

Miriam Karpilove's "Diary of a Lonely Girl"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/miriam-karpiloves-diary-lonely-girl>.

Introduction

Miriam Karpilove (1888-1956) was a prolific and popular writer for the Yiddish press in New York in the early twentieth century, publishing stories, essays, and serialized novels focusing on the lives and perspectives of women.

Her novel, *Diary of a Lonely Girl, or the Battle against Free Love*, serialized in the newspaper *Di varhayt* in 1916–1918 and published in book form in 1918, is a first-person account of a single Jewish woman living in New York at the turn of the century and the pressures she experiences in her dating life. ([Jessica Kirzane's recent translation](#) has made the novel available in English.) The narrator, who at times waxes lyrical and at times displays an acerbic wit, is deeply unsatisfied with the idea of “free love” advocated by the modern political, intellectual men with whom she has romantic relationships. She demonstrates that “free love” is not really free for women, who, unlike men, face enormous social consequences for such freedom.

This kit gathers together historical materials, images, and excerpts from related literary sources to give context to the novel.

Cover image: Cover illustration from the original printing of Miriam Karpilove's *Tage-bukh fun a elende meydel (Diary of a Lonely Girl)* in novel form, published by S. Kantrowitz, 1918.

Subjects

Feminism, Fiction, Gender, Marriage, New York, Sexuality, Social Commentary, United States, Women Writers, Yiddish

Reading and Background

- Jessica Kirzane's English translation of *Diary of a Lonely Girl*, published by Syracuse University Press in January 2020, can be purchased [here](#). Those interested in learning more about this translation may wish to read the translator's reflections for the [Jewish Women's Archive blog](#). Translations of other Miriam Karpilove stories, letters, and essays can be found at [Jewish Currents](#), [Another Chicago Magazine](#), [Columbia Journal](#), [Pakn Treger](#), [The Digital Yiddish Theatre Project](#), and the [Bronx Bohemians](#) blog.
- This [encyclopedia entry](#) on Miriam Karpilove provides background about her life and work.
- Those wishing to read more about the growing trend of translating women's prose from Yiddish may appreciate [this essay](#) by Madeleine Cohen and [this reflection](#) by Anita Norich (with its bibliography) about translating and teaching Yiddish prose by women. [This essay](#) by Irena Klepfisz offers background about the ways that women who wrote in Yiddish were previously overlooked.
- Those wishing to read more about the history of courtship and the social pressures of dating in New York in the early twentieth century may enjoy: Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Melissa Klapper, *Jewish Girls Coming of Age in America, 1860-1920* (NYU Press, 2007); Riv Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble Between Jewish Women and Jewish Men* (Beacon Press, 1999), and Susan A Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Cornell University Press, 1990).
- For resources on Emma Goldman, see the Jewish Women's Archive's [exhibit](#), as well as the [website of the Emma Goldman papers](#) at the University of California, Berkeley, which offers a wealth of accessible information about Goldman's writing and her work and includes a blog that often related Goldman's ideas to our present moment. [This documentary](#) about Goldman from PBS is also an excellent way to learn about this important figure.
- To learn more about *Where Are My Children?*, see Grace Kim's [essay](#) about the film in the context of the history of birth



control and Shelley Stamp's [essay](#) about the film, adapted from her book *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood*. You can also watch the film on [YouTube](#).

Resources

1: Novel excerpt, Mordkhe Spektor's "Yudishe studenten un yudishe tekhter," 1892.

Mordkhe Spektor (1858-1925) was an author, journalist, editor, and publisher who wrote dozens of Yiddish novels and stories and was especially known for establishing close contact with his readers by directly addressing them and through his journalistic tone. He was a central figure in the social and literary world of Yiddish writing in Warsaw and Odessa at the turn of the twentieth century and is considered an intermediary figure between popular and literary writing. His novel *Yudishe studenten un yudishe tekhter* (*Jewish Students and Jewish Girls*), published in 1892, is an early example of popular first-person diary literature in Yiddish about the experiences and feelings of courtship, a tradition that Karpilove takes up in her novel.

Although most of the episodes in this novel are written in the third person, several of the chapters are written as though they are excerpted from girls' diaries. This resource is a translation of such an excerpt.

Suggested Activity: Read the passage and discuss with students: What is the impact of the first-person narration on the reader? Do you feel sympathy with the narrator's position because it is coming directly from her? Does it matter to you that this woman's perspective was penned by a male author, and how does knowing that impact your experience of reading this (if at all) in comparison to reading Karpilove's diary novel?

What are the questions at stake for this narrator in considering whether to accept a marriage offer? How would you describe the social structures surrounding courtship and marriage for this narrator, and how are they different from those facing Karpilove's narrator fifteen years later? What conclusions can students draw from this comparison about the shifting nature of relationships between men and women during this period?

