The Representation of Jewish History, Religion, and Themes in Sholom Aleichem’s
*Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*

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Introduction

The first Hebrew storybook for Jewish children was published in the late 18th century (Gries, 2007). Prior to that one can assume that children were educated on stories derived from the Bible, the Midrash and Aggadah. These are folklore and legends that expand on the details of the biblical characters’ lives to further explain the details, and were passed down through the oral tradition. The most well known example would be the Passover Haggadah. Another famous example would be “Jacob’s Ladder”, in which Jacob climb’s a ladder to heaven and wrestles with an angel who renames him Israel because he succeeded. This explains a passage in the bible in which Jacob wrestles with a stranger all night. Jewish children are still raised on these stories, today.

European Jews were not always fluent in Hebrew, especially women. Yiddish, derived from German and written with Hebrew letters, was the vernacular language. The publication of Yiddish books, including illustrated storybooks, increased during the 18th century. This made education more accessible to women and children.

However, Yiddish has not always been widely accepted as an academic language. A certain sect of Orthodox Judaism, related to Israel Levi, wanted to shun the use of Yiddish and felt that Yiddish was worthless in quality, and harmful to Jewish tradition and values (Halberstam-Rubin, 1989). The public use of Yiddish, such as Yiddish theater, was even banned in Israel for a period of time. The anti-Yiddish activists failed. Even though the Yiddish language has failed to withstand the test of time and assimilation, Yiddish theater, literature and music thrived in the United States, and wherever European Jews settled, during the beginning of the 20th century. Although it is considered a dying language, some Jews do still speak Yiddish today.
Sholom Rabinowitz (1859-1916), widely known by the pseudonym, Sholom Aleichem\(^1\), actively wrote against the anti-yiddish activists in public. His goal was to change the pulp fiction image of Yiddish writing and elevate it to a respected and lucrative level. Despite the opposition that disapproved of the use of Yiddish and political satire, Sholom Aleichem became known as the best Jewish, and Yiddish, author of all time, during his own lifetime. He has been compared to Charles Dickens for his realism, and Mark Twain for his humor. The legacy of his most famous work, *Tevye the Dairyman*, lives on in the musical adaptation that is performed by students every year, “Fiddler on the Roof”.

Rabinowitz was born in Pereyaslav, Poltava, Ukraine on March 2, 1859. His family moved to New York in 1914, and he died there in 1916. Rabinowitz was raised in a shtetl called Voronko in the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish culture called Chasidism. Many of his stories are based on his life in this town. As a writer, he documented this religious culture, but also challenged it by documenting the struggle between modernity and orthodoxy. He has written over 300 short stories, several novels, and fifteen plays. He published work in Hebrew, Russian, and Yiddish. He preferred to write in Yiddish, and is best known for these works. Rabinowitz published work under multiple pseudonyms, including “Solomon Bikherfresser” (Solomon Bookeater), “Baron Pipernoter” (Baron Ogre), “Terakhs an Eynikl” (Terach’s Grandson), and “Der Yiddisher Gazlen” (The Robber Jew). He first published under the name Sholom Aleichem in 1883 and eventually solely published with this pseudonym. Sholom Aleichem is a formal greeting that means “peace be upon you”. If one states “Shalom Aleichem” to another person, the individual would respond by stating “Aleichem Shalom”. Likewise, in Arabic, one would state “Salaam

\(^1\) Sholom Aleichem can be found transliterated in different ways. Other spellings include Shalom Aleichem, Sholem Aleichem, and Sholom Aleykhem. It is most common pronunciation in Yiddish sounds like Sholem Alekhem. The ch/kh sound is guttural. Rabinowitz has also been published as Rabinovitz. American newspapers published his name as Solomon instead of Sholom.
Sholom Aleichem wrote short stories about the character Tevye from 1894 to 1916. They were originally published in Yiddish periodicals. Three of these stories were first published in a book, as *Tevye the Dairyman*, in a four-volume set of his complete works in 1903. The complete Yiddish novel was published in New York for the first time in 1912. It consists of eight chapters. The entire complete works of Sholom Aleichem were published in Yiddish in New York, as a 28 volume set, in 1918. *Tevye the Dairyman* was volume five. Because these were originally short stories, each one has been published in volumes by different names. These include: *The Best of Sholom Aleichem*, *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*, *The Three Great Classic Yiddish Writers of Modern Yiddish Literature*, *The Old Country*, *Tevye's Daughters*, *Selected Stories of Sholem Aleichem*, *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, *Great Jewish Short Stories*, and *Favorite Tales of Sholom Aleichem*. Sholom Aleichem first adapted the stories for theater in 1914. “Fiddler on the Roof” was written in the 1960s by playwright, John Stein. It was first performed in 1964.

