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Gender, Education and Family Dynamics in Jewish-American Fiction: 1915-1930

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Abstract

While the assimilationist novelists Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yezierska are usually considered to be part of a separate literary and political tradition to the communist writer and polemicist Michael Gold, their most enduring novels document the Jewish-American experience through the same thematic prisms: the conflict between Judaic and American gender norms, the quest of younger Jews to receive a fulfilling American education, and the fragile dynamics of the Lower East Side immigrant family.

Considering Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1915), Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925) and Gold's *Jews Without Money* (1930) as complementary character portraits of vulnerable men and radical women counteracts the tendency to place them in competing streams of masculine and feminine fiction. Moreover, while scholars typically associate Gold with the 1930s proletarian tradition (thanks to his radical theories of cultural production), framing him as a canonical Jewish writer of the pre-Depression era reveals a consistent aesthetic thread between the bourgeois Bildungsroman and the radical proletarian novel.

Treating these writers on a continuum with one another thus cements Gold's reputation as a pioneering literary figure, and contributes to recent scholarship treating Cahan and Yezierska's novels as more than just objects of historical nostalgia.

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Contents

Introduction

> In the stillness that followed Mother's words, I was thinking: suppose Mother had not felt like marrying Father, then where would all of us children be now? And here, in America, where girls pick out for themselves the men they want for husbands, how grand it would be if the children could also pick out their fathers and mothers.[1]

In this quote from *Bread Givers,* Anzia Yezierska encapsulates an archetypal feeling among assimilated Jewish-Americans: that living in the New World and contending with its myriad pressures divides enterprising children from their conservative immigrant parents. This comparative literary study explores how early twentieth-century Jewish novelists represented this cultural upheaval. By analysing depictions of first and second-generation Jewish-Americans in the works of Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska and Michael Gold, I will argue that these writers should be considered complementary documentarians of immigrant gender and family dynamics, rather than split into separate artistic and ideological traditions.[2]

While Cahan, Yezierska and Gold diverge in a number of well-documented ways—politics, literary style, faith in the virtues of assimilation—I contend they share a vital common interest in the Jewish struggle to adapt to American norms of living. Each chapter of this dissertation focusses on a different facet of this struggle, and thus a new area our writers complement and communicate with each

[1] Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers*, 3rd ed. (New York: Persea Books, 2003), 76.

[2] While each novelist wrote prolifically across several literary forms including autobiography, non-fiction and the short story, I will focus mainly on their best-known novels here: Cahan's The Rise of David Levinsky (1917), Yezierska's Bread Givers (1925) and Gold's Jews Without Money (1930).

other. The first two chapters concern the elder generation of Jewish-Americans, and examine respectively how evolving codes of manhood and motherhood prevented them from assimilating comfortably. These chapters make up the gendered portion of the dissertation, which expands Cynthia Port's claim (about *Jews Without Money*) that "a contrast is established not between virile men and ineffectual women, but rather between realistic female adults and childlike dreamers who are often male."[3] By identifying two common character types—the naive and emasculated Jewish man and the proto-radical Jewish mother—these chapters place Cahan, Yezierska and Gold within a cohesive strain of immigrant writing, one that dissects the conflict between Orthodox Jewish and American gender norms.

My final chapter explores the broader connection between two literary forms: the immigrant Bildungsroman and the proletarian novel. By shifting thematic focus towards second-generation Jews and their struggle to gain an education, I will frame *Jews Without Money* as a crucial point of literary experimentation in the field of immigrant fiction. While Cahan and Yezierska advocate formal schooling as the best path to social mobility, Gold shifts the sphere of Jewish fulfilment to the tenement street. This subtle modification, I contend, allowed Gold to pioneer an immigrant Bildungsroman that better reflected the plight of the urban working class: an embryonic version of the proletarian novel. Thus, while these writers differ in their prescriptions for success, analysing their novels alongside one another reveals a unified trajectory between liberal and radical creative traditions.

My choice to consider these novelists as contemporaries is unconventional.

[3] Cynthia Port, "Violent and Sentimental by Turns": The Gendered Discourses of Mike Gold," Shofar 32, no.2 (2014): 89.

Since the 1960s, most scholars have interpreted Cahan and Yezierska's work as expressing the "immigrant blues" felt by the first wave of assimilated Jewish-American writers. This reading germinated during the ethnic literary revival, when academic and popular audiences embraced cultural pluralism through the rediscovery of their ethnic pasts.[4] The unearthing of "forgotten" immigrant texts played an important role in this process, and revitalised the reputation of Dickensian realists like Cahan and vernacular modernists like Yezierska and Tillie Olsen.[5] Despite clear divergences in style, these writers document the travails of immigrants who struggle to reconcile their ethnic loyalties—to their religion, to their parents, to their homeland and its social norms—with the assimilated American future they imagine for themselves.

The Civil Rights era's emergent politics of ethnicity lent these stories a particular prescience, and provoked a spate of analyses concerned with immigrant unfulfilment, placelessness and nostalgia. In her introduction to *Bread Givers,* for example, Alice Kessler-Harris sets up a dichotomy between the "closeness of the immigrant community" on the one hand and the "pull of prosperity" on the other.[6] This reading typifies the themes that spoke to audiences from the 1960s onwards, namely "the ambiguity created by America's consistent temptations," "the unending trauma of adjustment" and "the psychic stress of adaptation."[7] In the first monograph written on Cahan, Jules Chametzky analyses *The Rise of David*

[4] For more on the ethnic literary revival, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (London: Harvard University Press, 2006).
[5] Corinna Lee, "Never Forgetting the East Side: Michael Gold's 'Jews Without Money'," MELUS 40, no.2 (2015): 32-35.
[6] Alice Kessler-Harris, introduction to *Bread Givers,* 3rd ed. by Anzia Yezierska (New York: Persea Books, 2003), xxix. Kessler-Harris is single-handedly responsible for the 1975 Persea Books reprint of *Bread Givers,* which sparked its renaissance as a work of popular fiction (and as a resource for historians and scholars of American immigrant literature).
[7] Ibid., xxx. See also: Babbette Inglehart, "Daughters of Loneliness: Anzia Yezierska and the Immigrant Woman Writer," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 1, no.2*:* 1–10; Susan Hersh Sachs, "Anzia Yezierska: 'Her Words Dance with a Thousand Colors'," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 3, no.3 (1981): 62-67.

Levinsky in similar terms:

> Cut off from his past, his mother (tongue), his father (land), all old beliefs and value systems, how can a David Levinsky be expected to overcome a deep dislocation and alienation, how can he fill such a void and emerge integrated and whole? Posing such questions, the book may be seen as dealing quintessentially with the immigrant experience; put that way it is also a quintessentially American book.[8]

Cahan and Yezierska's cautionary tales of upward mobility reflect the fact they wrote in relatively prosperous era for American Jews, scores of whom had begun to move from the Lower East Side to more affluent neighbourhoods. While both writers depict mainstream American society as inhospitable in various ways, they maintain faith that the "immigrant blues" can be shaken loose by working hard, receiving an education and abandoning European cultural norms. As Laura Hapke suggests in *Labour's Text*, the politically moderate tone of *Levinsky* and *Bread Givers* epitomises the "transitional era" before the Great Depression, when immigrant writers still had faith that America could deliver on its mythical potential.[9]

Contrastingly, scholars usually associate *Jews Without Money* with the

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[8] Jules Chametzky, *From The Ghetto: The Fiction of Abraham Cahan* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), 141. For more analyses of assimilation in *Levinsky,* see: David Engel, "The 'Discrepancies' of the Modern: Towards a Revaluation of Abraham Cahan's 'The Rise of David Levinsky'," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 2, no.2 (1981): 36–60; Benjamin Schreier, "Against the Dialectic of Nation: Abraham Cahan and Desire's Spectral Jew," *Modern Fiction Studies* 57, no.2 (2011): 276–99; Adam Sol, "Searching for Middle Ground in Abraham Cahan's 'The Rise of David Levinsky' and Sidney Nyburg's 'The Chosen People'," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 16 (1981): 6–21; & Donald Weber, "Outsiders and Greenhorns: Christopher Newman in the Old World, David Levinsky in the New," *American Literature* 67, no.4 (1995): 725–45.

[9] Laura Hapke, *Labour's Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 175.

proletarian novel, a didactic and openly anti-capitalist literary form that rejects the rags-to-riches "rise" entirely. The connection is a logical one: as Alan Wald attests, "no individual contributed more to forging the tradition of proletarian literature as a genre in the United States" than Michael Gold.[10] In his non-fiction writing for the *Liberator* and the *Masses,* Gold encouraged American writers to embrace the working class as a subject and an audience for literature, because "the masses know what Life is."[11] He then formulated a set of aesthetic guidelines for the burgeoning proletarian novelist: they should describe "the real conflicts of men and women who work" by writing "with technical precision," with "as few words as possible," and always with the social function of illuminating capitalistic injustice.[12] In their ideal form, this writer should resemble "a wild youth of about twenty-two, the son of working-class parents, who himself works in the lumber camps, coal mines, steel mills, harvest fields and mountain camps of America."[13] This idiosyncratic cultural critique (and its influence in founding a unique literary movement) tends to disqualify Gold from inclusion in discussions about earlier, more liberal Jewish writers.

Political trends widened this separation further. While Cahan and Yezierska were given their due in 1960s, Gold's unwavering commitment to communism saw him banished from the American literary establishment during the Cold War. For most of the twentieth century, critics struggled to separate Gold's art from its artist, and derided *Jews Without Money* as dogmatic and politically naive. Alfred Kazin, for example, writes in the introduction to *Jews*

[10] Alan M. Wald, *Exiles From a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 39.
[11] Michael Gold, "Towards Proletarian Art," *Liberator* (February 1921) qtd. in Folsom, Anthology, 66.
[12] Michael Gold, "Proletarian Realism," *The New Masses* 6, no.4 (September 1930): 5.
[13] Michael Gold, "Go Left, Young Writers!" *The New Masses* 4, no.8 (January 1929): 4.

Without Money's 1996 edition that Gold was "a man without the slightest literary finesse" who traded only in "uncomplicated words, uncomplicated feelings, and rudimentary behaviour."[14] Bernard Weinstein, similarly, considers the novel's "lapses into doctrinaire Marxism" unignorable.[15] This is a particularly unfair assessment of a text which (surprisingly given its author's reputation) only references Marxism overtly in its final lines.[16] Had the fog of the Cold War not continued to linger, one senses that things could have been different. Gold was, after all, still alive when the ethnic literary revival began, and, as Patrick Chura proves with his recent biography, more than willing to talk retrospectively about his work.[17] That no one but Michael Folsom took the opportunity to speak with Gold in the 1960s, just as his work appeared to fit with the moment, speaks to the extent of his ostracisation.[18]

All of this goes some way to explaining why Cahan, Yezierska and Gold are rarely analysed together. Crucially however, *Jews Without Money* does not fit comfortably into Gold's criteria for the proletarian novel. For one, neither Gold himself, nor the character he calls the "heroine" of the novel (a composite of his mother named Katie)[19], nor his protagonist (a composite of his younger self named Mikey) resemble the masculine ideal he invokes in his theoretical writing. As

[14] Alfred Kazin, Introduction to *Jews Without Money,* by Michael Gold (Philadelphia: PublicAffairs, 2009), 4.
[15] Bernard Weinstein, "Cahan's David Levinsky: An Inner Profile," *MELUS* 10, no.3 (Autumn 1983): 47.
[16] Morris Dickstein, "Hallucinating the Past: 'Jews Without Money' Revisited," *Grand Street* 9, no.2 (1990): 159.
[17] Patrick Chura, *Michael Gold: The People's Writer* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020).
[18] Michael Folsom recorded a number of long, in-person interviews with Gold from 1965 to 1966, with the intention of writing a biography. This task was never completed (Folsom instead published a vital anthology of Gold's written work) and it wasn't until Chura's 2020 biography that any of Folsom's interviews were published. Gold died in 1967, years before his work was seriously reappraised. For more on Gold's Cold War-era career and earlier failed biography attempts, see: Chura, *People's,* 1-12.
[19] Michael Gold, Author's Note to *Jews Without Money* (Philadelphia: PublicAffairs, 2009), 11-12.

several feminist critics have pointed out, *Jews Without Money* subverts the image of the virile male revolutionary by imbuing its female characters with radical agency.[20] Leftist contemporaries of Gold also criticised *Jews Without Money* for lacking a defined social function: in a 1930 review in the *New Republic,* Melvin Levy called the novel "a failure when judged by the standards of proletarian literature" because it omits the 1909 New York shirtwaist strikes and the ensuing Triangle factory fire.[21] Gold himself later decried "the mechanical application of the spirit of proletarian literature," seemingly expressing disillusionment with his own manifesto.[22]

I point this out not to deride *Jews Without Money* as a failed experiment, but to suggest that Gold's association with a separate literary tradition to Cahan and Yezierska has been chronically overstated. Because Gold was the principal theorist of proletarian fiction, *Jews Without Money* is repeatedly described in passing as "the first of the proletarian novels"[23] or "the most famous proletarian narrative to emerge from the Great Depression."[24] That the novel became synonymous with the 1930s by chance is easily overlooked: Gold published the first sketches of *Jews Without Money* in the *Masses* in 1917 (the year *The Rise of David Levinsky* was published)[25] and completed it in 1928, over a year before the Wall Street crash.[26] As Marcus Klein has suggested in *Foreigners,* the Depression

[20] See, for example: Port, "Violent," 88-115 & Jodie Childers, "'Go Left Young Writers!': Aesthetic and Political Debates in the New Masses, 1926-1929," *Studia Neophilologica* 92, no.2 (2020): 175–89.
[21] Melvin Levy, "Michael Gold: *Jews Without Money*," *The New Republic* (26 March 1930), 160-61.
[22] Michael Gold, "A Proletarian Novel?" *The New Republic* (4th June 1930): 74.
[23] Morris Dickstein, "Hallucinating the Past: 'Jews without Money' Revisited," *Grand Street* 9, no.2 (1990): 160.
[24] Sanford Sternlicht, *The Tenement Saga: The Lower East Side and Early Jewish American Writers* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), 111.
[25] Michael Denning, The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century (London: Verso, 1997), 232.
[26] Dickstein, "Hallucinating," 161-2.

made Gold's proletarian ethic suddenly universal, but he was treated as something of a doomsayer during the preceding decades (when he was at his most productive).[27] While Gold's stock rose serendipitously in the 1930s, the crash correspondingly stunted the legacy of less radical writers like Cahan and Yezierska. Their faith in the American system had not been repaid, and their novels came to be considered snapshots of a bygone time (which, eventually, fit perfectly with a nostalgic turn in the 1960s).