Ask your students to write a diary entry from their own perspective about social and romantic relationships in their own lives. What are their aspirations? Observations? What do they observe about other people's social lives, and the rules that seem to guide them? Make sure they know in advance that they will not be asked to share their writing with the class, so they can be as open as they want in the entry. Then, without revealing any specifics from their entry that they do not wish to share, ask them to compare the style of their writing, and the concerns or problems they discuss, to the Spektor excerpt or the Karpilove novel. What kinds of details do they—and do Spektor and Karpilove—choose to include? Is it more about narrative or about emotion? What are the roles of parents or friends in the entries? What could someone learn about contemporary social structures or cultural expectations about courtship by reading their entry?

Source: Mordecai Spektor, *Yudishe studenten un yudishe tekhter* (Berdychiv: M. Epshtayn, 1892), 51, <https://ia800604.us.archive.org/18/items/nybc212436/nybc212436.pdf>.

2: Cover art for Miriam Karpilove's "Diary of a Lonely Girl, or the Battle against Free Love," 1918.

Karpilove's novel came out in book form in 1918, after having first been serialized in the newspaper *Di varhayt*. The image on the cover appears to be a portrait of Karpilove herself.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to consider the cover and describe the details they notice. Some observations you might want to highlight include: the woman on the cover appears alone, rather than with a suitor; we see only her face and not her full body; she gazes into the distance rather than directly at the viewer; the picture is composed only of shades of brown except for the highlights, which are blue; the letters of the title are large and bold. What impressions do each of these details convey about the novel? What might a reader expect based on the cover?

Invite students to create their own cover for the novel or to write a paragraph describing what their cover would look like. Then have them explain their reasoning for the choices they made.

Source: Miriam Karpilove, *Tage-bukh fun a elende meydel* (New York: S. Kantrowitz, 1918), cover illustration.

3: Illustration, Samuel Zagat's "The First Step Toward a Maiden's Downfall," ca. 1910s.

This illustration for the newspaper *Di varhayt*, in which Karpilove's *Diary of a Lonely Girl* was serialized, depicts two young women chatting with men on the street. The title of the drawing, "The First Step Toward a Maiden's Downfall" suggests that even such apparently casual interactions are dangerous for young women who could lose their respectability if they are persuaded by young men to participate in illicit relationships.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students to consider this drawing before they learn its title. After they describe their observations and interpretations of the drawing, ask students to propose their own titles for the drawing. Then, reveal Zagat's title to them. Ask students how the illustrator's title reframes the way they interpret the image. Who is blamed or held responsible for respectability, according to the title? What does this imply about the pressures women were subject to and the moral standards they were meant to uphold? Ask students to find a moment in *Diary of a Lonely Girl* that they think could be illustrated with this image.

Source: Samuel Zagat, "The First Step toward a Maiden's Downfall," *Di varhayt* (New York: n. d.), Tamiment Labor History Archives, special collections, New York University, New York, NY, as represented in Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 42.

4: Essay excerpt, Emma Goldman, "Marriage and Love," 1911.

Emma Goldman (1869-1940) was an influential anarchist, political activist, and writer who lectured and wrote about freedom of speech, anti-capitalism, atheism, anti-militarism, birth control, women's rights, and free love. In her essay "Marriage and Love," Goldman rejects marriage as an institution that limits love and confines women to servility to their husbands.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to read the passage and then compare it to one of C.'s speeches in chapter 39 of Miriam Karpilove's *Diary of a Lonely Girl*. To what extent is C. borrowing from this free love ideology to make his arguments, and to what extent does he veer from it? Why would C., so clearly a misogynist figure, espouse an ideology so similar to that of a famed feminist? Is there humor in his doing so, and if so, who is the butt of the joke? Ask your students if they can think of contemporary examples in which ideologies are borrowed or subverted as they move between cultural or political groups.

Source: Emma Goldman, "Marriage and Love" (New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1911), 7, <https://archive.org/details/marriageandlove00goldgoog/page/n8/mode/2up>.

5: Image, photograph of a tenement room, circa 1912.

So much of the action in Karpilove's *Diary of a Lonely Girl* takes place in the domestic space of the narrator's rented rooms in tenement apartments. This image of a tenement room may give students a better picture of the living conditions Karpilove's narrator describes.

Suggested Activity: Before showing your students this image, ask them to sketch one of Karpilove's narrator's rooms. Then show them this photograph and ask them to compare their pictures to this one. What surprises them about this picture? How does picturing the action taking place in a room like this shape their reading of the text?

Source: Jessie Tarbox Beals, "Tenement Room," c. 1915, photograph, Community Service Society Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, NY, https://css.cul.columbia.edu/catalog/rbml_css_0185.

