

Joseph Opatoshu's "Romance of a Horse Thief"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/joseph-opatoshu-romance-horse-thief>.

Introduction

When people think about character types in Yiddish literature, healthy, illiterate Jewish criminals do not always come to mind. Yet Joseph Opatoshu's naturalist novella *A roman fun a ferd-ganef* (*Romance of a Horse Thief*) established his literary reputation and offered a new type of Jewish male character who might arguably seem more at home on the American frontier than in a shtetl in Russian Poland. *Romance of a Horse Thief* was first published in 1912 in *Shriftn* (*Writings*), a publication of the American Yiddish modernist group *Di yunge* (the Young Ones) that was targeted at the Yiddish-speaking intelligentsia. The novella was reprinted in book form in 1917, and very loosely adapted into a 1971 film starring Yul Brenner. This kit contains resources that explore the ways that Opatoshu's underworld characters continue to challenge, surprise, and entertain us today. All page and chapter designations in this kit follow David G. Roskies's English translation.

Cover image: Poster from movie adaptation of the novella, *Romance of a Horsethief* [sic], 1971.

Subjects

Eastern Europe, Fiction, Underworld, Yiddish

Reading and Background

- You can find an overview of the author's life and work in the 2013 volume *Joseph Opatoshu: A Yiddish Writer between Europe and America*, edited by Sabine Koller, Gennady Estraiikh, and Mikhail Krutikov.
- You can also watch the Yiddish Book Center's Wexler Oral History Project [interview](#) with Opatoshu's grandson, Dan Opatoshu, which includes many images of Opatoshu and those close to him. If you are pressed for time, the first 7:15 minutes provide a good overview. For background that is specific to the biographical elements of *Romance of a Horse Thief*, see 7:57–8:45.
- *Romance of a Horse Thief*, translated into English by David G. Roskies and first published in 1973, can be found in *A Shtetl and Other Yiddish Novellas*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse.
- The Yiddish Book Center has digitized the Yiddish version of the novella in several editions, including this [one](#).
- Mikhail Krutikov writes about the novella in his 2002 monograph *Yiddish Fiction and the Crisis of Modernity, 1905-1914*.
- The novella takes place during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) and describes smuggling horses over the Prussian border in violation of the Russian Empire's ban on selling horses outside its territory. For more about the Russo-Japanese War, you can consult the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The Library of Congress also has a [Research Guide](#) for the reception of the war in the American press.
- For more about *Di yunge*, see Ruth Wisse's 1988 *A Little Love in Big Manhattan* or Reuben Iceland's memoir *From Our Springtime*, translated from Yiddish by Gerald Marcus.
- For more about Jewish weddings and wedding dancing, see Sonia Beth Gollance, "Gesture, Repertoire, and Emotion: Yiddish Dance Practice in German and Yiddish Literature" (2019); Walter Zev Feldman, *Klezmer: Music, History, & Memory* (2016); and articles such as Zvi Friedhaber's "The Dance with the Separating Kerchief" in *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance*, ed. Judith Brinn Ingber (2011).

Resources



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1: David G. Roskies, Excerpt from the introduction to Joseph Opatoshu's "Romance of a Horse Thief," 1986.

The introduction to David G. Roskies's translation of *Romance of a Horse Thief* discusses the role of the underworld in the novella and in Yiddish literature more broadly. It describes Opatoshu's characters as "fleishig" (meaty) in contrast to "milchig" (milky) Jews, the most famous example of whom (although Roskies does not say so explicitly) is Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye the Dairyman*. (n.b. We have chosen to use the English spelling of these terms; Roskies uses the Yiddish transliteration in his introduction.)

Suggested Activity: Have students read the excerpt from Roskies's introduction. If students are not already familiar with the Jewish distinction between meat and milk, it may be useful to provide background on traditional Jewish dietary laws.

