

# Irwin Shaw's "Select Clientele"

## A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

### Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/irwin-shaws-select-clientele>.

### Introduction

Irwin Shaw (1918 – 1984) was a Jewish American novelist, playwright, screenwriter, and short story writer. Shaw grew up in New York City, the child of Jewish immigrants from Russia. Upon entering college, he changed his last name from Shamforoff to Shaw. Shaw served in the military during World War II, was put on the Hollywood blacklist in the McCarthy era, and wrote prolifically until his death in 1984.

Shaw's story "Select Clientele" was published by *The New Yorker* on August 17, 1940. It explores implicit and explicit American anti-Semitism, different responses to anti-Semitism and bigotry, and different manifestations of anti-Semitism. This text will be useful in Jewish and American literature classes, as well as classes concerning the United States's response to the Holocaust, American foreign and domestic policy before and during World War II, the role of Jews as an "other" throughout history, and bigotry or prejudice of any kind.

Cover image: Advertisement for The Sagamore, from *The New Yorker*, June 22 1940, 63, <https://archives.newyorker.com/newyorker/1940-06-22/flipbook/062/>.

### Subjects

Anti-Semitism, Fiction, Social Commentary, United States

### Reading and Background

- Irwin Shaw's *obituary in the New York Times* offers an overview of his legacy and literary accomplishments.
- This *article by Ben Yagoda*, author of *About Town: The New Yorker and the World it Made*, gives context for Shaw's "Select Clientele" and the use of such euphemistic terms in magazine advertisements of the 1940s.
- *The Paris Review* published two interviews with Shaw about his life and work, one in 1953 and one in 1979.
- "Select Clientele" can be found both *on the New Yorker website* (a subscription is required to view the full story) and in the book, *Short Stories of Irwin Shaw* (original copyright 1966, now out of print).

### Resources

#### 1: Images, "New Yorker" ads for resort hotels, 1940.

In "Select Clientele," Sam writes short stories for magazines that run advertisements seeking "select," "exclusive," and "restricted" clientele. These euphemisms for exclusionary practices against Jews, African Americans, and other minorities were used commonly throughout the United States in the mid-twentieth century, when this story takes place. In fact the *New Yorker* itself ran advertisements like these during the same summer that it published "Select Clientele."

**Suggested Activity:** Ask students to read the advertisements and analyze them as primary sources. You may wish to have them choose one ad to focus on, and to take notice of key words, images, and design choices that it employs. Then, ask them what their impressions are of these ads. What do some of these words—"select," "exclusive," "restricted," "distinguished"—conjure for them?

Next, ask students to think of places where they feel comfortable and welcome. How would they feel if such a place was off limits to them? Have them write about a time they felt wrongfully excluded from something, or about how they would react if they were



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disallowed from a particular space or institution. How do these experiences compare to the experiences of Esther, Sam, and Max?

**Sources:** Advertisement for The Mount Washington, *The New Yorker*, July 6 1940, 44, <https://archives.newyorker.com/newyorker/1940-07-06/flipbook/044/>.

Advertisement for The Montowese, *The New Yorker*, July 6 1940, 44, <https://archives.newyorker.com/newyorker/1940-07-06/flipbook/044/>.

Advertisement for The Sagamore, *The New Yorker*, June 22 1940, 63, <https://archives.newyorker.com/newyorker/1940-06-22/flipbook/062/>.

## 2: Article excerpts, Jerome Frank's "Red, White, and Blue Herring," 1941.

Jerome Frank was a prominent Jewish American judge and legal scholar. On December 6, 1941 (about a year and a half after "Select Clientele" was published, and one day before the attack on Pearl Harbor that quickly entered the United States into World War II), the *Saturday Evening Post* published an article written by Frank explaining to the American people the folly of anti-Semitism and trying to dispel anti-Semitic tropes, particularly the belief that Jewish Americans were more loyal to world Jewry than to the United States. The article followed accusations by American isolationists that American Jews, concerned for Jews in Germany and Eastern Europe, were the primary proponents of American intervention in the developing European war.

**Suggested Activity:** Ask students what they think of the excerpts from Frank's article. What claims is he making? What is the "hush policy" he's talking about, and what are its consequences? Does it exist today among Jews? Frank claims that, at the time he wrote his article, most American Jews would not "fight and die" to save the Jewish people, but *would* "fight and die" to save American democracy. Why would he feel the need to make this argument? What does it indicate about popular opinion on Jewish Americans during this era that might help us understand "Select Clientele"? Is the question of loyalty to America versus loyalty to the Jewish people still relevant for American Jews today?

For a longer project, have students do some research to try to determine whether Frank's claim was legitimate in 1941. What can they come up with to support or challenge his claim?

**Source:** Jerome Frank, "Red, White, and Blue Herring," *The Saturday Evening Post*, December 6 1941, 10, 86, <https://archive.org/details/the-saturday-evening-post-1941-12-06/page/n9>.

