

Anna Margolin's, "I Once Was a Youth"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/anna-margolins-i-once-was-youth>.

Introduction

Anna Margolin's "I Once Was a Youth" (*Ikh bin geven amol a yingling*) is a fascinating and perplexing Yiddish poem, written in New York and published in Margolin's only published volume, *Poems (Lider)*, in 1929. The poem's first-person speaker reflects on a diverse amalgam of cultural references, with a keen eye for historical evolution and change. This kit situates the poem within Margolin's transnational modernist milieu and explores how contemporary readers might engage the poem's complex presentation of identity, and the meaning of Yiddish as a marker of Jewish memory.

Cover image: A young Anna Margolin, early 1900s.

Subjects

Gender, Poetry, Women Writers, Yiddish, Translation, Modernism

Reading and Background

- A short biography of Anna Margolin (1887–1952, née Rosa Lebensboym) is available online at the [Jewish Women's Archive](#). A selection of her poetry in English translation, with a useful introduction to her life and work, is available in Shirley Kumove's *Drunk from the Bitter Truth*, 2005.
- Scholarly discussions of the poem include Barbara Mann, "Picturing the Poetry of Anna Margolin," 2002, and Naomi Brenner, "Slippery Selves: Rachel Bluvstein and Anna Margolin in Poetry and in Public," 2010.
- For cultural and historical background on Yiddish modernism in New York, see Ruth Wisse's 1988 book *A Little Love in Big Manhattan*.

Resources

1: Poem in Yiddish and English translation, Anna Margolin's "I Once Was a Youth" ("Ikh bin geven amol a yingling"), 1929.

Each stanza in Margolin's poem contains information about a first-person speaker and their intimate encounters with other people, details suggesting both homoerotic and incestuous relationships. At the same time, the poem features a kind of temporal unfolding (e.g., "I once was a youth....") that moves through the major stages of antiquity: Greece, Rome, Christianity. Throughout, the speaker is a unique witness of important historical events: the poem's closing lines describe hearing of Jesus's life and death from the edges of empire.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to point to concrete images from each stanza and consider how the poem's first-person speaker is constructed through these details: Who is speaking? What do we know about them? Do we have any information about the gender(s) of the speaker(s)? Do you think the speaker of the poem is Jewish? Why or why not? What is confusing or contradictory? Where are they speaking? When? How do these different personae add up? Do they? Find specific lines in the text to support your position.

Sources: Anna Margolin, *Lider [Poems]* (New York: Oriom Press, 1929), 5.

Barbara Mann, "Picturing the Poetry of Anna Margolin," *MLQ* 63:4 (2002), 510.



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2: Text excerpt, “Introspectivism” (“In zikh”) manifesto, 1921.

Margolin was part of a cohort of Yiddish poets who adopted the term “introspectivism” to explain their poetic process. Literary manifestos such as this were common in the early twentieth century, and were often polemical in tone—an idealistic statement of principles regarding how poetry should be written and read. This document, written by Jewish immigrants in New York City, positions Yiddish as a modern language capable of registering and recording the uniquely frenetic pace of urban life.

Suggested Activity: Read this manifesto excerpt and consider its insistence on a particular relationship between poetry and the world. Ask students to state, in their own words, what that relationship is. Then ask them if and how this manifesto helps them understand Margolin’s use of “kaleidoscopic” cultural references. Note the use of the words “panorama” and “labyrinth” to describe the “human psyche.” What does it mean to use terms suggesting vast or complex spaces to describe one’s interior self? How is the self simultaneously both small (interior) and large (the world)? What are some examples of an “inherited self” evident in Margolin’s poem? Consider the genre of the manifesto, which in the early twentieth century was often associated with various political viewpoints or social agendas. Have students work in pairs to create manifestos that reflect some aspect of their shared experience as young people in the present day.

Sources: M. Ofranel et al., *In zikh: a zamlung introspektive lider* [In zikh: a collection of introspectivist poems] (New York: M. N. Mayzel, 1920), 5–8.

