

Celia Dropkin's "Adam"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/celia-dropkins-adam>.

Introduction

Celia (Tsilye) Dropkin (1887–1956) was a poet, painter, and prose writer whose work expanded the psychological and erotic horizons of Yiddish arts. She earned acclaim for her formally exquisite and hotly-embodied poetic voice, and her work remains startlingly contemporary, inspiring musicians and translators to this day.

Born in Bobruisk, White Russia (today's Belarus), she began writing poetry in Russian at age ten. After marrying an activist in the secular socialist Bund movement, she immigrated to New York City in 1912. Dropkin inhabited avant-garde spheres in both the United States and Europe and published in Yiddish journals across the political and literary spectrum, including *Di tsukunft* (*The Future*), *Inzikh* (*In the Self*), *Forverts* (*The Forward*), and *Di naye velt* (*The New World*). Dropkin was one of the first female Yiddish poets to become widely anthologized. The only book of poetry she published in her lifetime was *In heysn vint* (*In the Hot Wind*), in 1935.

In this kit, we focus on a particular poem, "Adam," and offer multiple translations, literary critiques, intertextual comparisons, and a song clip, encouraging students to think about the complexity of the poem, and to engage with the text in numerous ways.

Cover image: Celia Dropkin, date unknown. Photographer unknown.

Subjects

Poetry, Women Writers, Yiddish, Tanakh, Music, Translation, Modernism

Reading and Background

- A biographical sketch of Celia Dropkin is available in [the Jewish Women's Archive encyclopedia](#).
- For English translations of her poetry, consider Dropkin's selected poems in *The Acrobat* translated by Faith Jones, Jennifer Kronovet, and Samuel Solomon, the 2006 anthology *Sing, Stranger: A Century of American Yiddish Poetry* edited by Barbara Harshav and Benjamin Harshav, and the 2001 anthology *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* edited by Jules Chametzky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Kathryn Hellerstein.
- To read Dropkin's short stories in English translation, consider "At the Rich Relatives," translated by Faith Jones in *Beautiful as the Moon, Radiant as the Stars: Jewish Women in Yiddish Stories: An Anthology*, edited by Sandra Bark and published in 2003, and "The Dancer" (*Di tentserin*) translated by Shirley Kumove in *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, edited by Ethel Raicus, Frieda Forman, Sarah Silberstein Swartz, and Margie Wolfe, published in 1994.
- Reflect with translator Faith Jones on the question, "[Why Read Celia Dropkin?](#)" in the article she wrote in 2014 for the Yiddish Book Center's *Pakn Treger*, issue 70.
- To hear Celia Dropkin's granddaughter, Elizabeth Starčević, describe Dropkin's personality and family life, watch [this clip](#) from an oral history interview conducted by the Yiddish Book Center's Wexler Oral History Project.
- For scholarship on Dropkin, consider Sheva Zucker's "The Red Flower: Rebellion and Guilt in the Poetry of Celia Dropkin" in *Women Writers of Yiddish Literature* (McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015), Kathryn Hellerstein's "The Art of Sex in Yiddish Poems: Celia Dropkin and Her Contemporaries," in *Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and Boundaries*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), and Janet Hadda's "The Eyes Have It: Celia Dropkin's Love Poetry" and Kathryn Hellerstein's "From 'Ikh' to 'Zikh': A Journey from 'I' to 'Self' in Yiddish Poems by Women," both in *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*, (The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992).
- For a musical adaptation of Celia Dropkin's work, listen to [this special performance at YIVO](#) by the duo Book of J (Jeremiah Lockwood and Jewlia Eisenberg).



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Resources

1: Poem, Celia Dropkin's "Adam," in Yiddish and English translation, 1935.

Celia Dropkin's poem "*Odem*" ("Adam") was published first in 1935, in *In heysn vint* (*In the hot wind*), and then again, as a shortened, adapted version of the poem, in a collection which shares the same title as the first, *In heysn vint* (1959). Her children funded the publication of this second book, a collection of Dropkin's selected poetry, short stories, and paintings, after her death.

