

I.L. Peretz, (Isaac Leib Peretz)

- Born May 18, 1852, [Zamość, Poland](#), Russian Empire; Died April 3, 1915, Warsaw
- the third of the great classical Yiddish writers
- Raised as an Orthodox Jew, he was eager for secular knowledge even at an early age.
- Learned Polish, Russian, German, and French so he could read in those languages and be exposed to larger worlds.
- Peretz appealed to the intellectuals who lived in the thriving cities:
- Believed that Jews could thrive in the Diaspora, with Yiddish as their language.
- Effectively ushered Yiddish literature into the modern era by exposing it to contemporary trends in western European art and literature.
- Ultimately an optimist who believed that progress was the path to greater Jewish freedom and enlightenment. Understood that shtetl Jews had to examine and alter their beliefs in order for them to be emancipated. Peretz believed in his roots as a Jew, but saw his religion as needing to evolve beyond its traditional strictures to advance the progress of the Jewish people.

Political/Literary Movements influencing Yiddish Literature

Description of the “zeitgeist” when Yiddish literature arose:

(from Howe, p. 14, *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* intro)

- “traditional religious forms had become stiff and crusted”
- “rabbinism often exercised a tyranny of opinion”
- Scholarship had lost its power
- Superstition challenging religious beliefs
- False Messianism of the 17th and 18th centuries had left a heritage of moral dismay.”

Haskalah (Enlightenment)

Late 18th century: Solomon Maimon

Centers in Berlin

Leaders came from merchant class and intellectuals

Focuses on learning; hooks up with Western intellectual history and tries to reconcile Jewish tradition with modern thought—philosophy, science, education

Outstanding figure: Moses Mendelssohn

“forerunner of assimilation”

Hasidism (religious revival)

18th century, mainly in Poland/Ukraine

“direct religious sentiment”

Sought wisdom, insight, experience

Insists on joy.

Validates Yiddish as a companion to Hebrew (sacred tongue)

Focuses on folk tales and story-telling in general.

Zionism

Socialism

Bontsha the Silent: 1894: Competing Interpretations:

- He viewed Hasidic material obliquely, from the standpoint of a secular literary intellect, and with this unique perspective the stories became the vehicle for an *elegiac contemplation of traditional Jewish values*
- *Satirizing the Hasidic visions of thrones and angels and God as king in a paradise* envisioned something like a Trump casino. In the story, the floor of the heavenly courthouse is all alabaster set with diamonds. There is a gold throne and a gold crown.
Captured the appeal and the charm of these fairy tales even as he *mocked* those sugary fables.
- The scene Peretz depicts here is firmly located in the modern experience of urbanization and proletarianization. In “Bontshe,” just wanting to work is insufficient: jobs are scarce, and, for the few who do find work, conditions are grueling and demeaning.
Peretz’s story can be adapted into many languages and cultures without diluting its message: *oppressed people whose dignity has been shattered must take a good look in the provocative mirror that Peretz laid before them and start to claim their rights.*
- His writing was *a call for self-determination and resistance against Jewish humiliation.*
There is the famous story Freud repeats. His father was walking in Galicia when a gentile man came by, called him “Jew” and knocked his hat into the muddy gutter. His father told his son that he simply picked up his hat and said not a word. Freud was humiliated. Physical harm to his father was avoided, but the harm done to the child who heard the way his father accepted this treatment remained. Years later, when Freud was forced to sign a paper saying the Nazis in Vienna had treated him well, he added a note saying that he would recommend the Nazis to anyone. This additional sentence he himself might have called passive-aggressive, but it was also a tip of his hat to Bontche, a fellow Jew.

Questions

1. This story takes place in Heaven. Who is the narrator?
2. What is gained by having this particular narrator, instead of Bontshe or the judge telling the story?
3. What do you notice about the setting?
4. Why is Abraham there? “**deep sweet smile**” “**my heart’s child**”
5. Bontshe is often seen as representing “the Jewish people.” But some readers see him as representing “the common man”—a socialist reading. How do you see him?
Doesn’t see/look up
Doesn’t hear
“forgot each present moment as it slipped behind him to become the past.” (page 5)
6. Do you like the character, Bontshe? If so, does that reaction change? If so, at what point?
7. In the Judge’s final speech, what tones do you pick up?
8. Explain: The roll and butter
9. Explain: The bitter laugh [**“no metaphors. And no sarcasm.”**] bottom p. 4