In 1987 a new translation by Hillel Halkin was published with one of Sholom Aleichem’s best sets of short stories, “The Railroad Stories”. This book is titled *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*. “The Railroad Stories” were written in 1902-1903 and 1909-1910. These were also published in periodicals before they were published in book format. It consists of 20 stories, and was also published in the Yiddish and English editions listed in the previous paragraphs.

In 1920, I.L. Bril wrote an announcement, in the Jewish Daily News, that Knopf would be publishing a collection of Sholom Aleichem’s stories in English. He doubted that this work could attract an English audience because “‘Tevye der Milchiger’… is so peculiar that it is exotic.
to the English reading mind.” In reading these stories, one can see that it is meant for a Jewish audience that has a certain level of religious and historical education. One really needs to read the introduction and glossary to understand the phrases in other languages, and details of history that have been left out to provide a context for the events such as the attempted Russian revolution of 1903, the pogroms that attacked Jews, and the housing restrictions that forced Jews to leave their own homes. It may not appeal to today’s youth, unless they have a strong sense of Jewish history and culture. Yet, Sholom Aleichem’s works are really about universal issues that all cultures struggle with, poverty, faith, prejudice, and family relationships. The adaptation of “Fiddler on the Roof” really simplifies Tevye the Dairyman in a way that makes his writing understandable for today’s youth, so that one can really learn about the Jewish religion, culture and history in the Russian Ukraine in 1905 without prior knowledge.

Although, this was meant for men, women, and children to read, a detailed analysis of Sholom Aleichem’s work is really needed to understand the details. Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories, discuss similar themes, religious, and historical issues. These include religion, Russian history of prejudice against Jews, gender roles and marriage, relationships between parents and children, poverty, and politics. The purpose of this paper is to present a comparative analysis of religion and history in these two sets of stories, Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories. Upon analyzing these topics further, one can understand that Sholom Aleichem’s purpose of his writing questioned the traditions of the Jewish customs that he was raised with and advocated for women and children to be independent, by making decisions for themselves. At the same time, it was meant to educate the public on the conditions and lives of Jews in Europe during this time period.

A Summary of Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories
*Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories* by Sholom Aleichem is a volume that consists of two separate works of stories that follow the lives of different Jewish characters that lived in similar regions of Russian Europe between 1894 and 1915. These works have been written as short stories. However, some scholars consider the complete *Tevye the Dairyman* a novel. The literary style of both sets of stories is similar. They also have similar representations of themes, including history, religion, politics, wealth, and prejudice in relation to Jewish life during the time period. Analyzing these stories sheds some light on Sholom Aleichem’s own viewpoints and how it has changed during his lifetime.

*Tevye the Dairyman* follows the life of a man named Tevye, and his family, living in the Russian Ukraine, in real time, between the years of 1894 and 1914. He is a very poor, Chasidic Jew, that began his career by collecting firewood from the forest and selling it to the citizens of the neighboring villages. He is the self-educated type, who loves to quote Jewish prayers and Hebrew text. After providing a ride to a pair of lost, wealthy, Jewish women in the woods, they rewarded him generously with many gifts, including a cow that did not give them milk. Tevye was able to buy another cow and started a successful dairy business.

Unfortunately, in the next chapter, Tevye lost a lot of money by attempting to invest in his wife’s cousin’s business of investing in gold imperials. The issue of poverty is something that really bothers Tevye. He dreams about being rich and questions God about why he is so poor and unlucky.