I argue here that these circumstantial divisions obscure a more holistic reading of early twentieth-century Jewish fiction. Placing these writers on a continuum with one another illuminates how they documented the Jewish-American experience through the same thematic prisms—gender, education and the fragile immigrant family—as well as how earlier, politically liberal novels shaped the radical literary atmosphere of the 1930s. Thus, while circumstances transformed Cahan and Yezierska into objects of nostalgia (and Gold into an object of unfair derision), they can be considered equally canonical and influential observers of immigrant life.

[27] Marcus Klein, Foreigners: The Making of American Literature 1900-1940 (London: University of Chicago Press), 36-7.

Chapter 1:

"Foolish male dreams": Masculine Fragility and the American Rise

This chapter treats *The Rise of David Levinsky*, *Bread Givers* and *Jews Without Money* as complementary character portraits of first-generation immigrant Jews forced to adapt to American norms of manhood. Each of these novels documents the collapse of the European Rabbinic ideal of masculinity (associated with quiet humility, spiritual wisdom and alignment with the metaphysical realm) and the traumatic attempts of Jewish men to replace it with an American alternative: laissez-faire capitalism and rugged individualism.

By exploring the parallels between these portrayals, I will argue that these writers were equally sceptical of America's cultural obsession with work, which (in fiction and in reality) stoked a noxious and self-defeating hero-worship of wealthy men among the working classes. While poverty and bad luck consistently disproves the proverbial link between hard work and success in these novels, a host of elder Jewish characters maintain undying faith in free market justice and fairness. America's solipsistic working culture is consistently presented as harmful to these men, who hold themselves responsible for their failures despite the impermeable barriers to upward mobility they face. These same standards of manhood simultaneously allow the moneyed elites (like the rags-to-riches protagonist of Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*) to believe they are physically and morally superior to the urban poor. While the fabled American meritocracy never materialises then, the *idea* of it solidifies America's class inequalities.

These writers thus make unique versions of the same argument: that the unceasing effort and brutal self-criticism the New World demanded from its middle-class men were not healthy strategies to survive in the proletarian Lower

East Side. Establishing this point of similarity between Cahan, Yezierska and Gold addresses an inconsistency in gender scholarship concerning Jewish fiction. Several studies have used Abraham Cahan's *Yekl* and *The Rise of David Levinsky* to explore how immigrant Jews adapted to American forms of manhood.[28] Cahan's ubiquity in this field is logical: across his fifty-year editorship of *The Jewish Daily Forward,* he emerged as the venerable patriarch of assimilatory culture, helming the popular *Bintel Brief* column that counselled scores of Jewish men about the New World's cultural customs.[29]

Conversely, feminist scholars since the 1970s have rightly valued *Bread Givers* for its treatment of Jewish womanhood, particularly the struggle to escape a life of domesticity through employment and education.[30] While themes of masculinity and patriarchy play an important role in this scholarship, they are usually analysed in relation to the novel's female characters. As for *Jews Without Money,* scholars often invoke Michael Gold's disdain for men he considered overly effete (like Sherwood Anderson and Thornton Wilder)[31] and the "macho" ideal writer he sketched in the *New Masses* to label the novel overtly masculine.[32] James Penner, for example, writes that Gold presents his "tough Jew persona … as the

[28] See, for example: Clay Motley, "'Dot' sh a' Kin' a man I am!': Abraham Cahan, Masculinity, and Jewish Assimilation in Nineteenth-Century America," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 30, no.2 (2011): 3-15; Warren Hoffman, "The Rise (And Fall) of David Levinsky: Performing Jewish American Heterosexuality," *Modern Fiction Studies* 51, no.2 (2005): 393-415; Sonia Gollance, "'A valtz from the land of valtzes!': Dance as a Form of Americanization in Abraham Cahan's Fiction," *Dance Chronicle* 41, no.3 (2018): 393-417.
[29] Jules Chametzky, *From The Ghetto: The Fiction of Abraham Cahan* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), 22-3.
[30] See, for example: Chip Rhodes, "Education as Liberation: The Case of Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers," Science and Society* 57, no.3 (1993): 294-312; Gay Wilentz, "Cultural Mediation and the Immigrant's Daughter: Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers," MELUS* 17, no.3 (1991-1992): 33-41; Dan Shiffman, "The Kindling Breath of Another Mind: Anzia Yezierska's Critique of American Education," *Studies in Jewish American Literature* 34, no.2 (2015): 257-273.
[31] See: Michael Gold, "Hemingway —White Collar Poet," *New Masses* 3, no.11 (March 1928): 21; & Michael Gold, "Wilder, Prophet of the Genteel Christ," in *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology,* ed. Michael Folsom (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 197-202.
[32] See: Michael Gold, "Go Left, Young Writers!" *New Masses* 4, no.8 (January 1929): 3.

masculine alternative to the Proustian male" in the text,[33] while James D. Bloom's *Left Letters*—until very recently the closest thing to a book-length biography of Gold—opens with the statement that *Jews Without Money* "enacts and wages the Kulturekampf that [his] manifestos, reviews, and theoretical essays advocate and promote."[34]

This chapter questions these enduring divisions by tracing the common character type of the naive Jewish immigrant man. While the tendency to view *Jews Without Money* as an expression of its author's machismo is natural enough, Gold's tragic portrayal of his vulnerable father suggests he was not attempting to fictionalise his hyper-masculine theories of cultural production.[35] Acknowledging Gold's sympathy towards effeminate men places *Jews Without Money* in league with the earlier work of Cahan and Yezierska, who share a clearer thematic interest in precarious Jewish masculinity. By my reading then, these novelists occupy a unified gendered tradition of immigrant fiction, rather than separate strains of male and female writing (or liberal and proletarian writing).

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In the nineteenth century, work was foundational to the identity of American middle-class men. Broadly speaking, being masculine meant being a "man of action": someone engaged with the hustle and bustle of working life.[36] If men were working towards wealth, eminence and respectability in their fields,

[33] James Penner, *Pinks, Pansies and Punks: The Rhetoric of Masculinity in American Literary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 31.
[34] James D. Bloom, *Left Letters: The Culture Wars of Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992): 11. For a more recent and in-depth biography of Gold, see Patrick Chura, *Michael Gold: The People's Writer* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020).
[35] Cynthia Port, "Violent and Sentimental by Turns": The Gendered Discourses of Mike Gold," Shofar 32, no.2 (2014): 95.
[36] E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 168.

they could be confident they were doing what all men should be doing. Correspondingly, those who lacked ambition, indulged in vices like drinking or womanising, or were simply victims of bad luck, were judged to be of poor character.[37] As best-selling self-help books like Orison Swett Marden's *Architects of Fate* confirmed, the practical obstacles to success were always surmountable through hard work, persistence and resourcefulness:

> If a man would accomplish anything in this world, he must not be afraid of assuming responsibilities. Of course it takes courage to run the risk of failure … but the man who is not true to himself, who cannot carry out the sealed orders placed in his hands at his birth, regardless of the world's yes or no, of its approval or disapproval, the man who has not the courage to trace the pattern of his own destiny, which no other soul knows but his own, can never rise to the true dignity of manhood … Men who have the right kind of material in them will assert their personality, and rise in spite of a thousand adverse circumstances. You cannot keep them down. Every obstacle seems only to add to their ability to get on.[38]

These ubiquitous values incentivised men to look inwardly when they failed.[39] Those with families had the added pressure—and potential affirmation—of being responsible for the social status of their wives and children.[40] Although the gendered division between domestic and wage labour began to erode in the early

[37] Ibid., 178-9.
[38] Orison Swett Marden, *Architects of Fate; or, Steps to Success and Power* (1895; Project Gutenberg, May 27th 2007), https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/21622/pg21622-images.html.
[39] Rotundo, *Manhood,* 178-9.
[40] Ibid., 169.

twentieth century, American men continued to source masculine pride from the act of breadwinning. As E. Anthony Rotundo writes, the family man "was what he achieved—and so were those he loved."[41]

In this context, the promise of upward mobility took on spiritual significance for American men. The generation raised on Horatio Alger stories evangelised the promise of individual success, and even the lowliest wage labourer took solace in the ideal of the worker-turned-capitalist championed by Abraham Lincoln decades earlier:

> The prudent, penniless beginner in the world labours for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself, then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him … If any continue through life in the condition of the hired labourer; it is not the fault of the system, but because of either a dependent nature which prefers it, or improvidence, folly, or singular misfortune.[42]

By the 1870s however, the reality of industrialised America became increasingly difficult to square with these enduring mantras. As Daniel. T Rodgers suggests, factory labour "upset the certainty that hard work would bring economic success."[43] Working-class men setting out to distinguish themselves were greeted with divided and menial roles that made them feel anonymous and replaceable.[44] More affluent men occupied mid-level—and notably less masculine—jobs as

[41] Ibid.
[42] An address by Abraham Lincoln before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, September 30, 1859; qtd. in Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America*, *1850-1920* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 35-6.
[43] Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 27-8.
[44] Rotundo, *Manhood,* 249-50.

bookkeepers, salesmen, and supervisors while competing for increasingly exclusive upper-management positions. What was, in one sense, a triumph of the masculine work ethic—the transformation of the United States into a global industrial power—was paradoxically hostile towards deeply instilled notions of American manhood.[45]

These are the gendered contradictions that greeted Jewish immigrant men arriving in New York's Lower East Side in the 1880s and 1890s. As Irving Howe writes, this generation of migrants broadly consisted of "the flotsam and jetsam of the old country, the *luftmenshn* without trades or roots driven to take a chance across the sea."[46] Many were the children and grandchildren of merchants, shopkeepers, and other small business owners. Abraham Cahan's father, for example, worked as a tavernkeeper, a bookkeeper and a salesman,[47] while Michael Gold's father owned a small but infrequently successful suspenders-fixture shop (like Herman Gold, his likeness in *Jews Without Money*).[48] However, while these men often harboured a quasi-American entrepreneurial spirit, the European norms of manhood they were accustomed to conflicted with those they encountered in America.[49] As a male symbol, the Jewish rabbi was the antithesis of the American self-made man: he attended to most of his work in private, relied on his wife or his congregation for his income, and rejected material desires in favour of intellectual and spiritual enlightenment.[50] While the gentle, humble Torah scholar

[45] Rodgers, *Work Ethic,* xii.
[46] Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made There* (London: Phoenix, 2000), 61. *Luftmensch* is a Yiddish term for someone without a defined trade or income.
[47] Richard S. Pressman, "Abraham Cahan, Capitalist; David Levinsky, Socialist," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 12 (1993): 5-6.
[48] Michael Folsom, Introduction to *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology,* ed. Michael Folsom (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 11.
[49] Howe, *Fathers,* 61.
[50] Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (London: University of California Press, 1997): 2.

represented the model male in European Orthodox culture,[51] he was notably feminine by Western standards.[52] For some Jewish men, rising to esteem in the New World emerged as the best way to rebel against this ideal; an opportunity to individualise in ways the Old World would not allow.[53] Conversely, many others felt uncomfortable showing the aggression American society rewarded, and felt disillusioned when the pastoral Orthodox way of life lost currency.

