

# Anzia Yezierska's "Bread Givers"

## A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

### Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/anzia-yezierskas-bread-givers>.

#### Introduction

In *Bread Givers*, Anzia Yezierska's 1925 novel, Sarah Smolinsky escapes the poverty and oppression of life as an Eastern European Jewish immigrant on New York City's Lower East Side and reinvents herself as a self-reliant American woman. The youngest of four sisters yearning to escape the squalor of the tenements, Sarah is constrained by family obligation, low economic status, religion, and cultural tradition. Her overbearing father is a *melamed*, a religious scholar and teacher, who presides over his family with implacable paternal authority, mandating traditional gender-specific roles and obligations from which Sarah recoils and rebels. Her mother is trapped in the thankless drudgery of life in the tenements, limits of privation and want, and frustrations imposed by social and religious custom. Sarah's sisters are consigned to arranged marriages and lives of wifely servitude like their mother. Seeking to avoid this fate, Sarah takes the wrenching step of moving out of her parents' home, after which she labors to support herself, works her way through college, and becomes a school teacher. Eventually, Sarah tries to reconcile her new life with the family, religion, and culture she can never completely leave behind.

Cover image: Sketch of Anzia Yezierska accompanying an article in the *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*, March 5, 1921.

#### Subjects

Childhood, Fiction, Gender, Immigration, Money, New York, Social Commentary, United States, Women Writers

#### Reading and Background

- Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* was published in 1925 by Doubleday, Page & Co. It was republished by Persea Books with an introduction by Alice Kessler-Harris in 1975, 1999, and 2003.
- For a [short biography of Yezierska](#), see the Jewish Women's Archive.
- Yezierska's daughter, Louise Levitas Henriksen, wrote a longer biography, [Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life](#), which was published by Rutgers University Press in 1988.
- [Hungry Hearts](#), the 1922 silent film adaptation of Yezierska's short story collection by the same title, was restored by the National Center for Jewish Film, with the cooperation of Samuel Goldwyn Pictures and the British Film Institute.
- For information about immigrant experiences on New York City's Lower East Side, check out the [Tenement Museum's teacher resources](#).

#### Resources

##### 1: Text excerpt, Anzia Yezierska's "Bread Givers," 1925.

In this short excerpt from the novel, Sara Smolinsky, who has recently run away from her parents determined to make a life on her own, visits her married sister Mashah who bemoans her own life of poverty and domestic obligations.

**Suggested Activity:** Before students begin the novel, ask them to hypothesize about what the title *Bread Givers* might refer to. Tell them to make note, as they read, of the references to this term in the book (and warn them that there aren't many).

Once students have read the novel, or have at least finished Book I, ask them to reflect on what they think the term "bread givers" means. How is it similar to or different from—in meaning, tone, or resonance—the more familiar term "bread winner"? What are the various meanings of "bread" throughout the novel—where do actual (edible) bread and money appear? How are the two (bread



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and money) interrelated? Ask students to reflect on why Chapter 9 is titled "Bread Givers." Is the title supposed to be descriptive of Sara's sisters' husbands? Is it ironic?

Finally, for an extended discussion, ask students to think about other monikers that Yezierska's characters apply to each other: e.g., Bessie is the "burden bearer," Sara is "*Blut-und-Eisen*." Read aloud some of the instances where these terms are used and ask students: how do these terms function in the story? What do they add to our understanding of the characters who use them and to the characters to whom they are applied? Can you think of instances in real life, or in other pieces of literature, in which people are given a name or title that describes their role? What might be the effects of having such names applied?

**Source:** Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (New York: Persea, 2003), 147.

## 2: Text excerpt, Alice Kessler-Harris's introduction to "Bread Givers," 1999.

In the mid-1960s, in the course of research for a doctoral dissertation, scholar Alice Kessler-Harris rediscovered Yezierska's novel, which had gone out of print. She brought *Bread Givers* to the attention of Persea Books, which republished it, with an insightful introduction by Kessler-Harris. In this excerpt, Kessler-Harris discusses the recurring theme in Yezierska's work of an immigrant woman "becoming a person."