The story continues by following the decisions of his daughters as they look for the right husband. All but one of them defies their parents’ wish for an arranged marriage for wealth by choosing their own spouses. This is a concept that broke with the traditional custom of arranged marriages that Orthodox Jews followed. Some still adhere to this custom today.
The local butcher offered to marry the oldest daughter, Tsaytl. However, Tsaytl felt that he was too old. She had already decided to marry the local tailor, Motl, because they were in love. She preferred to marry someone for love and be poor, instead of marrying someone for money that she would be unhappy with. Hodl fell in love with a tutor, and married him. Shortly after the marriage, he was imprisoned for his revolutionary activity. Chava married a Christian and was excommunicated by her family. Shprintze fell in love with a wealthy, Jew, who was a friend of the family. However, Tevye and the boy’s uncle were against them being married because Tevye’s family was too poor. The uncle accused Tevye and the girl of causing the problem, even though it was the boy’s fault. She decided to kill herself, and drowned herself in the nearby river. After Golde, Tevye’s wife died, Beilke decided to help the family by marrying a wealthy Jew through an arranged marriage. However, he did not have the best personality and tried to get rid of Tevye by sending him to Israel. This man regularly lied about who he was, and then lost his money. The couple ended up in America and worked in a factory that made socks. Tevye was not able to go to Israel because Motl died. He needed to help Tsaytl’s family, instead. At the end of the story, the political situation grew worse in his town. The villagers threatened to stage a pogrom, which did not occur. However, Jews were evicted and forced to leave the village. Chava returned to the family and decided to go with them.

_The Railroad Stories_ is a group of twenty short stories that were retold by a traveling salesman. Many of these are real stories that Sholom Aleichem and his friends collected. These stories are about the lives of different individuals and do not tell one cohesive story. The salesman retells interesting and funny stories that he heard from others while traveling on the trains in the areas of Russia where Jews were allowed to live and do business. Many of these stories are very sad, while others are very humorous. These stories tell about the individuals’
experiences with prejudice against Jews, like pogroms and the anti-Jewish regulations, being victimized by criminals, making money, railroad expansion, religious issues, the inability to be accepted into high schools, being drafted by the army, and similar tales of children not accepting arranged marriages as Tevye’s daughters.

One of the funniest stories is titled “The Miracle of Hoshana Rabbah”. Hoshana Rabbah is a Jewish holiday that occurs on the last day of the Jewish holiday, Sukkot. This is the final day of judgment, which began on Rosh Hashanah, the new year. It is believed that God writes everyone’s name in the Book of Life and decides who will live and die during the upcoming year. It is the custom for Jews to stay up all night to study Jewish text and pray.

This is the story of an event that happened on a train that was nicknamed “The Slowpoke Express”. This train stays at every station for more than an hour, while the locomotive is unhitched and maintenance is completed on the train. During this time, people sleep or get off the train while waiting for it to move. One day, a Jew was standing by the unhitched locomotive when a priest came by. They began to argue about how trains work. The priest thought the Jew was stupid and would not know how a train works, even though the priest was the one that did not know how trains worked. So the Jew decided to get on the train and demonstrate how it worked, even though he was just a passenger. He started the train and it left the station without the rest of the cars. It was going much faster than expected, and faster than usual. Neither he nor the priest knew how to stop the train. However, it eventually ran out of coal and stopped two stations away from where it began. The Jew was glad that he was still meant to stay alive for the year and that his name had been written in the Book of Life.

**Literary Technique**
Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories were written with similar literary conventions to create a sense of the author as a storyteller, by writing about painful experiences in a humorous manner, and by defining certain characters with different speech patterns. Each chapter of Tevye the Dairyman begins as if Tevye is speaking to Sholom Aleichem as he has run into him on his dairy route, and tells the author what has happened in his life. “Today’s Children” begins by stating

“Say what you will about today’s children, Pan Sholem Aleichem, bonim gidalti veroymamti: first you have them, then you break your back for them, make every sacrifice, put yourself through the mill…and for what?”

Then Tevye continues to update the author on his family’s news. As a published work this effect appears as if Sholom Aleichem is capturing the story of the lives of real people and publishing it for others to read. This element could allow the contemporary audience to feel connected to the characters, or to identify with their stories more.

The Railroad Stories begins with a note to the reader that describes how the author gathered stories that he heard on trips and published the most interesting ones. These stories begin with the author commenting on his experiences on the trains. Then it proceeds into the passenger’s stories. Some of the short stories begin as the passengers; stories right away. This is evident by the quotation from someone else’s speech. For both Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories, Sholom Aleichem has become a storyteller. This technique works well for publishing short stories in periodicals the way his work was originally published.