The poem "*Odem*" describes a charged encounter between two figures, mixing erotic imagery with biblical allusions. This first version of the poem is divided into three parts.

Suggested Activity: Read Kathryn Hellerstein's translation of the poem's first version out loud to the class or in smaller groups. Ask students: What do you know about the poem's speaker after reading the poem? What do you know about the poem's addressee? How do you visualize Adam here? How would you characterize the poem's tone, voice, and register? How would you describe its form (meter, rhyme, structure, enjambment, etc.)? How do you interpret the final stanza? What do you think it might say about creativity, spirituality, and power? In your own words, describe the poem's encounter. How is power divided between the two figures? What is the relationship between the three parts of the poem? What effect does the shift from first-person voice to dialogue have?

Sources: Celia Dropkin, "Odem," *In heysn vint* (New York: Pozy-Shaulson Press, 1935), 51-52.

Celia Dropkin, "Adam," trans. Kathryn Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586-1987*. Copyright (c) 2014 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University. All rights reserved. With the permission of Stanford University Press, www.sup.org.

2: Text excerpt, Kathryn Hellerstein's "A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586-1987," 2014.

Through her book, *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586-1987*, Kathryn Hellerstein engages women poets, considering their participation in the creation of modern Yiddish literary traditions. Hellerstein provides a translation of the 1935 version of "*Odem*" in the chapter "The Art of Sex: Celia Dropkin and Anna Margolin," and offers critical analysis of the poem.

Suggested Activity: Invite students to read the scholarly excerpt. Ask students: what are Hellerstein's primary arguments and insights in this section of text? Revisit together the poem in resource 1. Ask the students about Hellerstein's writing: do you agree with Hellerstein's readings and conclusions? Do you agree with this interpretation of how space functions symbolically in the poem? What other interpretations might be possible?

Source: Kathryn Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586-1987* (Stanford University Press, 2014), 255. Copyright (c) 2014 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University. All rights reserved. With the permission of Stanford University Press, www.sup.org.

3: Poem, Celia Dropkin's "Adam," in Yiddish and English translation, 1959.

The Acrobat, published in 2014, is the only dedicated collection of Celia Dropkin's poetry in English. The translators who put the collection together chose to work with the 1959 version of "*Adam*," which combines parts one and two into a single poem, eliminating part three. You can listen to Faith Jones, one of the translators, discuss the translation process on the Yiddish Book Center's podcast *The Shmooze*.

Suggested Activity: Invite students to read this translation of the poem and to compare it to the version in resource 1. Track the translators' choices in each version. Does the different conclusion dramatically change your interpretation of the poem? Is there a subtle difference in meaning and/or style between the translations? If so, in what ways do the translators make clear their interpretations of the poem? Choose a single line to compare across the two translations and perform a close reading of the line, discussing how even a small shift in register or word choice can affect the meaning of an entire poem.

Afterwards, ask students to create their own "translations" in small groups of two or three, drawing from the English translations

provided in resources 1 and 3. Which aspects of each translation (such as tone, register, or entire phrases) do they change, and which do they preserve? How do the new translations vary amongst the different groups in the class? Which images do they decide to heighten? Which do they decide to tone down?

Source: Celia Dropkin, "Adam," *The Acrobat: Selected Poems of Celia Dropkin*, trans. Faith Jones, Jennifer Kronovet, and Samuel Solomon (Huntington Beach, CA: Tebot Bach, 2014), 38-39.

4: Biblical excerpt, Genesis 3:6-7.

This is the biblical passage in which Eve eats the forbidden fruit and shares it with Adam. The reference to this scene in Dropkin's poem "Adam" is overt, and therefore makes for a good introduction to the concept of intertextuality in poetry: considering how and why a poem might reference traditional or canonical sources.

Suggested Activity: As a class or in pairs, read the passage from Genesis describing Eve's bite. Then read the translation of Dropkin's poem presented in resource 1. Ask students: what resonates between the poem and the passage from Genesis? What images, words, and relationships do the two texts have in common? What is different about the narratives they provide? What intrigues you about the comparison of the two texts? What confuses you? Why might Dropkin have alluded to this well-known biblical scene in her poem? Ask the students how the allusion adds to the poem: what if the named character in the poem was "Bob" instead of "Adam"?