## 3: Radio transcript excerpt, speech by Father Charles Coughlin, 1938, and audio of the broadcast.

Father Charles Coughlin was a prominent Catholic priest with a weekly national radio broadcast based in Michigan. He used his pulpit to promote isolationism, lament the rise of secularism, atheism, and communism, and blame certain groups (such as Jews) for the country's and world's ailments. In this November 20, 1938, broadcast, less than two weeks after *Kristallnacht*, Coughlin laments the persecution of Jews in Germany, but places the blame for their continued persecution on the failure of Jewish leaders to renounce Communism and the persecution of Christians throughout the world. In "Select Clientele," Sam mentions Coughlin as a reason for the rise in anti-Semitic acts like the one he experienced. Coughlin enjoyed a huge following until the government and Catholic Church restricted his platform in 1940 and then again in 1942.

**Suggested Activity:** After students have read and/or listened to the excerpts, ask them: What does Father Coughlin argue are the reasons for the rise of Nazi anti-Semitism? What audience is he appealing to? How do you think American listeners—and Jews specifically—would have received this speech in 1938? How do you think his tone in the audio excerpt contributes to his message? Ask students to think about media personalities and ideologues of today, and how their messages—and the tones they use to deliver them—compare to Father Coughlin's.

Then, have students write a letter in the voice of a Jew living in the United States in 1938. The letter can be to a hypothetical friend or neighbor who avidly listens to Father Coughlin every week, or it can be to Coughlin himself. Ask students to consider what would be the best way to refute Coughlin's arguments convincingly.

**Sources:** Charles Coughlin, "Address by Father C E Coughlin," transcribed by Dina McCarrick, 1938, 8, 9. Accessed via American Catholic History Classroom, The Catholic University of America, October 7 2019,

<https://cuomeka.wrlc.org/files/original/50b004fa185e86c9079c4ad288f49ac1.pdf>.

Charles Coughlin, "Persecution: Jewish and Christian," Father Coughlin Network, New York City, WMCA, November 20 1938. Accessed via Old Time Radio Downloads, <https://www.oldtimeradiodownloads.com/historical/father-coughlin/father-coughlin-38-11-20-x-persecution-jewish-and-christian>.

#### 4: Film excerpt, Quentin Tarantino's "Inglourious Basterds," 2009.

The 2009 film *Inglourious Basterds* follows a group of Jewish American soldiers who exact their violent revenge on German soldiers in Nazi-occupied France in 1944. An over-the-top fictionalized history, the movie shows one possible reaction to anti-Semitism, and to bigotry more generally—a reaction with similarities to and differences from Max, Sam, and Esther's reactions in "Select Clientele." Please note the potentially disturbing nature of Brad Pitt's monologue in this scene (a graphic call to violence against Nazi soldiers), as well as his use of curse words, before deciding whether to show it to students.

**Suggested Activity:** Ask students for their initial reactions to the scene. Do they find Brad Pitt's character frightening? Funny? Do they hate him, or empathize with him, or a bit of both? Then discuss: what role does revenge play after experiences of bigotry, discrimination, or violence? Should revenge ever have a place in rectifying a wrong? Compare the way that Max and Sam handle bigotry in "Select Clientele" to the way that Brad Pitt's character is suggesting the Nazis should be handled. What are the differences in the two scenarios and in the two approaches? What role, if any, should revenge play in small-scale scenarios such as the one in "Select Clientele" versus in larger-scale scenarios such as the Holocaust?

Assign students to write about a time when they were wronged and could have taken, or did take, revenge. Ask them to write: 1. what happened, how they reacted, and whether their reaction made them feel better or made the situation better; and 2. an imagined alternate version of events in which they reacted differently (either by taking or not taking revenge), and how this would have altered the outcome.

**Sources:** *Inglourious Basterds*, directed by Quentin Tarantino (2009, Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures).

Excerpt: Movieclips, "Inglourious Basterds (2/9) Movie CLIP - One Hundred Nazi Scalps (2009) HD," Nov. 4 2014, video, 3:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOcmzsviFA>.

#### 5: Survey, the Anti-Defamation League's "Global 100," 2014-2017.

In 2014, the Anti-Defamation League interviewed people in more than one hundred countries to determine levels of anti-Semitism across the globe. Respondents were classified as anti-Semitic if they labeled the majority of these eleven statements "probably true."

**Suggested Activity:** Ask students to read through the list of statements. Then put students in small groups and ask each group to discuss one or two of the statements. Why do you think the ADL used these statements as determinants of anti-Semitism? When the whole group reconvenes ask each group to share what they found interesting or puzzling about their statement(s). Ask students whether they think the ADL's statements make sense as a way of determining anti-Semitism. If not, what would be a better way to measure?

Then ask students to consider how anti-Semitism today is similar to and different from anti-Semitism in 1940, when "Select Clientele" was published. Discuss: Do you think the members of the "gang" in "Select Clientele" would agree or disagree with the statements on the ADL survey (excluding numbers 1 and 11, as these would be anachronistic)? Would Sam, Max, and Esther agree with any of the statements?

Have students examine the [ADL's interactive map](#) of anti-Semitism indexes across the globe, which was compiled using the results of this survey. You might want to point out the anti-Semitism index for the country in which you are teaching. Ask: Does it surprise you? How do you think it would compare to the index for that same country in 1940?

**Source:** "Methodology," in *ADL Global 100: An Index of Antisemitism*, ADL Global 100, Anti-Defamation League, 2017, 4, [https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/G100%202017%20EUROPE%20ANALYSIS%20REV\\_D.pdf](https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/G100%202017%20EUROPE%20ANALYSIS%20REV_D.pdf).