Sholom Aleichem’s reviewers in the United States called him the “Yiddish Mark Twain”. Everyone loved his subtle sense of humor. The element of humor can be found in his storylines, like “The Miracle of Hoshana Rabah” that was previously mentioned. He also writes about devastating events, like pogroms, in a humorous manner. Tevye’s experience is a hilarious example. In “Lekh-Lekho”, Sholom Aleichem described how Tevye’s family was one of only a
few Jews in his town. However, his Christian neighbors loved him and came to him for advice.

So when the time came that the town needed to decide to stage a pogrom for a display for the anti-Jewish government, they came to Tevye to ask how to do it. Ivan Paparilo stated,

“…Since you Jews have been beaten up everywhere, why let you get away with it here? We just aren’t certain what kind of pogrom to have. Should we just smash your windows, should we tear up your pillows and blankets and scatter all the feathers, or should we also burn down your house and barn with everything in them?”

Luckily, they did not attack him this time, even though someone ransacked his home when Chava married a Christian. The Jews were only evicted. Sholom Aleichem’s writing style reminds me of this saying about Eastern European Jewish music, called Klezmer music. It is meant to sound like crying and laughing at the same time.

Some of the characters in both sets of stories have unique speech patterns. These add an element of humor to the authors writing. Halkin wrote in the introduction to this volume that these are normal speech patterns that Sholom Aleichem was trying to capture. In the previous quote from “Today’s Children”, Tevye quoted an example of text in Hebrew and provided a humorous interpretation of it. He does so through out the whole story. “Bonim gidalti veroymamti” was taken from Isaiah, 1:2. It means, “I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me.” Another example of Tevye’s quotations from this same chapter is, “Haneshomoh lokh, it says—our souls may be God’s but someone better look after our bodies.” The Hebrew phrase comes from the saying “The soul is thine and the body is thine.” It is from a High Holy Day prayer, but Tevye only quotes the first part of the phrase. He always has a way of making funny commentary about God from prayers.

Some of the characters in the Railroad Stories do quote text like this, while others have different speech patterns. Humorous metaphors are used in the story, “Competitors”. When a vendors’ food spills on the floor the travelers state,
“What a massacre of rolls!”
“What a pogrom of eggs!”
“What did he have against those oranges?”
“Why ask? A goy is a goy!”

This is an example of speech in which Sholom Aleichem mixes elements of humor and tragedy.

In this same story, the author writes of the personality type of a person that always curses someone else. Halkin stated in the introduction that his stepmother was really like this. One of the vendors state,

“It’s all his fault. I hope he breaks his neck! I pray to God he breaks every bone in his body! He’s to blame for everything—I only wish, dear Father in heaven, that everything happens to him! He shouldn’t live to cross his own threshold! He should die a hundred times from a fire, from a fever, from an earthquake, from a plague, from an ill wind that carries him away! He should croak! He should burst! He should dry up like a puddle! He should swell like a dead fish!”

This character is over-dramatic. Over reacting characters can really make the reader laugh. Here, again, tragedy and humor are combined. Humorous curses are really common in Yiddish. As a non-Yiddish speaker, myself, the most hilarious one that I learned as a child from my Mother was, “You should be like a chandelier, hanging by day and swinging (or burning) by night.”

In the story “The Automatic Exemption” the author documents a different type of speech quirk. A traveler stated,

“Where am I coming from? It’s just my luck to be coming from the army, that’s where I’m coming from! The young man stretched out on that seat over there is my son. We stopped in Yehupetz on our way home to see a lawyer and a doctor—to get an opinion, that’s what we stopped for.”

This is a subtle style of speech in which the phrases are repeated. The character speaks like this throughout the entire story. It is a subtle style of speech that one may not notice, but it denotes a nervous type of personality. Sholom Aleichem is excellent at creating different personalities and characters by altering their styles of speech.

Another element of humor that is used in both sets of stories is the classic miscommunication problem. These never fail to make a reader laugh. A miscommunication problem occurred in Tevye the Dairyman when Tevye’s wife, Golde, sent him to speak to Layzer
Wolf, the butcher. Tevye went to him thinking that Layzer, wanted to buy his milk cow and he did not want to sell it. When Layzer realized that Tevye did not understand him, Layzer explained that he wanted to marry Tsaytl, Tevye’s oldest daughter. Tevye agreed to try, but he was hesitant because he did not want to sell his daughter to the butcher like a piece of meat.

