

“CHILDREN OF LONELINESS”: IMMIGRATION, TEENAGERS, AND PARENTS

Lesson plan for teens

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 and ask teens to read it in advance. Depending on your setting, you may also wish to allow time at the beginning of class for everyone to read or skim the story.

Note: The short story “Children of Loneliness” can be found in the book, *How I Found America: The Collected Stories of Anzia Yezierska* (New York: Persea Books, 1991), pp. 178-190. 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?
- Were your great-grandparents or grandparents immigrants? Are your parents immigrants? Are you an immigrant?
- How does the experience of immigration affect each generation differently, both in the story and in your own family?

- 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 Yankev Ravinsky, Rachel's father:

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).

- To whom do you feel more sympathetic? Can you try to identify with both Yankev and Rachel's perspectives?
- 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?

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).

- Do you ever feel that your parents stand between you and who you want to become?
- Is there 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?
- What about you and your life do you think is "American"?

- Do you feel pressure to be American? Does this affect your relationship with your parents? For example, what clothing do you like and what music do you listen to? How do your parents feel about your generation's taste in music and clothing?
- What were the generational differences between Rachel and her parents?
- What are some of the differences between you and your parents' generation?
- Is it possible to become your own person and still be close to your parents?

3. Examine the relationships between generations in the period of the story (early 20th century). In some Jewish immigrant families, the generational struggles weren't as dramatic as those 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 Yezierska's story?
- Have you ever experienced this dynamic in your home?
- What do your parents do that embarrasses you?
- Do your friends ever embarrass you in front of your parents?

- How do your parents view your friends? How do your friends view your parents?

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>)

- What is the attitude towards children in your family? Is it similar to that of Polier's family?
- How can parents and teens show respect for each other's views?

4. 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 is living in those same tenements on the Lower East Side nowadays?
- This story we read describes a difficult parent-child relationship. How do the pressures of immigration increase the regular pressures young people and their parents face?
- If you are a Jew with a family history of immigration, do you feel a connection with new immigrants?
- If you or your parents are immigrants, what can you tell us about immigration?

Note to teachers: If any of your students are immigrants, you can use this class as an opportunity for them to talk about their experiences and views as immigrants, or you can invite them to offer their own responses to the story, based on their lived experiences. If there is more than one immigrant in your class, you could have a panel in which each student answers similar questions. This will take them out of the spotlight, and provide support to talk.

The following are sample questions for a student panel:

- Where are you from?
- Why did you/your family come to America?
- What do you miss from your previous place of residence?
- What do you like about being an immigrant?
- What is difficult about being an immigrant?
- What would you like other students to know about you?