6: Image, photograph of Miriam Karpilove playing guitar to friends, ca. 1920.

In chapter 10 of Miriam Karpilove's *Diary of a Lonely Girl*, the narrator's friend Rae entertains a crowd of friends by singing Yiddish folk songs. Collective singing and social singing were a regular part of social life in the early twentieth century, and Jewish communities sang a large and eclectic repertoire of songs at public gatherings and events.

In this photograph, Miriam Karpilove herself plays guitar for a group of friends. Karpilove admits in her letters that she does not have an excellent singing voice, but she enjoys performing, and music was a cornerstone of the social gatherings of the Bohemian circles she was a part of.

Suggested Activity: Before showing students this photograph, ask them to discuss the role of music in social interaction in

chapters 10 and 11 of Karpilove's *Diary of a Lonely Girl*. Does music bring the characters together, or are they each lost in their own thoughts as music happens in the background? What songs does Rae choose to perform and why? Does it matter that the activity occurs in a public park, and how does that help your students compare and contrast the private and public spheres in this novel?

Ask your students to examine this photograph of Karpilove playing guitar and compare it to Rae's performance in chapters 10 and 11. What are these women trying to convey about themselves in posing for this picture, and how is it similar or different to Rae's self-presentation?

Invite your students to choose a figure from the photograph and write a diary entry in the style of *Diary of a Lonely Girl*, recounting their perspective of Karpilove's performance.

Source: Courtesy of David Karpilow.

7: Poem, A. M. Sharkansky's "The Boarder's Monologue," 1901, trans. Israel Davidson, 1907.

Immigrants in turn-of-the-twentieth-century New York, like the narrator of Karpilove's *Diary of a Lonely Girl*, lived in close quarters, often in unstable conditions. In this 1901 Yiddish parody of Hamlet's famous soliloquy from William Shakespeare, a male boarder considers whether or not he should leave his rented room because he lives in constant dread of a domineering landlady.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students why they think the narrator of this poem dreads his landlady so much. Are his concerns similar to or different from those of Karpilove's narrator? To what extent does gender impact the way they experience boarding? To what extent is their reluctance to move to a new room similar? Ask your students to edit this poem so that it better reflects Karpilove's narrator's experiences with her landladies.

Source: A. M. Sharkansky, "Dos borders monolog," trans. Israel Davidson, in *Parody in Jewish Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1907), 106.

8: Image, film advertisement, "Where Are My Children?," 1916.

In chapter 48 of Miriam Karpilove's *Diary of a Lonely Girl*, the narrator and Rae discuss the film *Where Are My Children?* (Universal Films, 1916). This silent film directed by Philips Smalley and Lois Weber, based on the obscenity trial of **Margaret Sanger**, tells the story of an attorney who is prosecuting a doctor for illegal abortions when he learns that women he knows, including his own wife, have procured abortions from the doctor. At the start of the film a doctor makes a convincing case for legalizing contraception to prevent unwanted births in poor families, but as the film progresses it makes a case against wealthy women having abortions on a "whim."

Suggested Activity: Ask your students to consider this poster. What does the advertisement reveal about the risqué content of the film—and what does it leave out? Ask your students if they experience Miriam Karpilove's novel as similar to this poster in terms of its use of innuendo and euphemism. Your students may wish to compare this image to the cover of Miriam Karpilove's *Diary of a Lonely Girl* (earlier in this resource kit) and discuss whether they represent women similarly, and, if so, why that might be. They may also discuss the apparent relationship between the nurse in the background of the image on the poster and the woman in the foreground. What do their expressions and body language suggest? How does the nurse seem to feel about the woman in the foreground? Ask students to consider whether this nurse seems in any way similar to the landladies in Karpilove's novel.

Ask your students to consider why Karpilove would reference this film in her novel: Does it situate the novel more firmly in a certain time period and cultural setting? Does it communicate a context of debate about birth control that extends beyond the characters in the novel itself (and one that extends outside of Yiddish-speaking circles)? Karpilove's narrator is against birth control as she is concerned that the possibility of pregnancy is one of the only ways women have power in a relationship, and she and Rae allude to this film as a way of expressing their anti-birth control leanings. Yet the film itself is told from a male perspective—a man who wants to know what happened to the children he was prevented from having due to birth control. Ask your students to consider: according to their reading of Karpilove's text, to what extent does the possibility of getting pregnant actually give Karpilove's narrator power? Ask your students if they think that introducing an allusion to this film strengthens Karpilove's narrator's case against birth control or undermines it.

Source: "Where Are My Children?" (1916), movie poster, Wikimedia Commons,

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Where_Are_My_Children%3F#/media/File:Where_are_my_children_poster.jpg.