A couple of the stories from The Railroad Stories are examples of miscommunication problems. The most humorous and tragic one’s occurred in the story “Go Climb a Tree if You don’t Like it”. Here, a man did not want to get arrested for not having a residence permit. He tricked his brother-in-law into switching identities when the police came. His brother-in-law was accused of not having a residence permit and was arrested instead of the traveler. Traveler got away without any problems. These elements of tragic examples of humor truly draw an audience in and have made Sholom Aleichem a very popular author. As one experienced such prejudice during this time period, humor related to these painful experiences helped to relieve the stress of everyday life.

**Historical and Political Context**

Understanding the historical and political context of this work may be difficult for today’s children. It was written with a contemporary audience in mind, so only certain details are mentioned. Sometimes, Sholom Aleichem even leaves out historical details that make the historical and political context difficult to understand. One really needs to study this period of Jewish and Russian history to truly understand the background and the author’s point of view in writing this work.

Russia had barred Jews from living in the country until it acquired Poland during the partitions of 1772, 1793, and 1795. Areas like Kiev were opened to Jews in 1794 for the first time. However, they were barred again in 1835. Temporary visits were allowed in 1862, and then
these areas were opened to Jewish residence by special permit. Jews could get permits to live in these areas due to their career and connections. Government regulations on Jews were very unfair and strict. For a period of time, Jewish boys were drafted into the army at the age of 12. Strict regulations also barred Jews from Russian schools, and only allowed a certain number of Jews into schools. The 1881 assassination of Alexander II led to pogroms against the Jews. This is Christian mob violence. Many people wrongly accused the Jews of many crimes, including the issue of blood libel to spur these attacks. The most common blood libel case, which is mentioned in Sholom Aleichem’s stories, is that of Mendel Beilis. He was falsely accused, and indicted, for the ritual slaughter of a child. The trial occurred between 1911 and 1913.

In 1904 “Hodl” from Tevye the Dairyman was published. In this story, Pertchik, Hodl’s husband, was imprisoned for revolutionary activity due to the attempted revolutionary activity of 1903 prior to the 1905 revolution. Specific details are left out of this story that would help one to truly understand the situation. There were actually a lot of violent pogroms against the Jews during this time period, and specifically since 1881. The 1903 pogrom in Kishinev particularly influenced Sholom Aleichem and his writing (Halkin, 1987). “The Tenth Man” from The Railroad Stories was written in 1910. It mentions how a Jew was hanged for revolutionary activity. It was and still is common for Jews to identify with the Communist and Socialist ideals. Karl Marx was half Jewish. He first published “The Communist Manifesto” in 1848. Lenin’s brother was caught plotting to kill Czar Alexander III as early as 1887. Many of the conservative Russians blamed the Jews on the 1905 Revolution and caused government-supported pogroms that attacked and killed Jews throughout the region. Today, there are many Jews that still consider themselves Socialists, as the Kibbutz system of Israel has been very successful.
In 1905 “Chava” from *Tevye the Dairyman* was published. Christian’s ransacked Tevye’s home because Chava married a Christian. Tevye’s family had to disown her. This is the first act of violence against Tevye because he is Jewish. “Lekh-Lekho” was published in 1914. This story more fully describes Tevye’s experience with pogroms and residency restrictions against Jews.

Pogroms, and government attacks and legal regulations on Jews, are mentioned in the following *Railroad Stories*: “Competitors”, “Baranovich Station”, “Eighteen from Pereshchepene”, “The Wedding that Came Without a Band”, “High School”, “Go Climb a Tree if you Don’t Like It”, and “The Tenth Man”. These legal issues include regulations that only allowed a certain amount of Jews into public schools and residency permits that only allowed certain people into cities. “The Wedding that Came Without a Band” is an interesting case. In this story, Jews successfully bribed a government official to protect them from the impending pogrom. The government brought in members of the army to stop the mob attacks.

**Religious Portrayal**

Sholom Aleichem was raised as a Chassidic (Hassidic) Jew. This is the background that many of his stories are based on. *Tevye the Dairyman* is about life as a Chassidic Jew. However, the stories that make up the *Railroad Stories* are about Jews of varying levels of religious observance. One can picture this when watching “Fiddler on the Roof”. However, this might not be something that is understandable to the uneducated reader.