Cahan, Yezierska and Gold's novels converge around this particular struggle. Most of their male characters falteringly try to establish a stable masculine identity, usually by stifling their Judaic habits and passing as American men of action. The most enduring of these character studies is *The Rise of David Levinsky*, which, as Catherine Rottenberg has argued, "demonstrates the impossibility of any subject ever fully inhabiting hegemonic gender ideals."[54] In David's hometown of Antomir, the Rabbinic role model appears in the form of Reb Sender, an "ungainly little figure of a man" who delivers his Talmudic singsong in a "warm, mellow basso."[55] While Sender extols the virtues of charity and forgiveness, the orphaned David's unique position in the social hierarchy makes him hyper-competitive. "I was ever awake to the fact that other little boys had fathers and that I was a melancholy exception," he writes.[56] This all-encompassing sense of difference (stemming significantly from the lack of a paternal figure) compels David to treat his male schoolmates as rivals and enemies. When an early love interest spurns him for a boy who plays "taps with his fist for a trumpet," he

[51] Catherine Rottenberg, *Performing Americanness: Race, Class, and Gender in Modern African-American and Jewish-American Literature* (London: Dartmouth College Press, 2008): 18.
[52] Boyarin, *Unheroic,* 161.
[53] Howe, *Fathers*, 24-6.
[54] Rottenberg, *Performing,* 18.
[55] Cahan, *Levinsky,* 29-30.
[56] Ibid., 4.

compulsively trumpets until his classmates complain.[57] He then obsessively memorises Talmud to outcompete the Pole, a prodigious rival student whose "good clothes," "well-fed face" and "haughty manner" remind David of everything he lacks.[58]

Levinsky thus fails to conform to the Reb's image of a good Jewish boy (quiet, studious, conscientious), and eventually abandons his spiritual motives for learning altogether. "I promised myself to settle my accounts with the Uppermost later on," he writes, "the only thing that mattered now was to beat the Pole."[59] While his ability to "rattle off pages" bolsters his sense of holiness,[60] really he embraces a Western standard of education (one that emphasises memorisation, statistical goal-setting and interpersonal dominance) as well as a secular, Weberian version of the anglo-Protestant work ethic.[61]

His desire to live in America is therefore logical. While young boys in American schools were encouraged to distinguish themselves through competitive sports, spelling bees and art competitions,[62] David is punished in the *cheder* for letting "hatred and malice" motivate his study.[63] Work has now replaced religion as the bedrock of his masculinity, and the land that rewards solitary, upwardly mobile men becomes irresistibly alluring to him:

> "Now I can work," I thought to myself, with the satisfaction of a well-filled stomach. "And work I will. I'll show people what I can do." I applied myself

[57] Ibid., 22.
[58] Ibid., 45-47.
[59] Ibid., 47.
[60] Cahan, *Levinsky,* 45. When David's classmates accuse him of being a gentile (Ibid., 47), they are in some senses correct: in terms of his attitude towards work and male attainment, he is now more Puritanical than Judaic.
[61] Rottenberg, *Performing,* 24.
[62] Rotundo, *Manhood,* 244-5.
[63] Cahan, *Levinsky,* 46.

> to my task with ardor, but it did not last long. My former interest in the Talmud was gone. The spell was broken irretrievably. Now that I did not want for food, my sense of loneliness became keener than ever … My surroundings had somehow lost their former meaning. Life was devoid of savor, and I was thirsting for an appetizer, as it were … Then it was that the word America first caught my fancy.[64]

Later in the novel, David reconstitutes his Orthodox upbringing into something more compatible with this American masculine worldview. By comparing the "sense of advancement and independence" of employment in an American factory to his days as a Talmudic scholar, he rationalises his early life as just another stage of his Alger-esque "rise" (and strips it of its spiritual value in the process).[65] His memory of Reb Sender undergoes a similar transformation. Although David loves the Reb passionately as a boy, in adulthood he considers him "an unsophisticated, simple-hearted man, with the mind of an infant."[66] These insults signal the collapse of the Rabbinic ideal for David, who eventually views Orthodox elders as quaint and outmoded next to American self-made men.

In *Jews Without Money,* Michael Gold echoes Cahan's suggestion that Judaic and American forms of masculinity cannot easily coexist. Gold's fictional father Herman is "marked among [his] playmates," not as an orphan but as a "Little Bridegroom" prematurely arranged for marriage.[67] His Rabbi forces him to wear only white linen, and instructs his family to go through a detailed ritual process to make him a man:

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[64] Ibid., 59.
[65] Ibid., 172.
[66] Ibid., 31.
[67] Michael Gold, Jews Without Money (Philadelphia: PublicAffairs, 2009), 93-4.

> That the child may live to manhood and wealth, follow these instructions of mine. When you come to your home, before you enter, dig some earth from under your doorsill. Then from the ceiling on your right hand as you go in, carefully remove a spider's web. Then go to the market-place, and the first beggar you see, be he Jew or Gentile, ask him for a penny and a crust of bread. Then take all these things, tie them into a red piece of cloth, and hang it around the child's throat. This will be his charm through life against sickness, accident and witchcraft.[68]

Because the Judaic path to "manhood and wealth" (as Gold conceives of it) exists only through superstition, Herman feels he lacks control over his own destiny.[69] About his bride, he remarks: "I might have fallen in love with her, had I not been forced to marry her," suggesting that being a good Jew comes at the expense of his free will.[70] Herman shows no interest in America prior to these scenes, but like with David Levinsky, his desire to emigrate materialises as soon as he abandons his religious obligations (in this case, by leaving his bride at the altar).[71] If David's compulsion to leave the *shtetl* stems from "a novel sense of loneliness" (in other words, a newly discovered sense of individualism) the same can be said about Herman Gold.[72] Both characters feel they can no longer be good Jewish boys, and look to America—a land proverbially associated with freedom—to provide a new blueprint for manhood.

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[68] Ibid., 92-3.
[69] Ibid., 92.
[70] Ibid., 97.
[71] Ibid., 98. The abruptness of Herman's epiphany is worth emphasising. When his father asks him why he refuses to marry, he initially responds "I don't know," then his next words are: "I am going to America to make my fortune" (Ibid.).
[72] Cahan, *Levinsky,* 59.

The glowing testimonies of recent emigres lend the pre-migration epiphanies in these novels even more weight. New immigrants in this period often sent home photographs of themselves in a new set of clothes (usually bought by their friends and relatives) before they had even found work.[73] This custom, combined with the partisan marketing of steamship companies and Yiddish periodicals, seemingly confirmed that the New World could transform paupers into moguls overnight.[74] When Herman Gold sees his cousin Sam Kravitz wearing a "fine gentleman's suit" and a "white collar like a doctor," he cannot contain his jealousy, and develops an obsessive taste for prosperous American dress:[75]

> I had seen two pictures of America. They were shown in the window of a store that sold Singer Sewing Machines in our village. One picture had in it the tallest building I had ever seen. It was called a skyscraper. At the bottom of it walked the proud Americans. The men wore derby hats and had fine mustaches and gold watch chains. The women wore silks and satins, and had proud faces like queens. Not a single poor man or woman was there; every one was rich.[76]

Similarly, David Levinsky recalls "succumbing to the spreading fever" after reading the correspondences sent back to his hometown.[77] Much like Herman and his shop window, these "letters full of wonders" seem to give New York "tangible form" in

[73] Tyler Anbinder, *City of Dreams: The 400-Year Epic History of Immigrant New York* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2017), 369.
[74] Howe, *Fathers,* 35.
[75] Gold, *Jews,* 100. "He suddenly looked so fat and rich, this beggarly cobbler's son!" Herman writes, "I tell you, my liver burned with envy when I hear my father and mother praise my cousin Sam. I knew I was better than him in every way, and it hurt me" (Ibid.).
[76] Ibid., 102.
[77] Cahan, *Levinsky,* 61.

his imagination, and convince him that genteel Americans are more fashionable and prosperous than European Jews.[78] "I was forever watching and striving to imitate the dress and the ways of the well-bred American merchants," he writes, admitting that his "ambition to act and look like a gentleman" outweighs his respect for Jewish sartorial customs.[79]

In Cahan and Gold's novels then, an idealised image of anglo-Saxon manhood disseminates in the *shtetl* just as the Rabbinic alternative loses currency. While the pressures of Orthodox life compel immigrant Jews to become more competitive and independent (and thus more like American men) these urges instil a dangerous faith in the New World's redemptive power. David Levinsky recalls seeing America as "a land of milk and honey … of mystery, of fantastic experiences, of marvelous transformations,"[80] while Herman Gold instantly believes the "*baba* stories" circulating in his village:[81]

> In America, we believed, people dug under the streets and found gold anywhere. In America, the poorest ragpicker lived better than a Roumanian millionaire. In America, people did little work, but had fun all day … It looked so nice and happy, this city standing on end like a child's toys and blocks. It looked like a land of fun, a game waiting for me to play … I had some money left. I also bought two fine derby hats from a pushcart; one for Yossel, and one for me. They were a little big, but how proud we felt in these American fun-hats. No one wears such hats in Roumania. Both of us had pictures taken in the American fun-hats to send to our parents. This

[78] Ibid., 61.
[79] Ibid., 260.
[80] Ibid., 61.
[81] Gold, *Jews,* 102.

> foolishness went on for two weeks. Then all my money was gone … Soon I came to understand it was not a land of fun. It was a Land of Hurry-Up. There was no gold to be dug in the streets here. Derbies were not fun-hats for holidays. They were work-hats.[82]

In this passage, the derby hat symbolises the dangerous duality America presented to Jewish men. While Herman associates the New World with unlimited abundance, the dignified men he hopes to emulate rejected a life of leisure.[83] Doing little work and having fun all day sacrificed the thrill of chasing success, which was just as fulfilling to these men as success itself. By treating the derby hat as a fashion statement rather than a symbol of working manhood, Herman completely misinterprets these norms, and reaches New York more concerned with appearing prosperous than finding employment.[84] Given America's work-obsessed culture, this can only lead to bankruptcy.

Indeed, contrary to the "land of milk and honey" stereotype, Jewish immigrants had to quickly adapt to American labour customs if they wanted to stay afloat. The pick of the jobs went to those with prior experience in a skilled trade—particularly tailoring, needlework and machine sewing—while unskilled workers who could demonstrate physical strength had to hope the industrial economy could accommodate them.[85] In *Bread Givers,* Anzia Yezierska explores how these occupational hurdles marginalised Jewish men who defended their Rabbinic ideals. The devout Reb Smolinsky is the opposite of the industrious,

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[82] Ibid., 102-7.
[83] Rotundo, *Manhood*, 176-7.
[84] For a thorough analysis of the importance of dress and "passing" in Cahan and Yezierska's works, see Nancy Von Rosk, "'Go, Make Yourself for a Person'": Urbanity and the Construction of an American Identity in the Novels of Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yezierska," *Prospects* 26 (2001): 295-335.
[85] Rodgers, *Work Ethic,* 172.

practical American: he lacks any of the skills necessary to flourish in the New World, and rejects the fulfilment of breadwinning (a pillar of American masculinity) by "work[ing] day and night" reading Talmud.[86] In a confrontation with Berel Bernstein, a garment trader and prospective self-made man, Yezierska sets up the archetypal dilemma between New and Old World gender norms. "In America they got no use for Torah learning," Bernstein says, "you got two hands and two feet. Why don't you go to work?"[87] However, with his urbane former life fresh in his mind, the Reb considers "brainless drudgery" to be completely beneath him.[88] "I'm a man among people!" he suggests, refusing to associate with "hunger-squeezed nobod[ies]" even though America will likely make him one.[89]

Cahan, similarly, suggests that living in America pressurised Jewish men to compromise between earthly and spiritual pursuits. Walking past a Talmudic bookstore in Antomir, David Levinsky's mother tells him that "this is the trade I am going to have you learn, and let our enemies grow green with envy."[90] Only when he reaches New York does he realise that employment is the only effective way to distinguish himself. As soon as he arrives, a labour contractor tells him that religion is "no business in America."[91] Despite his earlier conviction that migration presents endless opportunities "to a man of [his] type,"[92] David's lack of a valuable trade suggests he will join the thousands of *ferloryne menshn* —"lost souls"— who populated the Lower East Side's factories and sweatshops.[93] Indeed, the cerebral, isolated act of Talmudic study did not adequately prepare Jewish

[86] Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers*, 3rd ed. (New York: Persea Books), 46.
[87] Ibid., 49.
[88] Ibid., 132.
[89] Ibid., 75.
[90] Cahan, *Levinsky*, 23.
[91] Ibid., 91.
[92] Ibid., 65.
[93] Howe, *Fathers*, 77.

men to enter the American workforce. By 1900, only 1 percent of Jewish immigrants worked in "professional" jobs as doctors, lawyers, dentists or rabbis;[94] and 90 percent of New York's garment workers were Jewish.[95] Berel Bernstein's neglect of his religion to "start [himself] a shop" is rational, both as a path to prosperity and a strategy to achieve masculine belonging.[96]

Orthodox Jews thus quickly found that to become an American was to become (in Reb Smolinsky's words) a "common thickneck."[97] Smolinsky expresses his perceived superiority over gentiles and industrial labourers using the term "man of the earth." "Don't forget it that you're only a man of the earth," he tells Berel Bernstein, "I am a man of God … My learning comes before my living."[98] David Levinsky, too, uses the same logic to position himself as a man of (secular) ideas. "The cloak business as a career never entered my dreams," he writes, "I regarded the trade merely as a stepping stone to a life of intellectual interests."[99] Ironically however, by the terms of American Puritanism, a "man of the earth" can be considered analogous to a "man of action" or simply a "working man": someone who strives to achieve salvation through earthly deeds. Stripped of its pejorative association with atheism and brutality, the term evokes masculine American traits like resourcefulness and strength of purpose. Thus, while David's shipmate Gitelson might be an "ignorant man of the Earth" by Orthodox standards (because he cannot understand Hebrew), he finds immediate employment in New York in his previous role as a tailor.[100] Work being the substance of American male life, he is quickly recast as "a man of substance," while David (the expert Talmud scholar)

[94] Anbinder, *Dreams,* 374-5.
[95] Ibid., 368.
[96] Yezierska, *Bread,* 44.
[97] Ibid., 48.
[98] Ibid., 46.
[99] Cahan, *Levinsky,* 150.
[100] Cahan, *Levinsky,* 88.

finds himself at the bottom of the pile.