Source: Genesis 3:6-7. Source sheet compiled using Sefaria, 2018. <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/150371.2?lang=bi&with=About&lang2=en>

5: "Lilith," "Alphabet of Ben Sira" 23a-b, and text excerpt, Zohar Weiman-Kelman's "Touching Time," 2017.

Building upon the study of intertextuality, there is another traditional text that can be read alongside Dropkin's poem: the tale of Lilith. The tale of Lilith in Jewish folklore, as it has been popularized today, appears first in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* (an anonymous medieval text inspired by the ethical writings of the scribe Ben Sira.) According to this story, Lilith is Adam's first wife, created at the same time and from the same clay as Adam. She refuses to be subservient to Adam, and flees when she is not granted equal standing. Aside from this story, Lilith is depicted in folktales and popular culture as an infamous demon, associated with promiscuity, and accused of harming children and stealing babies in the darkness; however, she has also been adapted as a positive symbol of feminine strength, as in the feminist magazine *Lilith*.

Suggested Activity: Read the story and summarize the Lilith narrative. Ask students: how does this narrative differ from the biblical passage in resource 4? How does Dropkin's poem draw from and/or disrupt Jewish textual descriptions of creation, gender, and sexuality? How might the poem reference Lilith and/or Eve? Who do you think is the speaker in the poem?

Then invite students to read the text excerpt from Zohar Weiman-Kelman's article "Touching Time." Ask students: what is Weiman-Kelman's argument about the poem? How does the author connect the poem's relationship to Jewish texts and a Jewish past? Weiman-Kelman argues that the poem dissolves historical distance between its contemporary audience and Dropkin's era, "activating" both the bodies and imaginations of readers in the present. Do Weiman-Kelman's arguments and insights differ from Kathryn Hellerstein's in resource 2? If so, how?

Sources: Rabbi Jill Hammer, "Lilith, Lady Flying in Darkness," *My Jewish Learning*, accessed January 8, 2019. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/lilith-lady-flying-in-darkness/>.

Zohar Weiman-Kelman, "Touching Time," *Criticism* Vol. 59, No. 1 (Winter 2017), 103.

6: Audio clip, Charming Hostess's Hebrew-language musical interpretation of Dropkin's poem "Adam," 2004, along with a photograph of the band.

Charming Hostess, a band with roots in the 1990s avant-rock scene of Oakland, California, brings together women's vocal traditions (primarily from Eastern Europe and North Africa), and American folk musical forms. Identifying the genre of their album, *Sarajevo Blues*, as Klezmer-punk/Balkan-funk, Charming Hostess composed original scores for songs such as this one. This

exercise invites students to consider music and performance as forms of poetic interpretation.

Suggested Activity: Play the audio clip or [the entire song](#). Ask the students for their thoughts on this musical adaptation of Dropkin's poem: is there anything unexpected about this interpretation? How would you characterize the tone and style of the music? What seems different to you between the poem and the song? Ask students what style of music they would set the poem to, if they were adapting it for a band. If there are Hebrew-speaking students in your class: what do they think of the translation of the poem's words into Hebrew?

Invite students to create their own interpretation of "Adam" in a creative medium of their choice. They can make a drawing or painting based on the poem, they can write their own poem responding to "Adam," or they can work in small groups to perform the poem, deciding which aspects of the poem to emphasize, which lines to accent with gesture and voice. When sharing these projects in class, have students consider how each creation conveys the artist's particular interpretation of the poem.

Source: Charming Hostess, "Adam" in *Sarajevo Blues*, Tzadik, 2004. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLJfiCTgonw>.

Assaf Evron, Charming Hostess (L to R: Jewlia Eisenberg; Marika Hughes; Cynthia Taylor), 2006, photograph, [Wikimedia Commons](#), accessed February 22, 2019.