The Chassidic Jews are the most conservative of Orthodox Jews. It was founded as a religious revival movement by the followers of Israel Ben-Eliezer, the Ba’al Shem Tov (also known as the Besht) in the early 18th century in Poland. Ba’al Shem Tov means “master of the good name”. The origin of this movement has been traced to the region of Podolia in the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth. They are a very strict group of religious followers, who also study
the mystical teachings of the Kabbalah. It is not one cohesive movement, but consists of several subgroups with varying beliefs. The most common subgroups are the Lubavitchers (http://www.chabad.org), Breslovers (http://breslov.org/), and Satmars. Today, the Lubavitchers are known for the creation of Jewish community centers for all Jews around the world. They try to influence Jews to become more religious. The Breslovers are the most mystical and meditative of the groups. They can be seen dancing in the streets, in front of vans that play loud music in Israel, and are known for spraying religious graffiti on buildings in Israel. The Satmars are notorious for being opposed to Zionism and protest against Israel. A good way of describing Chasidim to a Christian would be to compare them to the Mennonites or Amish. They follow the bible literally, and in ways that seem very extreme. Except that Chasidim do not shy away from technology the way that the Amish do.

On the surface, the Chassidic characters in Sholom Aleichem’s writing are evident by their level of religious observance. Tevye and some of the other characters always quote Jewish text and prayer and strictly observe Jewish customs and holidays. Tevye is the most developed Jewish character, because Tevye the Dairyman is like a novel, while The Railroad Stories only provide glimpses into individual personalities. Because of this Tevye’s character can be more fully analyzed for archetypal characteristics that permeate Jewish stories since the biblical era.

Tevye follows in the pattern of the archetype of Israel (Jacob), as the one that wrestles with God. Although, Jewish ancestors have been known to struggle with the idea of God since Abraham, it is the story of Jacob, and then later in the story of Job, that really has permeated this discussion in the Jewish discourse. Anyone who has read the bible knows that Jacob was not as pious as Tevye the Dairyman. Jacob was jealous of his twin brother, Esau. He forced Esau to sell his birthright in exchange for food, and deceived his blind father, Isaac, in order to receive the
blessing that was promised to Esau. Esau was so irate that he vowed to kill Jacob after their father died.

In Genesis 32:25-32:33, Jacob wrestled with a man all night. Even though this man injured Jacob, he continued to try to overpower the stranger. Jacob would not let the man go until he received the stranger's blessing. The stranger stated, “Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel; for thou hast striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed.” The name Israel is sometimes interpreted as “he overpowered God”. But some say it means that he wrestled with God, while others believe that it comes from the word for authority. Genesis 32:31 states, “And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: ‘for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.’” Although this passage is ambiguous due to missing details, biblical commentaries have traditionally interpreted this by stating that Jacob had wrestled with an angel and succeeded.

Maimonides (Moshe Ben Maimon, also known as the Rambam) first interpreted this passage to be a prophetic dream in the 12th century. In a D’var Torah on the Torah portion Vayishlach, Rabbi Ari Kahn stated that this experience “transformed and empowered” Jacob. It taught him “how to respond to challenges which await him from both this world, and the other.” And after this experience Jacob and Esau were able to handle their problems in a more successful way.

From this passage one can derive the idea of the archetype of Israel, as the individual, or cultural group that wrestles with their faith in God. Whether one is as pious and devoted to religion as Tevye, or as deceitful as Jacob, there are moments in life when everyone struggles with faith and struggles with accepting the circumstances of one’s life by wondering, “Why did God cause this to happen to me?” “What have I done to deserve this?” “What do I need to do to
become rich?” Jews have experienced anti-semitic attacks for thousands of years and continue to wonder if God exists. If God existed, why would God cause Jews to be attacked and killed in pogroms or slaughtered at the hands of the Nazis during the Holocaust?

Sol Gittleman wrote extensively in his book on Sholom Aleichem about Tevye’s personal relationship with God. Despite Tevye’s anger with God, he still adheres to Orthodox practices. This anger can be characterized by a statement that Tevye makes in the story “Tevye Strikes it Rich,” “…with God’s help, I was poor as a devil. No Jew should starve as I did!” Tevye blames God for his poverty, and does not take the responsibility for his situation himself. However, Tevye felt that continuing to have faith and hope would lead him out of this situation. Similarly, in the introduction to Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories, Halkin calls Tevye a “God-arguer” and compares him to the biblical figures, Abraham, Moses, and Job. He states that Tevye is similar to Job, because Job would not accept God’s unjust judgment.