Cahan, Yezierska and Gold's first-generation characters are thus singularly unfit to thrive in a country that has spent decades venerating the opposite kind of men. It is unsurprising that the religious fare particularly badly, but as Howe writes, the greater part of the late nineteenth-century Jewish migration consisted of "the 'dissenters,' the poor and underprivileged, the unlearned and less learned, and those who were influenced by secularism."[101] Michael Gold suggests in *Jews Without Money* that these men experienced a similar dilemma. Herman Gold bears all the hallmarks of the secular, cultural Jew: when drinking with his friends, he repeats overheard Talmudic epigrams to appear a "very learned man," but other than that, shows no sign of any religious inclination.[102] Nevertheless, he still considers industrial wage labour somehow base. When his cousin cheats him out of a business early in the novel, he becomes obsessed with being his own boss.[103] "I will show the world I can run a suspender ends shop!" he says, "I will have no partners this time. I will work alone."[104] America's culture of rugged individualism thus isolates working class men of all stripes in these texts. Those who reject it outright (like Reb Smolinsky) get left behind; while those who embrace it (like Herman Gold) get saddled with the burden of self-reliance.

This existential trap appears doubly alienating when we recall that middle-class men of the era found it difficult to process failure.[105] As Rotundo writes, denial was a popular motivational tool for upwardly mobile Americans, who "responded to the initial doubts and frustrations of their careers with intensified

[101] Howe, *Fathers,* 61.
[102] Gold, *Jews*, 118.
[103] Ibid., 122.
[104] Ibid., 110.
[105] Rotundo, *Manhood,* 181-3.

effort" rather than self-examination.[106] Failure, reconstituted as a vital step towards success, symbolically linked all hard-working men with the moguls they read about in newspapers and magazines.[107] Thus, while the American job market quickly distinguished the useful from the useless (a significant trauma in itself) men processed their failure in the context of a culture that compulsively idolised the wealthy and successful. Captains of industry like John D. Rockefeller—self-made men in their final form—provided living proof that success was simply a matter of courage, hard work, and determination:

> In every way, it appears to me, the boy of to-day enjoys inestimable advantages over the boy of fifty years ago. The whole field of human effort lies open to him. It only remains for him to take advantage of his opportunities. If I were asked to say a word of advice to him, it would be this: decide upon your course—the thing that you feel yourself most fitted to do—and then go straight ahead and do your best. Be prudent, economical, and honest … No boy, howsoever lowly—the barefoot country boy, the humble newsboy, the child of the tenement—need despair. I see in each of them infinite possibilities. They have but to master the knack of the economy, thrift, honesty, and perseverance, and success is theirs.[108]

In their attempts to pass as rugged individualists, Yezierska and Gold's characters adopt these ill-fitting cultural formulas. When Reb Smolinsky bankrupts his family

[106] Ibid., 175.
[107] Ibid., 183.
[108] John D. Rockefeller, "John D. Rockefeller on Opportunity in America," Cosmopolitan 43, no. 4 (Aug. 1907): 372.

by purchasing a sham grocery store, he can only repeat the mantra that "big men grow wise through their mistakes."[109] Herman Gold, similarly, reimagines the ghetto as a character-building school of hard knocks. "Look at Nathan Straus! Look at Otto Kahn! They peddled shoe laces when they first came here!" he says.[110] Labouring under a kind of cognitive dissonance, these proletarian men can no longer distinguish their interests from those of the rich. Herman criticises striking workers for threatening the right of "each man [to] make his own fortune,"[111] while Reb Smolinsky claims that "in America, there is no need to be poor, if you only got brains and money."[112] The irony that he possesses neither of these gifts is lost on him.[113]

Thus, while histories of the period are rife with tales of well-to-do men swallowing their pride, redoubling their efforts and finding success, Jewish immigrant fiction condemns the same culture of individualism for facilitating an insidious cycle of overwork, defeat and shame amongst the urban working classes. In *Jews Without Money,* Gold personifies this phenomenon using the labourer Fyfka the Miser, who works as much as possible, eats as little as possible, and saves every penny he earns, all because "he had heard of Rothschild [and] wanted to go into business in America."[114] Fyfka is so brutalised by his proletarian life that

[109] Yezierska, *Bread,* 126. The ghetto roots of America's famous captains of industry seem to confirm this to be true. "How do you suppose Rockefeller, or Morgan, or any of those millionaires made their start in America?" the Reb says, "They all began with empty hands." (Ibid., 133).
[110] Gold, *Jews,* 110. In response to a procession of setbacks, Herman then alternates throughout the novel between aggressive self-confidence —"I am a man with a strong will. I will have yet another shop" (Ibid., 109)— and passive self-loathing —"I am a man without luck … Why has it been so easy for them, so hard for me?" (Ibid., 301).
[111] Ibid., 235.
[112] Yezierska, *Bread,* 112.
[113] Earlier in the novel, Smolinsky's wife suggests that their flight to America was enforced in part by her husband's poor business sense: "He was a smart salesman, only to sell things for less than they cost … And when everything was gone from us, then our only hope was to come to America, where Father thought things cost nothing at all" (Ibid., 34).
[114] Gold, *Jews,* 76.

he is essentially no longer human. He has a "dumb, gloomy, animal face," "nostrils like a camel," "small eyes … like a baboon" and a "slink look … like a dog."[115] Nevertheless, he maintains undying faith that the free market will come good for him. "Poverty makes some people insane," Gold writes, lamenting that American masculine conventions are so intertwined with the interests of capital.[116] If the distinguished gentlemen on Herman's mythical billboard symbolise the promise of America, Fyfka the Miser—the "madman in an old derby hat"— constitutes the reality.[117]

While Cahan's capitalist critique is certainly more moderate, David Levinsky's rise through the ranks of the cloak industry reveals a related problem: America's success-obsessed culture both brutalises the working class *and* provides the elite with ideological cover for their exploitation. When a socialist newspaper calls David a "cockroach manufacturer," he is delighted to have been mentioned alongside "the Vanderbilts, the Goulds [and] the Rothschilds" of the world.[118] He admits to employing cheap, non-union workers, but comforts himself with the thought that many men (like Herman and Fyfka) aspire to be "fleecers of labour" like him.[119] Playing the ruthless baron rewards him, economically and culturally, and he happily peddles the same lines as his fellow self-made men:

> I added a little disquisition on the opportunities America afforded to every man who had brains and industry, and on the grudge which men like myself were apt to arouse in lazy fellows. "Those union leaders have neither brains nor a desire for work. That's why they can't work themselves up," I said.

[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Cahan, *Levinsky,* 273.
[119] Ibid.

"Yes, and that's why they begrudge those who can."[120]

Importantly then, Cahan, like Gold and Yezierska, considers the American self-made man a false idol for the working class. While manufacturers like David Levinsky preach the gospel of individualism to court praise and avoid scrutiny, "upright conservative pauper[s]" like Herman Gold take them at their word and work themselves to death in factories and sweatshops.[121]

As the divergent fates of their male characters suggest then, early twentieth-century Jewish writers conceived of American success as essentially random; a matter of luck rather than pluck. Cahan, Yezierska and Gold develop this idea through their portrayals of pushcart peddling, a career that seemingly aligned with America's proverbial selling points (independence, self-reliance, free competition, and so on). At this lowest rung of the capitalist ladder, Jews who could not enter the garment industry tried to build something "more respectable, stable and remunerative."[122] In one sense, entering the bustling marketplace of the Lower East Side provided a crash course in American market principles. "As a peddler I seemed to belong to the world of business, to the same class as the rich," David Levinsky recalls.[123] Although he curses his place amongst the "common herd," peddling represents the first step of his rise.[124] The same can be said for Max Goldstein in *Bread Givers*, a newly christened self-made man. Initially branded a "poor little greenhorn," Max comes to see the street corner as a stage for bourgeois-aspirant men to perform on:[125]

[120] Ibid., 274.
[121] Gold, *Jews*, 235.
[122] Anbinder, *Dreams,* 377.
[123] Cahan, *Levinsky,* 152.
[124] Ibid., 107.
[125] Yezierska, *Bread,* 188.

> Then I saw an old man struggling with his pushcart over the frozen snow. I rushed up to him, begging with my eyes and my hands to let me help him. So he gave me the job to drive his pushcart and holler for him, 'Pay cash clothes' … To me it was only singing a song. I didn't understand the words, but my voice was like dynamite … From all the windows, people began to look with wonder at the strange greenhorn singer … Such a free theatre as I gave them! Hester Street never saw and never heard such acting and dancing and singing in their whole life.[126]

However, for every success story observed in these novels, there is an "old melancholy Jew" whose lamentations go unheard.[127] As Howe writes, peddling was "backbreaking and soul-destroying work," pursued largely out of desperation by unskilled Jews who wanted to avoid the ignominy of factory labour.[128] Reb Smolinsky ends up peddling chewing gum with "the stoop of poverty on his back," cursing that he has been left "in [his] old age … as they left King Lear."[129] Herman Gold, similarly, sees peddling as "a symbol of defeat, of utter hopelessness."[130] Forced to sell bananas to keep his family afloat, he finds social stasis where others find social mobility. "The city is locked against me!" he says, "I am a man in a trap!"[131] Thus, while American norms of manhood claim to restore strength,

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[126] Ibid., 189-90.
[127] Gold, *Jews*, 56. The procession of lowly pushcart peddlers Gold observed in the Lower East Side inspired the title of his only novel. In one scene in *Jews Without Money,* the same words sung by Max Goldstein take on a more tragic meaning: "An old melancholy Jew limped by … 'I Cash Clothes!" he wailed, gazing with his eyes up and down the tenement walls … In my ears still ring the lamentations of the lonely old Jews without money: 'I cash clothes, I cash clothes, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" (Ibid.).
[128] Howe, *Fathers,* 78.
[129] Yezierska, *Bread*, 283-5.
[130] Gold, *Jews,* 298.
[131] Ibid., 297.

stability and structure to the life of disorientated Jews, in reality, most find themselves at the whims of a particularly unfeeling brand of capitalist individualism. Where one man finds freedom, another finds precarity; and where one man finds fulfilling work, another finds monotony.

Cahan, Yezierska and Gold thus share the common goal of humanising first-generation Jewish men as they chased an elusive sense of fulfilment in the New World. In their novels, the American self-made man emerges as an attractive role model for disaffected Jews—replacing the admirable but antiquated Rabbi—while moving to America represents a logical act of rebellion. However, in their attempts to pass as rugged individualists, Jewish men of all stripes undergo some kind of material or moral decline. The devoutly religious (like Yezierska's Reb Smolinsky) succumb to unbecoming careers as peddlers, while secular Jews like Herman Gold lock themselves in an oppressive cycle of overwork and self-loathing. Those who do achieve the proverbial "rise" do so at the expense of their moral compass: while David Levinsky comes from proletarian stock, he quickly adopts the persona of a Machiavellian capitalist. While America takes shape as "a safety valve and haven, a place for renewal and a source of support" for Jewish men (to use Howe's words), these characters are eventually haunted, not liberated, by this same faith.[132] Separating these writers thus obscures their shared interest in documenting the gendered conflicts that accompanied the chase for social mobility. In all of their texts, the American rise corrupts the men lucky enough to achieve it, and ruins the men who do not.

[132] Howe, *Fathers,* 24.

Chapter 2:

The Evolution of the Proto-Radical Jewish Mother

> The more completed her husband fulfills the ideal picture of the man as scholar, the more essential is the wife as realist between his ivory tower and the hurly-burly of everyday life …
>
> The economic area is more nearly an extension of the woman's domain than of the man's. To bustle about in search of a livelihood is merely another form of bustling about managing a home.[133]

In this epigraph from their celebrated anthropological study of nineteenth century Eastern Europe, *Life Is With People* (1953), Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog introduce us to a hugely significant figure in Jewish life and culture: the industrious and self-sacrificing Jewish mother. Having explored the burden of migration on first-generation men—the crumbling of the religious "ivory tower" under the stresses of American manhood—this chapter proposes Jewish motherhood to be something of a literary counterforce, a wellspring of hope that kept fragile immigrant families from breaking apart.

