

I. L. Peretz's "Bontshe the Silent"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/i-l-peretzs-bontshe-the-silent>.

Introduction

Classic Yiddish writer I. L. Peretz's short story, "Bontshe shvayg" ("Bontshe the Silent") first published in 1894, remains one of the most widely known, anthologized, and translated in all of Yiddish literature. Its central figure, Bontshe, is a man who never speaks up for himself, no matter what indignities he suffers. Peretz, who was called the "father of Yiddish literature," was one of the most influential figures in modern Jewish culture, in part because of how cleverly he could adapt folk and religious materials to a range of ideological and narrative ends, and "Bontshe the Silent" is a perfect example of this skill. The story's reception through time suggests the many different ways that Peretz's work can be interpreted—alternately as a story about disempowerment, persecution, or humility. This kit provides some key resources for teaching the short story.

Cover image: Still of Jack Gilford as Bontshe Shvayg in the final moments of an American television adaptation of the story as part of the program "The World of Sholom Aleichem" (1959).

Subjects

Fiction, Religion, Social Commentary, Yiddish, Translation

Reading and Background:

- The story has been translated into English many, many times; the standard translation is in *The I. L. Peretz Reader*, edited by Ruth Wisse. There are much earlier versions available for free [here](#) (translated by Leo Wiener, 1899) and [here](#) (translated by Helena Frank, 1906).
- The full text in the original Yiddish is [the first story in this volume](#) of Peretz's collected works, and an abridged Yiddish version for children is [here](#).
- A brief, useful [biography of I. L. Peretz](#) can be found in the YIVO Encyclopedia.
- Those seeking a general introduction to Peretz's work should consult Ruth Wisse's 1991 book, *I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (1991).
- Adi Mahalel, a scholar who has written extensively about Peretz, discusses the story's adaptation for the American stage in 1953 by a group of blacklisted artists, in a fascinating article for *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, "[We will not be silent: I. L. Peretz's 'Bontshe the Silent' vs. 1950s McCarthyism in America and the story of the staging of The World of Sholom Aleichem.](#)"

Resources



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