Next, ask students to work together as a class to compile a list of character traits they would describe as "milchig" or "fleishig." What attributes belong to each character type? If appropriate (especially if students have read other Jewish literature), you might ask the students whether other characters they have encountered previously might be described according to these categories (texts which would provide good background for this exercise include *Tevye the Dairyman* and *God of Vengeance*). Alternatively, you might also ask about "fleishig" characters that students have encountered in popular culture, such as Western movies. Why might an author such as Opatoshu be interested in writing about "fleishig" characters? Why might such characters be popular with readers?

Source: David G. Roskies, introduction to *Romance of a Horse Thief*, Joseph Opatoshu, trans. David G. Roskies, in *A Shtetl and Other Yiddish Novellas*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 144–145.

2: Lyrics, "Avreml the Filcher," 2010; Youtube recording, Daniel Kahn & the Painted Bird, 2018; and excerpt, "Romance of a Horse Thief," 1986.

Mordechai Gebirtig (1877–1942) was a Jewish poet and songwriter from Krakow, Poland. He was known (and beloved) for compositions in a folk style that depicted the lives of working class Jews. In his song "*Avreml der marvikher*" (Avreml the Filcher, sometimes translated as Avreml the Pickpocket), Gebirtig depicts the life of a different type of Jewish criminal than the ones we get to know in *Romance of a Horse Thief*. His songs remain popular with Yiddish singers, including Berlin-based American-born artist Daniel Kahn, whose bilingual version of "*Avreml*" is included in this resource.

Suggested Activity: Break students into pairs and ask them to read Kahn's English lyrics (note that he has only translated the third, fourth, and fifth stanzas, and has left the first, second, and sixth stanza in the original Yiddish). You may also choose to read the lyrics out loud as a class, especially if the instructor and/or students are comfortable pronouncing transliterated Yiddish. Discuss: How is Avreml's life depicted? How sympathetic or unsympathetic is he? What class issues come up in the song? What fate does Avreml imagine for himself? If students have some familiarity with Yiddish, you might also ask them to compare the English and Yiddish verses. Even if they do not know Yiddish, you can ask them to reflect on their experience reading (or later listening to) verses in Yiddish. Have students predict how the song might sound. What genre do they think the song will be? What tempo? What instrumentation?

Next, play a recording of the song being performed by Daniel Kahn & the Painted Bird. What styles of music do you notice? (You may choose to stop the video at 0:47 to ask the questions before the musical style changes, and then repeat the questions again at the end of the song.) What is the emotional impact of these styles of music? Kahn keeps some of the song in the original Yiddish and translates some verses into English. What effect does this choice have on the piece as a whole? Why might an artist choose to make a bilingual piece?

At the end of "Avreml the Filcher," Kahn includes a version of the kaddish, the Jewish mourning prayer. If students are familiar with the kaddish, you may choose to ask them why they think Kahn chose to end his version of the song with this memorial prayer. Now have students read the excerpt from chapter 20 of *Romance of a Horse Thief*. Why does the warden refuse to send children to pray for Gradul? How does this contrast with Kahn's use of kaddish to mourn Avreml? Zanol says to the warden, "Sure he's a thief. I'm a thief too, you hear me? But we're Jews." What do his words say about how Jews are supposed to behave?

Sources: Mordechai Gebirtig, "*Avreml der marvikher* / Avreml the Filcher," lyrics, trans. Daniel Kahn, 2010, accessed [online](#).

Mordechai Gebirtig and Daniel Kahn, "Avreml the Filcher / *Avreml der Marvikher*," in *Lost Causes* (Berlin: Oriente Musik, 2010),

accessed on [Youtube](#).

Joseph Opatoshu, *Romance of a Horse Thief*, trans. David G. Roskies, in *A Shtetl and Other Yiddish Novellas*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 202.

3: Text excerpt, Glenn Dynner's "Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, and Life in the Kingdom of Poland," 2013.

In his study of Jewish tavern-keeping in the Kingdom of Poland, Glenn Dynner probes the many ways in which the (Jewish-run) tavern was a place that blurred boundaries: between Jews and Christians (both peasants and nobility), men and women, lawful and criminal conduct, drunkenness and sobriety.