Jacob Glatshteyn, A. Leyeles, and N. Minkov, “Introspectivism,” trans. Anita Norich, appendix to *American Yiddish Poetry*, eds. Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007), 774–775.

3: Poem excerpt, Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” 1918, English translation from German, and photograph of statue.

Margolin admired Rilke’s work and his influential idea of “thing-poems” (*Dinggedichte*). She may have had [this well-known poem](#) in mind when writing “I Once Was a Youth,” especially for its vivid focus on a fragment of a Greek statue—a “torso”—that seems to possess a dynamic, life-like quality.

Suggested Activity: Rilke’s and Margolin’s poems both contain images of statues. However, the focus is less on their value as objects of art, and more on an experience of their concrete, material qualities. Have students write short “thing-poems” about an ordinary object, something they use or touch in their daily lives, encouraging them to observe and encounter these everyday objects as “suffused” with inspiration.

Sources: Rainer Maria Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. by Stephen Mitchell (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 67.

For full poem, see: <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/syllabi/readings/Rilke-Archaic.html>

4: Alternate translations of the poem’s title and first line.

Here is a selection of translations of the title and first line of Margolin’s poem. Notice that even experienced Yiddish translators have been challenged by the poem’s ambiguous gender coding.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to consider the effect of translating the poem’s title/first line with and without marked gender. How does having specific information about gender (e.g., the speaker is male) affect your experience of the poem? What happens when that gender identification is left more open-ended? Although all of these translations are renderings of the same poem, they are each slightly different. Would you say that the original poem and a translation of the poem are the same poem? Why or why not? What do you think the goal of a translation is?

As a way of sensitizing students to poetry’s special literary qualities (e.g. imagery, rhyme, line breaks) ask them to “translate” a stanza or two of the poem into prose-narrative. Insist that their prose translation reflect the mood, situation, and/or voice of the poem. Finally, ask them to reflect on the activity, and consider what might get “lost in translation,” when one turns poetry into prose, thereby highlighting poetry’s unique formal features.

Sources: 1. Ruth Whitman, ed., *An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry* (New York: October House, 1966; Detroit: Wayne State UP,

1995), 133.

2. Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk, eds., *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, trans. Marcia Falk (New York: Viking, 1987), 218.

3. Jules Chametzky et al, eds., *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, trans. Kathryn Hellerstein (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 265.

4. Barbara Mann, "Picturing the Poetry of Anna Margolin," *Modern Language Quarterly* 63:4 (2002): 510.

5. Shirley Kumove, *Drunk from the Bitter Truth: The Poems of Anna Margolin* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 3.

6. Benjamin Harshav, ed., *Sing, Stranger*, trans. Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006), 650.

5: Poem, Anna Margolin's "She of the Cold Marble Breasts," and photograph, Anna Margolin's tombstone.

Margolin's grave features an inscription of her poem "She of the Cold Marble Breasts," one of two poetic epitaphs she published in her lifetime. The tombstone is thus simultaneously both literary text and concrete thing, and alludes to the idea of the self as a made-object, which is so strong in Margolin's work.

This self-inscribed epitaph in effect gives the poet the last word: she creates her own painful legacy, one sensitive to the price of trauma and missed opportunities.

Suggested Activity: Compare the carefree exuberance of "I Once Was a Youth" to the bitter self-recrimination of "She of the Cold Marble Breasts." What kind of commemoration does Margolin's tombstone offer? How are we instructed to remember her? How does writing such as an epitaph or a poem help you remember someone who has passed? How does an object or place (such as a tombstone or memorial site) help you remember someone? Ask students to think of examples of each kind of memorialization, either personal or public.

Finally, have students write their own epitaph, with the option to make it ironic, funny, tragic, serious, etc. They can write several. What would the different versions convey to posterity?

Sources: Photograph from <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/21662581/anna-margolin>

Anna Margolin, *Drunk from the Bitter Truth: The Poems of Anna Margolin*, trans. Shirley Kumove (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 273.