Despite this anger, Tevye is not tolerant of his daughters’ decision to marry a Christian. He disowns her and adheres to a strictly Orthodox practice. This storyline represents a point when Jews that struggle with their own feelings of faith and God defy their parents and their traditions instead of adhering to it. Many Jews do not agree with Orthodox Jews and do not follow religious practices so strictly. Some of the Jewish characters that are less religious are evident in Sholom Aleichem’s writing because the more religious one’s do not like the less religious way of life, or the children do not want to follow the ways of the parents. This is a struggle of traditional religious control versus modernity. Instead of wallowing in one’s pain and arguing with God the way Tevye does, characters that defy tradition and are empowered to move forward into the modern era are learning from their experiences in a similar way that Jacob learned handle his problems better after he struggled with the angel. The secular and socialist
characters and the women that make up their own minds in Sholom Aleichem’s stories empower the readers to do the same.

**What can be concluded about the author’s viewpoint?**

It was very normal during Sholom Aleichem’s time and today, for Jews to not want to live according to the strict laws of Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox Judaism. Yet, a lot of the literature available for Jews to read, written by Jews, was based on religious principals and folktales related to religious belief. Although Sholom Aleichem was raised as a Chassidic Jew, he wanted to break with these traditions. He wrote about the lives of Orthodox Jews, as their family members were not willing to follow authority. Those that did not want to follow the traditional practices did so for the sake of being more modern. Sholom Aleichem was sympathetic with those that desired for modernity within the Orthodox Jewish community. He maintained a life as part of the Orthodox community, but by writing about difficult and painful situations in a humorous manner, he helped Jews process their emotions and move on with their lives in a more positive manner than Tevye the dairyman could. He had a positive outlook on life, despite the awful treatment of Jews and revolutionaries in Russia. By writing about these situations in a humorous manner, he empowered Jews, and specifically women and children, to make decisions for themselves and to be independent in their beliefs.

By writing about Orthodoxy as it exists, along with Zionism, Christianity, intermarriage, and Communism, Sholom Aleichem is showing a love and sympathy for all types of individuals. He was accepting of everyone’s beliefs, because his writing speaks of the experiences of all types of Jews. His characters, like Tevye, are open about their desires to live in Israel as a religious Zionist. While characters in both sets of stories want to assimilate into the Christian world by marrying Christians. Several characters, including one of Tevye’s daughters, decided to
deal with poverty by supporting the revolutionary, Communist cause. Yet, many of the characters do maintain their beliefs in Orthodoxy.

Despite such awful circumstances for Jews during the time period, the female characters in Sholom Aleichem’s stories, like Tsaytl, Chava, and Hodl are very strong female characters. In the true socialist and secular spirit of egalitarian equality, they appear to be independent of their parents and make their own decisions. They defy their parent’s wishes to follow in the Orthodox tradition. Some characters prefer to be poor instead of marrying for wealth. Wealth is not the most important thing in the world, even though it is very frustrating to be poor. This is a very wise idea to be able to understand, and also maintains level of solidarity with the working class instead of being a capitalist.

Before Sholom Aleichem died, he wrote his own epitaph. It stated,

Here lies a Jew, a plain man,
Who wrote in Yiddish for women
And for the plain people was he
A humorist, a writer.

He laughed all through his life,
He fought the whole world,
But all the world was the gainer
And he, only the loser.

And while the world was merry
And saw in him but gladness,
Poor man, he suffered on the quiet.
God knows, but no one else did.

As depressed and defeated by poverty and the forces that opposed his writing, the first paragraph of this epitaph is really what defines his writing. Sholom Aleichem wrote to specifically empower women to be themselves and to not adhere to the strict controlling life of Orthodox Judaism in which the men, and the parents, are in charge. Sholom Aleichem advocates for acceptance of all people in a way that writers of Jewish folktales had not previously done by
writing about life in the shtetl. In so doing, he wrote to empower all people to stand up for themselves against the forces of prejudice that opposed them.
Bibliography