Suggested Activity: First, students should read the short passage from Dynner's book. Ask them what happens in a tavern (as described by Dynner), what sort of space it is, and what sort of behavior can happen there. From there, you can ask them questions to help them recall what happens in the tavern scene in chapter 8 of *Romance of a Horse Thief*. For instance: why does Zanol go to the tavern? Who does he encounter there? What do they do? Why might it be important that this scene takes place in a tavern? Can you imagine these characters meeting in a different location?

If time permits, ask: What is the significance of the tavern scene for the novella as a whole? How do the tavern, wedding, and brothel scenes represent different spaces where characters come into contact with each other in transgressive ways? In what way do these spaces differ? In what ways are they similar?

Source: Glenn Dynner, *Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, and Life in the Kingdom of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 17–18.

4: Excerpt, "Romance of a Horse Thief," 1986, and video clip, pas d'espagne demonstration by Steve Weintraub and Avia Moore, 2009.

In chapter 12, Zanol and Beyle dance together at a wedding, even though traditional Jewish law prohibits men and women from dancing together. The English translation of the novella refers to Zanol and Beyle's scandalous dance as a polka. In the Yiddish original, it is actually a Russian ballroom dance called a *pas d'espagne*, which comes from the French for "Spanish Step."

Suggested Activity: Have students read the short scene where Zanol and Beyle dance together. What kind of dance do they imagine based on the text (movements, speed, closeness?) How are their motions described? How does Opatoshu indicate the transgressive aspects of this dance? How does he convey temptation? What sort of contemporary dances capture this same energy?

Next, have students watch the video of Yiddish dance leaders Steve Weintraub and Avia Moore dancing the *pas d'espagne*. Ask them to describe the movements they see. Was this the kind of dance they were expecting based on the text? Why or why not?

Sources: Joseph Opatoshu, *Romance of a Horse Thief*, trans. David G. Roskies, in *A Shtetl and Other Yiddish Novellas*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 180.

"pas d'espagne demonstration by Steve Weintraub and Avia Moore," [Youtube](#). Accessed March 3, 2020.

5: Encyclopedia article, "Dogs," by Anna Shternshis, 2010.

Throughout the novella, Zanol is accompanied by his dog Morva. His canine companion is an unusual choice for an Eastern European Jew, since dogs were identified with evil and amoral behavior in Jewish holy texts, and were sometimes sicced upon Jews by local nobility. At the end of the novella, Zanol's choice to strangle a dog represents his ultimate social and moral decline.

Suggested Activity: Have students read the article on "Dogs" from the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. Ask them to reflect on why Eastern European Jews had such a complicated relationship with dogs, and to compare this situation with the way dogs are talked about in contemporary American culture. Then ask them to find instances in which Morva and other dogs appear throughout the novella (such as chapters 3, 8, 10, 17, and 22). How does Zanol treat Morva and the other dogs over the course of the book? How does his changing behavior towards these dogs reflect larger changes in his character?

In the final scene of the book, Zanvl strangles a dog. What is the emotional impact of this scene? How does Shloyme react and how does his reaction influence your interpretation of this moment?

Source: Anna Shternshis, "Dogs," *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. Accessed March 3, 2020, [online](#).

6: Film poster, "Romance of a Horsethief," 1971.

Although the screenplay for this period piece was written by Joseph Opatoshu's son David, it bears only a vague similarity to the original novella. Use the poster to help students think about the key elements of Opatoshu's novella.

Suggested Activity: Before showing students the movie poster, have them imagine what elements they would include if they were designing a poster for the novella. Are there any scenes they'd want to depict? Would they include any quotes on the poster? If time permits, have students draw their own posters or covers for the novella.

Then show students the 1971 movie poster. What elements do students see on the poster (words, images, colors)? How similar is the movie poster to the posters or covers they designed for the novella? Discuss: what message is the poster trying to convey? How would you describe the tone? What aspects do you recognize from the literary text? What elements seem different? Based on the poster, how closely do students think the film would follow the original text? Do students think the target audience for the film is the same as the audience for the novella? How would the audience be similar or different? You can broaden the discussion by asking students how they would adapt the literary text into a film.

Source: *Romance of a Horsethief*, poster, 1971, accessed [online](#).