

“CHILDREN OF LONELINESS”: IMMIGRATION AND INTERGENERATIONAL STORIES

Lesson plan for adults

This lesson plan is part of a larger Go & Learn lesson entitled “Immigration and Generations: Anzia Yezierska’s Children of Loneliness,” which can be found at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/apr07/>.

Distribute copies of the story “Children of Loneliness” by Anzia Yezierska (published in *How I Found America: The Collected Stories of Anzia Yezierska*, New York: Persea Books, 1991) and ask people to read it in advance.

Note: If you cannot find a copy of *How I Found America*, you can also find the story in *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Jules Chametzky et al (New York: Norton, 2001), pp. 233-244. However, the page numbers referred to throughout the lesson are from *How I Found America*.

- 1. Start the session by reviewing** the basic plot of the story with everyone present. You may wish to read the opening lines aloud:

“Oh, Mother, can’t you use a fork?” exclaimed Rachel as Mrs. Ravinsky took the shell of the baked potato in her fingers and raised it to her watering mouth.

“Here, Teacherin mine, you want to learn me in my old age how to put the bite in my mouth?” The mother dropped the potato back into her plate, too wounded to eat. Wiping her hands on her blue-checked apron she turned her glance to her husband, at the opposite side of the table....

“All my teachers died already in the old country,” retorted the old man. “I ain’t going to learn nothing new no more from my American

daughter.” He continued to suck the marrow out of the bone with that noisy relish that was so exasperating to Rachel.

Then use some of the following questions in a discussion:

- How does this story make you feel?
- Does anything about this story sound familiar to you? Did any of your family members live in similar conditions when they first came to America? Are you an immigrant? If so, what is your experience with immigration?
- While the story is fictional, many of the details depicted are real. How does the story portray Jewish immigrant life in New York City?
- This story describes a fraught parent-child relationship. How do the pressures of immigration and assimilation compound the regular pressures young people and their parents face?
- How has immigration affected our great-grandparents, grandparents, our parents, and ourselves?
- Do you think that the loneliness described in the title of this story, “Children of Loneliness,” was passed on to future generations, either in the story or in your own family?
- In what ways do new immigrants today face similar conditions to those depicted in the story?

2. Next, **track the evolution of Rachel’s relationship with her parents** throughout the story. Highlights of this topic are listed below.

The following excerpt captures Rachel’s attitude toward her parents near the beginning of the story, after she has come home from college to find herself embarrassed by her parents’ table manners:

To think that I was born of these creatures! It's an insult to my soul. What kinship have I with these two lumps of ignorance and superstition? They're ugly and gross and stupid. I'm all sensitive nerves. They want to wallow in dirt. . . . How is it possible that I lived with them and like them only four years ago? What is it in me that quickly gets accustomed to the best? Beauty and cleanliness are as natural to me as if I'd been born on Fifth Avenue instead of the dirt of Essex Street (p. 181).

The following excerpt is the response of Rachel's father, Yankev Ravinsky:

Pfui on all your American colleges! Pfui on the morals of America! No respect for old age. No fear of God. Stepping with your feet on all the laws of the holy Torah. A fire should burn out the whole new generation. They should sink into the earth, like Korah (p. 179).

- What has happened in their relationship?
- What kind of life does Rachel want for herself?
- Why is Rachel so scornful of her parents?
- What caused her to see her parents in this light, and to stand apart from them?
- What values did Rachel acquire in college that caused her to feel better than or different from her parents?
- What is gained and what is lost in the process of assimilation?
- How has assimilation affected the connections we have with our parents or children today?

After Rachel moves out of her parents' apartment, she struggles to think about her relationship with them, as the following quote demonstrates:

If I could only have love and my own life, I could almost forgive them for bringing me into the world. I don't really hate them; I only hate them when they stand between me and the new America that I'm to conquer (p. 183).

- Why was Rachel's need to become an American so urgent?
- Was that true of others from her generation?
- Do you think there could be any way for Rachel to find her own life path without completely abandoning her family?
- What kinds of pressures to assimilate did Rachel's generation experience?

3. Now examine how Rachel's story speaks to the particular experience of being a *female Jewish immigrant*, as is referred to in the following quote:

No wonder a man's love means so little to the American woman. They belong to the world in which they are born. They belong to their fathers and mothers; they belong to their relatives and friends. They are human even without a man's love. I don't belong; I'm not a human. Only a man's love can save me and make me human again (p. 187).

- How is the role of women portrayed in the story? What do we learn about the position of Jewish women immigrants during this time period?
- Do you think the insecurity of being a Jewish female immigrant influenced the way women viewed their relationships with men during this time?
- How has the role of girls and women in the Jewish family changed since the early 20th century?
- Does more need to change for women in Jewish families to achieve equality?

4. Discuss Jewish men and their particular experiences as immigrants during this time period.

- How does Yeziarska portray Jewish men's roles in early 20th century America?
- How have their roles changed?
- Was the role of the father in the story one that was advantageous for him?
- What were the costs that men had to pay for the privileges they enjoyed?

5. Examine the relationships between generations at this time. In some Jewish immigrant families, the generational struggles weren't as dramatic as depicted in "Children of Loneliness," but tensions existed nevertheless.

Consider the following quote by Irving Howe (Irving Howe, "A Personal Reminiscence," in *Getting Comfortable in New York: The American Jewish Home, 1880-1950*, Susan L. Braunstein and Jenna Weissman Joselit, Eds., New York: The Jewish Museum, 1990.):

The thought of bringing my friends home was inconceivable, for I would have been as ashamed to show them to my parents as to show my parents to them. I had enough imagination to suppose that each could see through the shams of the other, but not enough courage to defend one against the other (p. 17).

- How was Howe's struggle different than the one described in Yeziarska's story?
- Have you ever experienced this dynamic in your home?

Justine Wise Polier, the first female Justice in New York and a contemporary of Anzia Yeziarska's, also had a very different

relationship with her parents than the one depicted in “Children of Loneliness.” Her father was the prominent rabbi Stephen Wise. In looking back on her life, Polier said the following about her parents:

My parents were among the first progressive parents who thought their children should always be at the dinner table to be heard as well as seen. (See <http://www.jwa.org/exhibits/wov/wise/jp2.html>)

- When you were growing up, what was the attitude towards children in your family? Was it similar to that of Polier’s family?
- What are the major differences between the experiences of your generation and those of your parents?
- If you are a parent, what are the major differences between your experiences growing up and your children’s?
- Do you think it is possible for parents and children to maintain close relationships throughout their lives?

6. Consider how this story about a Jewish immigrant family living on the Lower East Side of New York City a hundred years ago is similar to or different from the conditions new immigrants to America face today.

- Who lives in the tenements of the Lower East Side nowadays?
- As a Jew with a history of immigration, do you feel a connection to new immigrants? How can we help immigrants today?
- What can we do to help bridge the always challenging parent-teen relationship for families under the added pressures of poverty and/or immigration?