Cahan, Yezierska and Gold were at the forefront of a group of assimilated writers who memorialised Jewish matriarchs with a mixture of fondness, sentimentality and guilt. This generation were keenly aware of how important their mothers had been to their personal development: for decades, they represented emotional heart of the home, providing the model for acceptable behaviour during a time of great uncertainty.[134] However, these writers also felt the urge to move

[133] Mark Zborowski & Elizabeth Herzog, *Life is With People: The Jewish Little-Town of Eastern Europe* (New York: International Universities Press, 1953), 131.
[134] Joyce Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write! A History of the Jewish Mother* (Oxford:

on from what their mothers represented—Judaism, family values, the Old World and its societal norms—in short, the status quo.[135] Moving forth into the New World, it appeared, meant abandoning the Jewish mother, despite her unbending loyalty. "Toward the mother the child [felt] most grateful," Beverley Gray Bienstock writes, "and consequently most guilty."[136] The lyrics to Sophie Tucker's Vaudeville hit "My Yiddishe Momme" (1925) neatly encapsulate this conflict:

> My yiddishe momme, I need her more than ever now
> My yiddishe momme, I'd love to kiss that wrinkled brow
> I long to hold her hands once more as in days gone by
> and ask her to forgive me for things I did that made her cry.
>
> How few were her pleasures, she never cared for fashion's styles
> Her jewels and treasures, she found them in her baby's smiles
> Oh, I know that I owe what I am today
> To that dear little lady so old and gray
> To that wonderful yiddishe momme of mine.[137]

The adulation Tucker expresses—a combination of gratitude and faint condescension—became a popular motif on stage and in print, where the Jewish mother was elevated to a figure of "sanctioned tenderness" (to use Irving Howe's

Oxford University Press, 2007), 15-16.
[135] Beverley Gray Bienstock, "The Changing Image of the American Jewish Mother," in *Changing Images of the Family*, ed. Virginia Tufte and Barbara Myerhoff (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 179.
[136] Ibid., 190.
[137] Jack Yellen & Lew Polack, "My Yiddishe Momme," sung by Sophie Tucker (New York: Okeh records, 1925).

term).[138] In his 1925 novel *The Mother*, for example, Solem Asch depicts the *Yiddishe momme* as a boundless source of love and a staunch defender of Jewish family values.[139] The line between respect and resentment was a thin one, however: in Clifford Odets' play *Awake and Sing!* (1935), the mother's typical tenacity and hatred of poverty mutates into a petit-bourgeois obsession with material comforts.[140] For these writers then, Jewish motherhood was both liberating—the bedrock of a stable American life—but also cloying; a stubborn and sensitive reminder of a hazy former existence.

Establishing a new avenue of communication between Cahan, Yezierska and Gold, this chapter traces the literary evolution of the *proto-radical* Jewish mother, whose diligence, creativity and shrewdness inspired the more outwardly rebellious second generation. I will firstly argue that the stereotype of the sacrificial Jewish matriarch emerges naturally from her nebulous position at the end of the nineteenth century: namely, caught between her breadwinning role in Europe and her domestic role in America. The tendency to remember the Jewish mother as a tragic figure stems ultimately from her disillusionment with urban American life, which forced her to abandon her many commercial and civic talents.

I then argue that, while Cahan, Yezierska and Gold associate men with

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[138] Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made There* [ebook] (New York: OpenRoad Integrated Media, 2017), 173.

[139] Bienstock, "Changing," 176-7. Samson Raphaelson's popular broadway play The Jazz Singer (1925) takes a similar tact, lauding the mother's ability to embrace American life without losing her innate sense of Jewishness.

[140] Jules Chametzky, *From The Ghetto: The Fiction of Abraham Cahan* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), 141. For more analyses of assimilation in *Levinsky,* see: David Engel, "The 'Discrepancies' of the Modern: Towards a Revaluation of Abraham Cahan's 'The Rise of David Levinsky'," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 2, no.2 (1981): 36–60; Benjamin Schreier, "Against the Dialectic of Nation: Abraham Cahan and Desire's Spectral Jew," *Modern Fiction Studies* 57, no.2 (2011): 276–99; Adam Sol, "Searching for Middle Ground in Abraham Cahan's 'The Rise of David Levinsky' and Sidney Nyburg's 'The Chosen People'," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 16 (1981): 6–21; & Donald Weber, "Outsiders and Greenhorns: Christopher Newman in the Old World, David Levinsky in the New," *American Literature* 67, no.4 (1995): 725–45.

capitalism and bourgeois urges, they align motherhood with community and moral decency. An improvised brand of social activism evolves in stature and clarity throughout these texts, always invariably centred on the Jewish mother. I use the term *proto-radical* to describe this ethic because, although Cahan, Yezierska and Gold's matriarchs stop short of formal political engagement, they intuitively challenge the capitalistic structures that keep their communities in poverty, and eventually embrace an improvised form of proletarian class consciousness (which appears in *Jews Without Money* as a political extension of Jewish motherly love). Tracing the evolution of the proto-radical mother thus illuminates once more how these novels inhabit a common gendered tradition of immigrant writing.

My analysis fits into a scholarly trend that questions the negative cultural image of Jewish mothers that became mainstream when Philip Roth published *Portnoy's Complaint* in 1969. With his central caricature—the incessantly nagging Sophie Portnoy—Roth distilled and magnified the Jewish matriarch's compendium of quirks into something comically monstrous. Importantly for our purposes, his novel issued a clarion call for scholars to defend the reputation of Jewish women, in literature and in life. Historians Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman and Sonya Michel, for example, were inspired to write *The Jewish Woman in America* (1976) to counteract Roth's negative portrayal.[141] Similarly, the most recent history of the Jewish mother, Joyce Antler's *You Never Call! You Never Write!* (2007), demystifies the stereotypes presented in *Portnoy's Complaint* (and elsewhere in popular culture).[142]

Serendipitously then, Roth's rise to stardom accelerated the renaissance of writers like Cahan and Yezierska, whose "business of 'being ancestors'," Matthew

[141] Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman & Sonya Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York: New American Library, 1976), x-xii.
[142] Antler, *Never*, 3-4.

Frye Jacobson writes, spoke powerfully to late-century audiences intent on "*finding* ancestors."[143] At the centre of this nostalgic project—and symbolic of all the beauty and tragedy of immigrant life—sits the Jewish mother, an embattled figure whose critical reappraisal is still ongoing.[144] My contribution is to parse a more optimistic reading of early twentieth-century immigrant fiction than has become typical, one that acknowledges the Jewish mother's integrity and kindness.

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Jewish mothers burnished their reputation for strength, rationality and prudence in the Eastern European *shtetl,* where a divinely ordained division of labour separated spiritual men from worldly women. According to *Halakha* (Jewish Law), women could not take part in communal prayer, lead religious services, or become rabbis or cantors.[145] Those who wanted to attend synagogue were permitted to do so, but could only pray in a separate balcony, hidden from the rest of the congregation.[146] Women were also exempt from studying Torah and Talmud, which led to an educational divide: while young men received private religious schooling, their sisters were often sent to secular public schools.[147] By becoming a rabbi, Jewish men could join a revered cultural elite and confer instant prestige on their families.[148] Unsurprisingly then, parents made inordinate

[143] Jacobson, *Roots,* 133. Emphasis his.
[144] Lee, "Never," 35. Recent literary studies of the Jewish mother include: Dana Mihailescu, "Sides of the 'Nagging Wife' Stereotype in Early Twentieth Century Jewish American Narratives," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 3, no.2 (2010): 47–76; & Brygida Gasztold, "Self-Sacrificing And/or Overbearing: The Jewish Mother in the Cultural Imagination," *Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia* 11, no.11 (2013): 161-173.
[145] Michael Gold, "Go Left, Young Writers!" *The New Masses* 4, no.8 (January 1929): 4.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women* (London: University of Washington Press, 1995), 54-5.
[148] Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 9-10.

sacrifices to send their sons to *khadorim* and *yeshiva,* and daughters of age were encouraged to marry learned men.[149]

However, while the *shtetl* family revolved around the male spiritual journey, most scholars did not secure paid rabbinical posts, and so looked for wives who could run the household *and* provide for them economically.[150] Conveniently, men framed this arrangement as logical: while the husband mastered the spiritual realm, their wives mastered the physical one, and could be assured of their place in Paradise if only they became domestic and economic servants.[151] While the great majority of Jewish men did not become rabbis, the ideal of the female breadwinner persisted across vocations: if the scholar's wife worked, why shouldn't the merchant's wife or the tailor's wife work too?[152] As Irving Howe writes, families that reflected the ideal of male learning and female labour "set a standard honoured even by those who could not live up to it."[153]

The tough working woman thus became a dominant cultural standard in late nineteenth-century Eastern Europe.[154] Subverting the transnational cult of domesticity that gripped bourgeois families at this time, working class Jewish women became seamstresses, shopkeepers, factory workers and market peddlers, all while maintaining responsibility for cooking, cleaning and childrearing.[155] Despite being regarded as second-class citizens, bustling *baleboste* (housewives) were essential to the functioning of Jewish society, and in many ways, led richer lives than their middle-class counterparts.[156] They enjoyed a great

[149] Ibid., 10.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Baum et al., *Woman*, 12.
[152] Glenn, *Daughters,* 12.
[153] Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* [ebook version] (New York: OpenRoad Integrated Media, 2017), 170-2.
[154] Hyman, *Modern*, 67-8.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Glenn, *Daughters,* 8.

deal of control over their families, and, by virtue of their myriad obligations, maintained a healthy variety of social contacts.[157] The wife who bargained day after day with neighbours, market traders and unruly children was respected for her resourcefulness. As Susan Glenn writes, women became "quasi-independent brokers in the public world of the marketplace" who enjoyed "the rights and responsibilities of breadwinners."[158] These benefits, of course, did not alleviate poverty, nor excuse a total lack of religious and political enfranchisement. Nevertheless, patriarchal *shtetl* norms had the paradoxical effect of empowering women in the workplace, and when the same women turned their natural strengths towards political and labour activism, their stock in civic society rose too.[159]

When the time came to emigrate to America, Jewish wives and mothers found themselves in a conflicted position. On the one hand, they were often better prepared to face the journey and adjust to American society than men.[160] They had picked up valuable commercial skills by "assisting" their husbands in business (in other words, running stores entirely while their husbands took credit) and, broadly speaking, *shtetl* life conditioned them to survive in harsh circumstances.[161] As we have seen, the same cannot be said of male religious scholars, who slumped from distinguished members of the Old World gentility to brutalised proletarians in America. Whilst religious *pogroms* in the Russian Empire were an obvious push factor, many Jewish women in the late-nineteenth century saw emigration as a logical step in their personal development.[162] Nevertheless, very few of these

[157] Hyman, *Modern,* 67-8.
[158] Glenn, *Daughters,* 8.
[159] Baum et al., *Woman,* 15.
[160] Ibid., 58.
[161] Glenn, *Daughters,* 14-15.
[162] Baum et al., *Woman,* 89.

women were "feminine" in the American sense. In contrast to the Western bourgeois image of the domestic goddess, Eastern European women were famed for being assertive, street-wise and outgoing (traits typically associated with American masculinity).[163] No matter how suited to American life they thought they were, Jewish immigrants were entering a culture with entirely different expectations about female behaviour.

Moreover, when Jewish wives and mothers landed in America, a number of practical forces restricted them to a more domestic role than they were used to. For one, living in New York's run-down tenements increased the burden of housework.[164] Air pollution led to near-constant dirt, while the sheer volume of people living in close quarters created sanitation problems. It took so much effort just to clean, shop, cook and raise children that it was impossible for Jewish mothers to work anywhere outside the home.[165] There simply were not enough hours in the day. Previously, elder children (usually daughters) took care of their siblings while their mothers attended to their non-domestic engagements. This arrangement was counterproductive in America: if daughters weren't too busy at school, they could find work in sweatshops and factories.[166] Childcare thus became the mother's job, and her earning power decreased accordingly.