**Suggested Activity:** Before students begin reading *Bread Givers*, ask them to make note as they read of any references in the text to "becoming a person." Later, at the start of this discussion, ask them to take out their notes and find some of those references. Read some of the references aloud from the novel, and ask students the following questions. What does it mean to Sara Smolinsky to "become a person" or "be a person"? What are some of the characteristics associated with "being a person"? What does that particular phrase imply about the way she sees herself and her family, and about her goals?

Then read the excerpt from Kessler-Harris as a class and discuss the relationship in *Bread Givers* between "becoming a person" and becoming an American. Were the two synonymous for Sara? Why was the journey of Americanization "anguished"? What were the milestones along the journey for a Jewish immigrant woman like Sara? (These might include becoming educated, earning one's own living, engaging with the world beyond the Jewish immigrant community, learning to speak without an accent, choosing one's own husband, etc.) What does Kessler-Harris mean when she says that "A jumble of emotions assaulted the poor immigrant who tried to absorb these rules all at once"? What emotions did Sara and each of her sisters feel as they tried, in their own ways, to "be a person"? What were the conflicts—both internal and external—Sara faced as she made this journey?

**Source:** Alice Kessler-Harris, introduction to *Bread Givers*, by Anzia Yezierska (New York: Persea Books, 2003), xxii.

## 3: Excerpts from book review of "Bread Givers," the "New York Times," 1925.

*Bread Givers* received a very positive review in the *New York Times* soon after its publication. These excerpts highlight the importance of the relationship between the narrator, Sara, and her father.

**Suggested Activities:** Read the first excerpt with students. Ask them if they agree with the reviewer that "The character of Reb Smolinsky is magnificent, robust, full of contrarieties." Ask: why would it be a good thing, as this reviewer suggests, for a character to be full of "contrarieties" or contradictions? Then turn to the scene discussed in this excerpt, on p. 13–14 in the Persea Books edition. What happens when Sara's mother suggests that they move Reb Smolinsky's books from the front room to the kitchen? Why might the book reviewer have focused on this scene in trying to illustrate the character of Reb Smolinsky? Why does the reviewer call this scene the Reb's "first great surrender"?

Have students write a couple of paragraphs describing the relationship between Sara and her father, and then share their descriptions with the class. As a class, make a list of some of the opposite poles Sara and her father represent (e.g., new world and old world, future and past, modernity and tradition) and discuss how these opposites clash and also blur in the novel.

Now read the second review excerpt. Ask students: what does the reviewer mean by "She is the Reb translated into the American idiom"? Do you agree with that statement? In what ways are Sara and her father similar, despite their polarity?

**Source:** Anonymous, "Turbulent Folkways of the Ghetto in a New Novel" (*The New York Times*, September 13, 1925), [https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1925/09/13/104186316.pdf?pdf\\_redirect=true&ip=0](https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1925/09/13/104186316.pdf?pdf_redirect=true&ip=0), accessed March 6, 2020.

## 4: Text excerpts, Edith Wharton's, "The House of Mirth," 1905, and Anzia Yezierska's "Bread Givers," 1925.

*The House of Mirth* is Edith Wharton's 1905 novel about Lily Bart, a young woman of beauty and breeding who can neither escape nor find refuge within the privileged social class into which she was born. After cultivating their daughter for a life of wealth and privilege, Lily's parents die and leave her penniless. Unable to settle for the role of a leisure class ornamental wife, and unprepared for any gainful professional employment, she slowly wilts like a hothouse flower, teetering at the precipice and falling from the heights of New York Society.

Anzia Yezierska and Edith Wharton are two writers of social realist fiction with dramatically different styles and strategies. Wharton's sublime sentences and austere language contrast markedly with Yezierska's Yiddish-inflected broken-English and overwrought pursuit of the inexpressible. And yet, the two authors demonstrate a shared purpose to provoke the reader's empathetic reaction to their characters. When confronting the challenges of being women in the early twentieth century, Wharton's and Yezierska's writing demonstrate surprising similarities.

