American dream to attain; each dream is qualified by the contexts of the immigrant. To fully adapt to their new culture, immigrants must not reject their pasts but integrate it within their new identity as Americans. Sara succeeds, then, by defining her version of success as opposed to the type of success expected of her from her teachers or parents. As the reader, too, we expect her to reject her family—and thus, the confining nature of her past. Subverting these expectations is the only way Sara can live within her new society, which can be just as confining as the old. The guilt she feels about abandoning her family may or may not be unfounded but is real for her nonetheless. The guilt is a part of her past, and the gift of

forgiveness of her father relieves her of this burden. Sara successfully creates a dual identity with which she is comfortable, one that can function in both worlds but does not depend on either.

David cannot forgive himself for abandoning the past and remains alienated from his past self, despite his great material success in America. Externally, David ideally assimilates to American society; he learns the rules and mannerisms by analyzing others and then is not only able to put them into practice, but to manipulate them to his advantage. What David feels is not uncommon to immigrants, both in his time and now. Cahan wrote in an editorial, “We have to be Americans... We shall love Americans and help to build America . . . But you will not be able to erase the old home from your heart. The heart will be drawn elsewhere. And in your solitude, images will rise up and stare in your faces with eternal sorrow” (qtd. in Weber 3). Cahan’s words accurately describe David’s plight. Immigrants in the nineteenth century played a large part of the increasing population in cities, the industrialization of America, and the notion of class mobility; they contributed significantly to the creation of America in the modern era.

Despite their differences in outcome, Sara and David also provide tales of caution. Assimilating to a new culture requires the immigrant to grapple with a divided sense of self, an attempt to locate one’s self again in a new place. The way in which immigrants choose to re-contextualize themselves in their new location demands a personal examination and newly-created understanding of themselves. However, immigrants from different areas have built small communities within larger ones to reflect their homes and thereby assuage the transition, adding to the cultural diversity of America and, as Cahan wrote, helping to build America. Despite the increasing diversity and understanding of different cultures by all Americans, immigrants—especially undocumented ones, often escaping poor or dangerous situations—can face hostility from other Americans. Politically, English-language laws, racial profiling, and border control

have created uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous environments for immigrants.

Documented immigrants must deal with complicated citizenship processes and discrimination in all facets of their new lives. In contemporary times, Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yeziarska still bring pertinent and much-needed voices to the lives of immigrants. For Sara and David, the outcome of their struggles, obstacles, and perseverance create new possibilities, new identities, and a new life. Their assimilation process and coming-of-age merge into the crucial need to “make myself for a person” in their new country, fittingly helping to mold America as they allow it to mold them.

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