In the Old World, where factories had only just begun to spring up (and industrial jobs were often off-limits to Jews) the prevalence of home-based artisanal work allowed Jewish mothers to raise children and earn money at the same time. In America however, production had moved almost entirely to the factory by the late nineteenth century. While American garment traders did

[163] Ibid., 55-6.
[164] Glenn, *Daughters,* 71.
[165] Howe, *Fathers* [ebook], 171-2.
[166] Glenn, *Daughters,* 69-70.

subcontract to home-based pieceworkers, this trade was not particularly lucrative: mothers could earn an extra dollar here and there, but they were no longer breadwinners. Barring exceptional circumstances, married women taking factory jobs was also out of the question: Jewish wives fraternising with and taking orders from other men were liable to arouse the sexual jealousy of their husbands.[167]

Thus, while America's industrial priorities aligned with Jewish mothers' artisanal and wage-earning experiences in principle, in reality their talents often went to waste. This phenomenon had a further cultural dimension. As we have seen, assimilation required Jewish men to embrace economic rather than religious codes of belonging. As such, they felt a new pressure to appear upwardly mobile and, in the long term, become their family's main breadwinner.[168] This breadwinning ethic was inherently bourgeois, but it trickled down to the working class nevertheless. As they became more assimilated, Jewish men began to view the economic empowerment of their wives as incompatible with modern America. Married women belonged in the home, the thinking went, and their economic activities—taking in boarders, performing piecework, running family-owned businesses—were simply an extension of their domestic lives.[169] By refusing to acknowledge women's work, men affirmed their status as breadwinners (and, by extension, their Americanness).[170] Correspondingly, the matriarch's enforced transformation was deeply stigmatising: in the Old World, striving in business was considered "intellectual" and dignified, while domestic work was considered dirty,

[167] Ibid.
[168] Ibid., 76-7.
[169] As Glenn writes: "All of these breadwinning activities … enabled married women to contribute to the family economy in ways that separated them physically and psychologically from the ranks of outside wage earners. Because such labor entwined itself with daily domestic tasks, it was possible for immigrants to deny that wives were actually working. Growing numbers of Jewish immigrants chose to underplay or deny women's economic contributions because they wished to conform to modern, not traditional, understandings about women's proper roles" (Ibid.).
[170] Ibid., 69.

demeaning and humiliating.[171] Restricted to the lowest form of labour, married women lost the independence that had sustained them in the *shtetl*, and had to rely—often compulsively—on their role as family protectors to bolster their self-worth.

Why, then, are Jewish mothers so often memorialised as conservative, abrasive and outmoded? A compelling answer, I believe, emerges when we acknowledge their socio-economic decline. For all the talk of America as a land of freedom and opportunity, many immigrant wives found their new lives far more gruelling and one-dimensional than their European ones. Where they had once been a fixture in the labour force, the marketplace, and the wider *shtetl* community, they were now relegated largely to the home. As Howe suggests, it was logical for them to fixate upon the family unit, for it was now their only true domain:

> It was from her place in the kitchen that the Jewish housewife became the looming figure who would inspire, haunt, and devastate a generation of sons. She realized intuitively that insofar as the outer world tyrannized and wore down her men, reducing them to postures of docility, she alone could create an oasis of order. It was she who would cling to received values and resist the pressures of dispersion.[172]

Given the trauma of adapting to this new role, is it any wonder Jewish sons and daughters found their mothers neurotic? Amongst all their youthful rebellion and desire to assimilate, the first truly American generation of Jews seemed to forget

[171] Ibid., 16.
[172] Howe, *Fathers* [ebook], 172.

their mothers' past lives as breadwinners, recasting them in literature and drama as conservers of Judaic culture and guardians of domestic order.[173] This stereotype, loving and sentimental though it was, was somewhat unfair. Could Jewish mothers really be blamed for becoming overprotective, given the hardships they faced in the Old Country?[174] Did they deserve to be left behind simply because they became, in Joyce Antler's words, "the bodily representation of all that was familiar"?[175]

My contention is that Cahan, Yezierska and Gold portray their mothers' constant agitating as a blessing rather than a burden. The first glimpse of the proto-radical mother in Jewish-American fiction comes in Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, although she remains only a glimpse. In her few brief scenes, Mrs. Levinsky exhibits a number of rebellious tendencies. Twice she confronts gentiles who attack her son, repeating in "measured accents": "I'm going to kill him. I'm just going to kill him."[176] She also physically confronts a tyrannical schoolmaster, violating the privilege conventionally granted to male scholars and risking her own child's education.[177] David's mother is also a shrewd organiser: although she cannot afford to send her son to *cheder,* she harasses her relatives to put up the money.[178] To her supposed superiors (the men who determine David's education) she jumps between two tactics: imploring them "to take pity on the poor, helpless woman that she was" or bursting into "a flood of threats and imprecations, daring [them] to let a fatherless boy grow up in ignorance of the Word of God."[179] Protectiveness and resilience emerge here as the proto-radical

[173] Baum et al., *Woman,* 120.
[174] Howe, *Fathers* [ebook], 174.
[175] Antler, *Never, 17.*
[176] Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 52.
[177] Ibid., 19-20.
[178] Ibid., 16.
[179] Ibid.

mother's foundational traits.

Mrs. Levinsky also combines her Judaic worldview with a more humanistic value system. Although she admonishes a married woman for flirting with another man (calling her a "lump of stench" and a "heap of dung") she stops short of telling the woman's husband provided she "never do it again."[180] Prostitutes also arouse in her a mixture of disgust and pity:

> As a rule my mother was bitterly opposed to their visits and often she chased them out with maledictions and expressions of abhorrence; but there was one case in which she showed unusual tolerance and even assumed the part of father confessor to a woman of this kind. She would listen to her tale of woe, homesickness, and repentance, including some of the most intimate details of her loathsome life. She would even deliver donations to the synagogue, thus helping her cheat the Biblical injunction which bars the gifts of fallen women from a house of God.[181]

While David's mother considers prostitution a sin, her faith is malleable enough to accommodate basic human sympathies. Cahan's comparison with the "father confessor" is significant too, as it suggests Mrs. Levinsky is wise enough to overcome the male monopoly on spiritual guidance. Her willingness to act on behalf of a woman in need—and flout religious rules while doing so—suggests she would rather perform good deeds on earth than guarantee her place in Paradise.

Mrs. Levinsky is thus not your typical *Yiddishe momme*. Significantly (given the cultural dominance of the opposite stereotype) she is anything but

[180] Ibid., 11.
[181] Ibid., 13-14.

sentimental. "She never poured over me those torrents of senseless rhapsody which I heard other Jewish mothers shower over their children," David writes.[182] Instead, her words of endearment—"my comfort," "my little bean," "my little orphan"—have a homely and melancholic air to them, as though she is reticent to appear overbearing.[183] When David asks why his mother never beats him, she responds: "Because God has punished you hard enough as it is."[184] These words are tragic, but also rational: why compound misery with misery? Moreover, by taking on odd jobs to keep her family afloat, David's mother resembles the practical matriarchs we see sketched in European histories. In keeping with his editorship at *The Jewish Daily Forward*—which, in its array of columns about women's issues, criticised the domestication of Jewish women in America and defended their position in the workplace—Cahan acknowledges the breadwinning role of Eastern European women in *The Rise of David Levinsky.*[185]

Mrs. Levinsky is thus something of rarity in American fiction: a progressive, in many ways modern Old World mother. However, her absence from most of the novel (after her murder by a gentile gang) is more significant than the few scenes she inhabits. Writing as an older man with a capitalistic mindset, David cannot properly honour the loss of his only female role model. "The fact that my mother was dead and would never be alive again smote me with crushing violence," he writes lifelessly in one passage, while in another he confesses that being "the central figure of a great sensation" led to a "wild paroxysm of grief."[186] David's attitude becomes stranger as he becomes more successful (and more

[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Maxine S. Seller, "Defining Socialist Womanhood: The Women's Page of the 'Jewish Daily Forward' in 1919," *American Jewish History* 76, no.4 (1987): 419.
[186] Cahan, *Levinsky,* 53-4.

atheistic). After securing a sympathetic donation from a landsman, he writes that "it seemed … as though she had died so that I might arouse sympathy and make a good start in America."[187] As the novel progresses, he fails to memorialise his mother without mentioning his career:

> I was lured to the synagogue by a force against which my Spencerian agnosticism was powerless … And so, as I gazed at that huge candle commemorating the day when my mother gave her life for me, I felt as though its light was part of her spirit. The gentle flutter of its flame seemed to be speaking in the sacred whisper of a graveyard. "Mother dear! Mother dear!" my heart was saying. And then: "Thank God, mother dear! I own a large factory. I am a rich man and I am going to be married to the daughter of a fine Jew, a man of substance and Talmud."[188]

Nothing we know about Mrs. Levinsky suggests she would be proud of her son and his factory. His only connection to Judaism is through *knowing* (not being) a good Jew, and he only attends the memorial against his "better" (Spencerian) judgment. While David can observe his mother's candle and dictate various platitudes about it, later in the novel he refers to it in inverted commas as his "memorial candle," suggesting it no longer means anything to him.[189]

The less David resembles his mother then, the more unlikeable and unhappy he becomes. While this tribute is certainly subtle, it informs Yezierska's more realised study of motherhood in *Bread Givers*. Unlike Mrs. Levinsky, Shenah

[187] Ibid., 103. When the same landsman tells David he was already aware of his mother's murder, David writes: "I was thrilled to find myself in the lime-light of world-wide publicity. I almost felt like a hero" (Ibid., 100).
[188] Ibid., 389.
[189] Ibid., 392.

Smolinsky (mother of protagonist Sara) must adapt to American culture as well as navigate the last vestiges of Orthodox patriarchy. The latter social system appears in the conflict between religious texts (male) and household items (female). "When we came to America," Shenah recounts, "instead of taking along feather beds, and the samovar, and the brass pots and pans … Father made us carry his books."[190] While her husband's stubbornness stems from his religion—"my holy books always were, and always will be, the light of the world," he says—his naivety emboldens him.[191] The feather beds are useless because "it's always summer in America," while the kitchenware can be replaced with "new golden dishes to cook in."[192] Reb Smolinsky disregards his wife's earthly implements because he thinks salvation lies elsewhere: either with God, or in "the new golden country, where milk and honey flows free in the streets."[193] Shenah cannot hope to compete with these lofty constructs, and must play the deferential scholar's wife in a country with completely different ideals.

Reb Smolinsky aggravates Shenah's burden as he navigates his own gendered confusions. Although he seeks protection from earthly concerns like food, rent and childrearing, he quickly realises that men are the breadwinners in America. In his haste to prove his "quick head for business," he refuses to grant his wife the economic control she would have commanded in the *shtetl*.[194] "Woman!" he says, "stay in your place! … You're smart enough to bargain with the fish-peddler, but I'm the head of this family."[195] When a conman persuades the Smolinskys to buy a sham grocery store, Shenah repeatedly questions

[190] Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers*, 3rd ed. (New York: Persea Books), 8.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid.
[194] Ibid., 48.
[195] Ibid., 13.

whether the deal is legitimate ("Does he really ask only four hundred dollars for all this? … Why does he let go such a good thing?") and tries in vain to insert herself into the process.[196] However, the Reb succumbs to his breadwinning urge and buys the store himself. "Does a man of brains need a woman's stocking to hold his money for him?" he asks, oblivious to how common this scenario was in his homeland.[197] When Shenah reveals the store to be a forgery, stabbing a knife into "the fake wooden bottom" of a box of goods, she exhibits the matriarchal knack for distinguishing truth from facade.[198]

Yezierska thus writes sympathetically about Jewish mothers, and criticises Orthodox men for adopting the cavalier attitude of Western businessmen (all while fighting to retain their religious privileges).[199] The response of husband and wife to their own ruin in *Bread Givers* clearly indicates where her loyalties lie. Reb Smolinsky shows unwavering faith in free market social relations. "I trust people," he says, "the whole world is built on trust. The bank, the mines, the Government could never exist unless people trusted each other."[200] Shenah, meanwhile, appeals to "policeman, judges [and] courts of justice" for help, suggesting she is more civically-minded.[201] As Dana Mihailescu has suggested, Jewish men often stigmatised their wives for their pragmatism by accusing them of nagging.[202] Reb Smolinsky repeatedly chastises Shenah for "darkening the house with [her] worries," even quoting scripture to leverage his position.[203] "God sends always to the spinner his flax, and to the drinker his wine," he says, "and

[196] Ibid., 114.
[197] Ibid., 112.
[198] Ibid., 119.
[199] Ibid., 10.
[200] Ibid., 124.
[201] Ibid., 121.
[202] Mihailescu, "Sides," 59-60.
[203] Yezierska, *Bread,* 10.

to the woman who is looking for worries something to worry about."[204]

Despite these insults, Shenah still idolises her husband, seemingly against her better judgment.[205] In several scenes in *Bread Givers*, the Reb's Talmudic chanting transports his wife to a world without "beds, mattresses, boarders and dowries."[206] "Is there any music on earth like this?" she marvels, calling her husband a "pure, silken soul"[207] and "a man innocent as a child and harmless as an angel."[208] For some readers, these passages undermine Shenah's potential radicalism. Baum et al. posit that Yezierska "censures the misguided wives who encourage men to remain parasites by revering them,"[209] while Joyce Antler suggests that although Shenah is "more flexible and adaptable" than her husband, she too "belongs to the Old World."[210]

However, the reluctance that accompanies Mrs. Smolinsky's reveries suggests otherwise. Although the Reb's learning could grant her access to an intangible afterlife, his dominance of the home has dire material consequences: by refusing to move his books, he prevents his family from taking in a paid lodger. The tension between Shenah's role as family protector (physical) and servant to her husband (spiritual) explains why she pivots incongruously from "lick[ing] up Father's every little word, like honey" to threatening to throw his books into the street.[211] While she is conditioned to treat her husband as a spiritual superior, the physical world always engages a sudden reality check. "I'm willing to give up all my earthly needs for the wine of Heaven with you," she tells him, "but … God gave