**Suggested Activity:** Compare the excerpts from *The House of Mirth* and *Bread Givers*, both of which address the social pressure imposed upon women to perform in public, and to dress and cultivate their appearance to accommodate both the female and the male gaze. Ask students: what is similar about these two excerpts? What is different? What does it tell you that two female novelists of the early twentieth century—from very different backgrounds—were both confronting the idea that women were judged more on their looks and clothes than on their brains or character?

For a more extended study, ask each student to research and bring into class one additional novel from this time period that addresses this theme. They don't have to read the novel, but they should learn enough about it to be able to tell the class about the author, summarize the plot, and share a passage in which the way women are seen and valued in society is critiqued. It's ok if several students bring in the same novel. After sharing a number of examples, ask students to consider whether fiction, and art in general, can help to change systemic problems such as misogyny? Is misogyny still a problem today? Which writers and artists are addressing it, and how?

**Sources:** Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), accessed at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/284/284-h/284-h.htm>.

Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (New York: Persea, 2003), 220.

## 5: Text excerpt, Sianne Ngai's "Ugly Feelings," 2005.

In *Ugly Feelings*, scholar Sianne Ngai argues that Sara Smolinsky's overly emotional expressiveness is part of a long line of characters in American literature and film whose behavior depicts immigrants or foreign "others" as agitated, excitable, and hysterical.

**Suggested Activity:** Ask students to summarize Ngai's excerpt to make sure they understand her argument. Then ask them to find, in *Bread Givers*, examples of the "hand-wringing" and "hyperexpressive" behavior Ngai describes. Ask students: Do you agree with Ngai that Sara perceives her own "overemotionality" as something she must struggle against in order to achieve assimilation in America? Have them find examples of this in the text. Ask students: why is it problematic to characterize certain racial or ethnic groups as excessively emotional? Encourage them to think about how doing so can devalue an entire group and lead to false assumptions (e.g., someone who expresses themselves loudly is necessarily "out of control" or "wild").

Ask students to free-write on the following questions: can you think of examples of people altering their behaviors in order to fit in with cultural norms? Describe some examples. Have you ever altered your own behaviors to fit in with cultural norms? What are the benefits and consequences of making such alterations?

**Source:** Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 93-94.

## 6: Film excerpt, "Hungry Hearts," directed by E. Mason Hopper, 1922.

The 1922 film *Hungry Hearts* was adapted from Anzia Yezierska's short story collection by the same name. While the film came out several years before *Bread Givers* was published, it addresses some of the same themes and is set in the Jewish ghetto of

New York City's Lower East Side. In this scene a family has just arrived from Europe to their new home; they are seeing America for the first time.

**Suggested Activities:** Ask students to imagine what Sara's Hester Street neighborhood in *Bread Givers* looks, feels, and sounds like. Have them find sensory descriptions of the neighborhood in the text. Then watch the *Hungry Hearts* excerpt together. Does the picture of the neighborhood in the film match the descriptions in the book? How do the characters in the film react to their first moments in their new neighborhood?

While *Bread Givers* doesn't depict the Smolinskys' arrival in America, *Hungry Hearts* sheds some light on what their arrival may have been like. Ask students to think about what hopes the Smolinskys—especially the parents—may have had when they came to America and what realities they were met with.

Point out the similarity between the moment in the film excerpt when the daughter says, "Where's the sunshine in America?" and the moment in *Bread Givers* (p. 9 in the Persea Books edition) when Reb Smolinsky barks at his wife "Don't you know it's always summer in America?" Ask students how they read the tone of the speaker in each instance: are they being sincere, ironic, hyperbolic, or something else? What do these moments suggest about the immigrant experience for families like the Smolinskys?

**Source:** *Hungry Hearts*, dir. E. Mason Hopper, 1922. Used with permission from the National Center for Jewish Film, Brandeis University.