[204] Ibid., 126.
[205] When the Reb calls her a "stone on [his] neck" (Ibid., 133) and a "steam whistle," Shenah retorts that he is "a madman who ought to be tied up with ropes" (Ibid., 126).
[206] Ibid., 16.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Ibid., 130.
[209] Baum et al., *Woman,* 199.
[210] Antler, *Never,* 28.
[211] Yezierska, *Bread,* 12-13.

us children. They have a life to live yet, here on Earth."[212] Like Mrs. Levinsky before her, Shenah ultimately chooses life over afterlife, and seeks true salvation in her earthly deeds.[213]

Nevertheless, Yezierska clearly considered proto-radical mothers to be a dying breed. At the apex of *Bread Givers*, Shenah Smolinsky meets her end in similarly tragic circumstances to Mrs. Levinsky:

> Was that grey, ghastly face Mother's? Only the eyes that gazed at me seemed alive. What sorrowful eyes! What unutterable sadness looked out from their silent depths! What worlds of pain lay dumb in that helpless gaze! … The eyes seemed agonized with longing to speak, but only tears came … I touched the sunken lids where the eyes had shone on me with such ineffable love. My hand withdrew, shuddering. Cold, icy Death. Mother no more.[214]

While this scene could signal the Jewish mother's extinction as a role model, Yezierska pointedly protects her in the following chapters. While "a chorus of wailing neighbours" remember Shenah as a good homemaker and a "virtuous wife" (but nothing else),[215] Sara Smolinsky tries to replicate the passion with which she "bargained at the pushcart over a penny."[216] As she matures into adulthood, Sara comes to view her estranged father as "a child who needed mothering,"[217] and reconciles with her past in a way David Levinsky cannot: by seeing the world

[212] Ibid., 12.
[213] Ibid., 13.
[214] Ibid., 251-3.
[215] Ibid., 254.
[216] Ibid., 251.
[217] Ibid., 285.

"through [her] Mother's eyes" and following her example.[218]

Thus, while Cahan and Yezierska advise young Jewish-Americans to honour their mothers, neither of their portraits are particularly optimistic. Shenah cannot overcome her husband's tyranny or escape the American proletariat (although her daughter can, thanks to her influence) while Mrs. Levinsky never reaches America in the first place. In these assimilatory texts, the mother's subjugation is less important than the lessons her children learn from it. This would change in *Jews Without Money,* where Jewish mothers are living, breathing proletarian agitators. By casting the "brave, beautiful" Katie as the heroine of his only novel, Michael Gold critiques his generation's tendency to view their parents as honourable anachronisms.[219] Katie is the proto-radical matriarch in her final form: a "workhorse" and "a *buttinsky*" who is "always engaged in some complicated ethical brawl."[220] She is the whole tenement's midwife, nurse and family peacemaker; providing "money, food, advice and the work of her hands" to anyone who needs it.[221] She also, unusually for a married woman in America, takes a job as a dishwasher:

> Her wages were seven dollars a week. She woke at five, cooked our breakfast at home, then had to walk a mile to her job. She came home at five-thirty, and made supper, cleaned the house, was busy on her feet until bedtime. It hurt my father's masculine pride to see his wife working for wages, but my mother liked it all; she was proud of earning money,

[218] Ibid.
[219] Michael Gold, Authors Note to *Jews Without Money* (Philadelphia: PublicAffairs, 2009), 11-12.
[220] Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (Philadelphia: PublicAffairs, 2009), 157-60.
[221] Ibid., 160.

and she liked her fights in the restaurant.[222]

Katie resembles the female breadwinner of the *shtetl* here*,* if she were transplanted into the Lower East Side.[223] Her mothering powers extend from home to work (where her colleagues call her "momma" and she argues with her boss "as if he were her child")[224] and out into the wider tenement community, where she cooks the meals, scrubs the floors and bathes the children of other wives who fall ill.[225]

While Katie is a strong working woman then, her home is also a sanctuary for any "human being in trouble," including local prostitutes.[226] In his didactic authorial voice, Gold reminds readers that these women were "starved into this profession" because "it was easier than being in a sweatshop."[227] By taking in these supposedly tainted strangers, Katie tacitly adopts the same view. "There was always some girl or other in our kitchen … warming herself at my mother's wonderful heart,"[228] Gold writes, synchronising Jewish motherhood with a more concrete leftist ideology (that is, treating prostitutes as "peasants who had been drafted into an army" rather than immoral or threatening people).[229] Like Cahan and Yezierska's matriarchs, Katie knows that helping people is more important than adhering to societal conventions.

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[222] Ibid., 246.
[223] Indeed, Katie's conforms to this stereotype in her early life. As Gold writes: "What a hard life she had led. She had known nothing but work since her tenth year. Her father had died then, and she was the oldest child of a large family. She went to work in a bakery, then did a man's labor on a farm. When she was eighteen, relatives gathered seventy five gulden, and sent her to America as the last hope for her family. She was to work here and send for her brothers and sisters." (Ibid., 159-60).
[224] Ibid., 246.
[225] Ibid., 160.
[226] Ibid., 165.
[227] Ibid., 34.
[228] Ibid., 30.
[229] Ibid.

This natural empathy extends to her German, Italian and Irish neighbours. Although history teaches Jews to treat Christians as "a great enemy, to be hated, feared and cursed," the weight of common experience dispels any ethnic tensions Katie might feel.[230] As Corinna Lee suggests, the "inter-ethnic language of commonality" she develops ("a polyglot jargon that was a mixture of Italian, Yiddish, Hungarian and English")[231] speaks to her willingness to abandon her conditioned prejudices and reach across ethnic lines.[232] "That woman used to gather mushrooms in the forest in Ireland. Just the way I gathered them in Hungary," Katie says, acknowledging that "she is a good woman … even if she is a Christian."[233] More than any male character in the novel then, Katie reflects her author's belief in the power of universal proletarian citizenship:

> In the Orient, where millions live and labor and die, peace has brooded in the air for centuries … Men have felt themselves part of a mystic group extending from the dim past into the unfolding future. Men have gathered peace from that bond and strength to support the sorrow of Life. From the solidarity learned in the family group, they have learned the solidarity of the universe.[234]

Katie's selfless actions throughout the novel suggest she has made the existential leap Gold refers to here. When Herman Gold becomes a foreman, Katie is less

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[230] Ibid., 164.
[231] Ibid., 167.
[232] Corinna Lee, "Never Forgetting the East Side: Michael Gold's 'Jews Without Money'," MELUS 40, no.2 (2015): 47-8.
[233] Gold, *Jews,* 171.
[234] Michael Gold, "Towards Proletarian Art," *Liberator* (February 1921) qtd. Michael Folsom, *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 67.

excited for him than sympathetic to the elderly man he replaces.[235] "It is not right that after working ten years for a boss, a man should be fired, a sick man with a family," she says.[236] Because the working class are all connected, Katie refuses to acknowledge any benefit she receives at the expense of her neighbours. That this infuriates her husband (who, as we have seen, personifies capitalist individualism) shows that Katie embodies the opposite moral and political code.[237]

Gold thus conceives of class consciousness as an evolved form of Jewish motherly love. While Katie is unflinchingly protective of her brood, she defends her neighbours just as strongly, feeding them and hosting them even though she is "too poor to be generous."[238] Many of her scenes can be read as microcosms of different socialistic principles. When she pawns her diamond ring—her family's "only negotiable capital"—to pay for her children's shoes, she personifies a system of collective ownership.[239] She also leads a rent strike, boasting that "the landlord is scared of me, I [can] see it in his eyes."[240] Using the metaphor of a bedbug infestation, Gold then places Katie on the frontlines of the revolution itself:

> Bedbugs are what people mean when they say: Poverty … The bedbugs were a torment to her. She doused the beds with kerosene, changed the sheets, sprayed the mattresses in an endless frantic war with the bedbugs … The bedbugs lived and bred in the rotten walls of the tenement, with the rats, fleas, roaches; the whole rotten structure needed to be torn

[235] Gold, *Jews,* 213.
[236] Ibid.
[237] In response to Katie's endless charity, Herman says: "One has to be selfish in America … It is dog eat dog over here. But you, you neglect your own family to help every passing stranger" (Ibid., 162).
[238] Ibid., 74.
[239] Ibid., 157.
[240] Ibid., 252.

down.[241]

These are the only scenes in *Jews Without Money* (other than Mikey's socialist conversion) that reflect Gold's radical politics, and they all revolve around Katie. The male firebrand he envisioned in the *Masses* never appears, and instead, he converts the protective Jewish mother into an altruistic champion of the working class.[242] "Momma! Momma!" Gold writes, "I must remain faithful to the poor because I cannot be faithless to you! … The world must be made gracious for the poor! Momma, you taught me that!"[243] Thus, while Cahan and Yezierska's mother figures are merely rebellious, Katie embodies a genuine political position, and provides a pertinent example of proletarian citizenship.

The proto-radical mother thus evolves as a character type throughout these novels. By subverting the *Yiddishe momme* motif, these writers collectively acknowledge that women held significant political and economic power in both Europe and America. While Cahan's mother figure only appears in a few scenes, her death sets David Levinsky's unfulfilling journey in motion, and establishes radical motherly love as a counterpoint to heartless capitalism. Yezierska's matriarch stubbornly fights for agency throughout *Bread Givers,* resisting her husband's attempts at religious and economic coercion. While these novels imply that proto-radical motherhood cannot withstand the stresses of migration, Gold uses the heroic figure of Katie to suggest the contrary: that maternal love can not only survive, but extend beyond ethnic and familial lines to include the entire working class. By placing Katie at the centre of his leftist critique, Gold confirms what Cahan and Yezierska only hint at: that Jewish mothers are best able to

[241] Ibid., 72.
[242] See Gold, "Go Left," 4.
[243] Ibid., 158.

observe the injustices of capitalism, but least able to intervene to correct them.

Chapter 3:

"All that I know of life I learned in the tenement":

Youth and Education from the School to the Street

> Wild with all that was choked in me since I was born, my eyes burned into my father's eyes.
>
> "My will is as strong as yours. I'm going to live my own life. Nobody can stop me. I'm not from the old country. I'm American!"
>
> I leaped back and dashed for the door. The Old World had struck its last on me.[244]

In this pivotal scene from *Bread Givers,* a Jewish family cracks under the pressure of their competing urges. Having examined one side of this generational upheaval in the last two chapters, I will now turn to the plight of younger Jews, particularly their attempts to receive a fulfilling education.

While Cahan and Yezierska presume that assimilation can be taught in the classroom, Gold locates true enlightenment in the day-to-day battle of life in New York's tenements. This thematic pivot from school to street, I argue, allowed Gold to pioneer an anti-bourgeois version of the immigrant ascension story, one that connected the liberal tradition inhabited by Cahan and Yezierska with the radical proletarian movement of the 1930s. By framing *Jews Without Money* as response to earlier literary endorsements of public schooling, this chapter calls into question the claim that Gold was primarily a proletarian novelist. As we'll see, his work was a crucial point of political and creative experimentation that connected the pre-Depression era with the following decade.

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[244] Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers*, 3rd ed. (New York: Persea Books, 2003), 138.

My analysis expands on Barbara Foley's argument that *Jews Without Money* repurposes the typically bourgeois Bildungsroman form into something "expressly didactic, teaching not the fixity of the bourgeois world, but its ripeness for revolution."[245] By comparing Cahan, Yezierska and Gold's textual treatments of education, I aim to illuminate this formal evolution in greater detail. Both *The Rise of David Levinsky* and *Bread Givers* can be considered archetypal examples of the immigrant Bildungsroman.[246] In *Levinsky,* schools and colleges replace the church as the dominant sphere of Jewish intellectual belonging. Instruction in empirical subjects like mathematics, science and geography breaks the Talmudic monopoly on enlightenment, and invariably helps young immigrants find their footing in America. Anzia Yezierska shares much of this sentiment. Attending night school and college endows Sara Smolinsky with an "impersonal, scientific attitude of mind" that neutralises her Orthodox family's lingering patriarchal norms.[247] Nevertheless, while education grants her material comfort, Sara never truly resolves the existential conflict between her bourgeois and proletarian sensibilities.

Michael Gold's solution to this liberal guilt was a radical one. In *Jews Without Money,* embracing the visceral reality of the ghetto nullifies America's dangerous bourgeois temptations (particularly the urge to civilise yourself through education). In scenes that encapsulate Gold's virulent anti-intellectualism, Mikey Gold learns infinitely more than he ever would in a classroom by roaming the

[245] Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction*, *1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 284.
[246] See: David Green, "The Price of Success: Use of the Bildungsroman Plot in Abraham Cahan's 'The Rise of David Levinsky'," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 12 (1993): 19-24. Green argues convincingly that *The Rise of David Levinsky* is a Bildungsroman, writing that the novel introduces into the genre "the issue of the inferiority felt by a person from an ethnic and religious minority group, during the process of assimilation into the mainstream culture" (Ibid., 19). As we will see, this claim can also be made about Yezierska's *Bread Givers.*
[247] Yezierska, *Bread,* 226.

streets of the Lower East Side. Shifting the sphere of Jewish (and working-class) liberation from the school to the street lays the groundwork for *Jews Without Money*'s revolutionary climax: Mikey's refusal to enrol in high school and his related conversion to socialism. By stripping Cahan and Yezierska's "rise" of its association with capitalism, Gold thus began the process of establishing an expressly ideological literary form.[248] As both an embryonic proletarian novel and an adapted immigrant ascension story, *Jews Without Money* stands as a point of continuity between liberal and radical creative traditions.

While my analysis contributes to a wealth of scholarship discussing education in Cahan and Yezierska's work,[249] it more importantly questions some enduring criticisms of Gold's artistic practice. Negative critiques of *Jews Without Money* often revolve around the abruptness of its ending, which several scholars frame as a reflection of Gold's dogmatism and lack of literary skill. This chapter treats the novel's conclusion as the logical, political result of Mikey's tenement education, and proof that Gold was adapting a pre-existing literary form. As Foley suggests, *Jews Without Money* (like both the Bildungsroman and the proletarian novel) reflects in its structure "the felt need to end the narrative with the achievement of a satisfactory and stable identity."[250] Acknowledging these nuances dispels the notion that Gold shoehorned his ideology into the novel, and suggests he was boldly experimenting with supposedly conflicted themes and structures. This chapter thus contributes to a recent strain of more sympathetic

[248] Foley, *Representations,* 284.
[249] See, for example: Dan Shiffman, "The Halo of Education in Abraham Cahan's 'The Imported Bridegroom' and *The Rise of David Levinsky*," *Shofar* 33, no.1 (2014): 83-100; Lori Jirousek-Falls, "Abraham Cahan and Jewish Immigrant Education: For Men and Women," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 26 (2007): 35-47; Chip Rhodes, "Education as Liberation: The Case of Anzia Yezierska's 'Bread Givers'," *Science and Society* 57, no.3 (1993): 294-312; Dan Shiffman, "The Kindling Breath of Another Mind: Anzia Yezierska's Critique of American Education," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 34, no.2 (2015): 257-273.
[250] Foley, *Representations,* 316-7.

Gold scholarship by treating *Jews Without Money* as an influential and canonical Jewish text.[251]

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In his sociological study of American religion *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1955), Will Herberg posited that an unbridgeable divide separated second-generation Jews from their parents. While immigrants arriving from Europe wanted to protect their cultural habits, their children were "anxious to rid themselves of the burden of immigrant foreignness."[252] "The moment they entered school … [and] were let out on the street to play with children of other tongues and origins," Herberg writes, immigrant children "began to escape the ethnic-immigrant life of their parents."[253] In his 1902 history of Jewish New York, Hutchins Hapgood (in the paternalistic language of the time) detects these forces at work, particularly in the secular public schools young Jews were required by law to attend:

> The boy becomes acquainted in the school reader with fragments of writings on all subjects, with a little mathematics, a little history. His instruction, in the interests of a liberal non-sectarianism, is entirely secular. English becomes his most familiar language. He achieves a growing comprehension and sympathy with the independent, free, rather

[251] See, for example: Cynthia Port, "Violent and Sentimental by Turns": The Gendered Discourses of Mike Gold," Shofar 32, no.2 (2014): 88-115; Corinna Lee, "Never Forgetting the East Side: Michael Gold's 'Jews Without Money'," MELUS 40, no.2 (2015): 30-52; & Patrick Chura, *Michael Gold: The People's Writer* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020).
[252] Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1960), 18.
[253] Ibid., 28.

> sceptical spirit of the American boy … The orthodox Jewish influences, still at work upon him, are rapidly weakened. He grows to look upon the ceremonial life at home as rather ridiculous. His old parents, who speak no English, he regards as "greenhorns."[254]

Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* stands as the most enduring novel to depict this process of education and acculturation. Working initially as a tutor in a New York night school, Cahan experienced firsthand how learning English and understanding American civic affairs emancipated young Jewish immigrants.[255] He then dedicated much of his work to endorsing a secular education in American institutions, "like a father thrusting a child into the water in the hope it will be forced to swim."[256]

This ethic extends into *Levinsky*, where the titular character abandons his religion and enrols in public evening classes. Bender, David's instructor, is a shining example of assimilation: a German with an American mother who has studied "detail after detail of American life."[257] His inflected "nasal twang" and "over-dignified drawl" resemble that of a distinguished Yankee or founding father,[258] and he delivers lessons with the lofty tone of a Protestant clergyman.[259] David learns English by imitating these "utterly un-Yiddish" mannerisms, and admires how his teacher "fought his way through City College" to shake his

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[254] Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of The Ghetto* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967 [1902]): 23-4.
[255] Shiffman, *Halo*, 85.
[256] Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* [ebook version] (New York: OpenRoad Integrated Media, 2017), 223.
[257] Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 135.
[258] Ibid., 130.
[259] Adam Sol, "Searching for the Middle Ground in Abraham Cahan's 'The Rise of David Levinsky' and Sidney Nyburg's 'The Chosen People'," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 16 (1997): 9.

greenhornhood.[260] Cahan suggests here that progress stems from assimilated Jews—particularly teachers, writers and other thought leaders—radiating their knowledge to the unassimilated.[261] The classroom provides the perfect space for this process of performance and mimicry.

The act of learning itself also affirms anglo-American values. When David memorises words like "dil-i-gence, perr-severence, [and] tenacity," he internalises but also embodies their meaning.[262] Cahan thus considered education and assimilation to be symbiotic processes: the more you learn, the more like "the genuine article" you become.[263] Interestingly however, he couched these ideas in religious language, suggesting he thought secular tutelage complemented a broader sense of Jewishness. David enjoys his classes because they indulge his Talmudic desire for "book-learning," and he attends them with "religious devotion" and "divine pleasure."[264] In a section of the novel titled "My Temple," Cahan then lingers on the image of The College of the City of New York (CCNY) as a house of worship:

> I would pause and gaze at its red, ivy-clad walls, mysterious high windows, humble spires … My old religion had gradually fallen to pieces,

[260] Cahan, *Levinsky,* 135.
[261] Ibid., 130. Cahan saw himself as one of these thought leaders. In his biography, he writes of his time as a Jewish night school instructor: "Twelve- and fourteen-year olds could not read English properly; they were weak in grammar and arithmetic. I was deeply touched by their plight, and for this reason I spent more time at the yeshiva than my agreement called for. I could feel the warmth and appreciation in their responses, my own devotion to my pupils grew stronger. Most of them were able youngsters. They went for my instruction in the same way a thirsty man rushes to a spring of fresh water … The job provided me with a few dollars and with a lot of pleasure. The boys were earnest in their work. I taught them as if they were my own children." Abraham Cahan, *The Educaction of Abraham Cahan,* trans. Leon Stein, Abraham P. Conan & Lynn Davison (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America*,* 1969), 372-3.
[262] Cahan, *Levinsky*, 135.
[263] Ibid., 168.
[264] Ibid., 129-133.

> and if its place was taken by something else, if there was something that appealed to the better man in me, to what was purest in my thoughts and most sacred in my emotions, that something was the red, church-like structure on the southeast corner of Lexington Avenue and Twenty-third street.[265]

The suggestion here is that, in America, the school replaces the synagogue. While this was a worrying development for devout Jews, Cahan depicts the trade-off as worthwhile for everyone else. "One of the finest qualities of the Jewish people," he wrote in *The Forward*, is "our love for education, for intellectual effort."[266] Although college instruction threatened Orthodox Judaism by incubating secular ideas*,* it also indulged a natural curiosity about the world which, for Cahan, was just as important and unique to Jewish life. Conveniently, this position circumvented the criticism that educated (and therefore assimilated) Jews were somehow less Jewish. They were simply transitioning towards a more modern, secular brand of Judaism; one which placed greater emphasis on their intellectual rather than spiritual gifts.

In this context, David Levinsky's description of CCNY as "the synagogue of [his] new life" appears less sacrilegious.[267] If study is the successor to worship in America, college is the successor to the church. This was a tangible phenomenon in the case of CCNY, which was headquartered close to the Lower East Side and offered free tuition at a time when (often unofficial) quotas barred Jews from enrolling in many public and private schools. Observing that proletarian

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[265] Ibid., 168-9.
[266] Abraham Cahan, inaugural lead article in the *Jewish Daily Forward* (March 16th 1902), qtd. in Ronald Sanders,*The Downtown Jews* (New York: New American Library, 1969), 213.
[267] Cahan, *Levinsky,* 169.

Jewish boys make up the majority of the college faculty, David writes that he feels "bound to that college with the ties of kinship."[268] His synagogue, in contrast, evokes "an air of desolation."[269] "Oh, it is not the old home," one worshipper says, "over there people go to the same synagogue all their lives, while here one is constantly on the move."[270] For Cahan, CCNY provided a space of intellectual belonging for New York Jews amidst this hectic churn, just as the church had in years gone by.[271]

Nevertheless, David never actually attends the college himself. The trappings of a business career prove too hard to ignore, and he spends the novel ruing his decision to reject his "noblest enthusiasm."[272] Speaking as an older man, he pinpoints his hesitancy to enrol in CCNY as a tragic sliding doors moment:

> There are moments when I regret my whole career, when my very success seems to be a mistake. I think that I was born for a life of intellectual interest. I was certainly brought up for one. The day when that accident turned my mind from college to business seems to be the most unfortunate day in my life. I think that I should be much happier as a scientist or writer, perhaps … That's the way I feel every time I pass the abandoned old building of the City College.[273]

By placing his protagonist "at the gates of a great world of knowledge" but denying

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[268] Ibid.
[269] Ibid., 96.
[270] Ibid., 214.
[271] As David writes: "The East Side was full of poor Jews —wage earners, peddlers, grocers, salesmen, insurance agents— who would beggar themselves to give their children a liberal education. Then, too, thousands of our working-men attended public evening school, while many others took lessons at home. The ghetto rang with a clamour for knowledge" (Ibid., 156).
[272] Ibid., 216.
[273] Ibid., 529.

him access to it, Cahan confirms that an intellectual life is a happy one.[274] Moreover, as Dan Shiffman has suggested, Levinsky reveres the concept of a higher education more frequently as the novel progresses, often "to negotiate whatever feelings of guilt may be plaguing him, to earn favors and influence, and to enhance his mystique as an admired, erudite businessman."[275] David's interest in Darwin and Spencer, for example, only flourishes because their works "flatter [his] vanity as one of the 'fittest'."[276] Given what we know about Cahan, we can interpret Levinsky's final sadness as a punishment for rejecting (and then bastardising) the lettered life.

In *Bread Givers,* Anzia Yezierska replicates Cahan's optimism about the power of education to elevate working-class Jews. After protagonist Sara Smolinsky's father marries her sisters off to grotesque husbands, she enrols in teacher training at an idyllic, suburban public college. As with David Levinsky, an epiphany reveals a new potential life to her, one in which she is educated and (therefore) affluent:

> *Ach!* Only to make myself somebody great … And then it flashed to me. The story from the Sunday paper. A girl —slaving away in the shop. Her hair was already turning gray, and nothing had ever happened to her. Then suddenly she began to study in the night school, then college. And worked and studied, on and on, till she became a teacher in the schools … I saw myself sitting back like a lady at my desk, the children, their eyes on me … It was like looking up to the top of the highest skyscraper while

[274] Ibid., 282.
[275] Shiffman, "Halo," 92.
[276] Cahan, *Levinsky*, 283.

down in the gutter.[277]

At first, this new identity as a teacher-in-waiting neutralises Reb Smolinsky's claims to his daughter's freedom. "Now, when I begin to have a little use from you, you want to run away and live for yourself?" he says, to which Sara responds: "It's enough that mother and the others lived for you."[278] Sara's parents repeatedly scold her for deserting them, while her sisters condemn her for rejecting the life of a married "plain home girl."[279] The image she conjures of herself leading a class of (somebody else's) children is thus particularly evocative: while her family see the *teacherin* as a "dried up old maid,"[280] Sara sees the "inspiring sight" of a successful woman who is not necessarily a wife or mother.[281] Throughout the novel, male and female teachers emerge as compelling examples not just of social mobility, but of strength, independence and intellectual autonomy. In Sara's eyes, they are "superior creatures."[282]

Some scholars use these scenes to frame Yezierska's rejection of Judaism as the novel's overriding message. As Ellen Golub argues: "It is no wonder, as Yezierska sees it, that Jews cast off the old patriarchal world … It is a world controlled by men … who hypocritically torment, deceive and deny all those in their greedy power."[283] Importantly however, Yezierska saw intellectual study as

[277] Yezierska, *Bread,* 155.
[278] Ibid., 137.
[279] As one suitor remarks: "I like a plain home girl that knows how to help save the dollar, and cook a good meal, and help me yet in the shop." Ibid., 45.
[280] Ibid., 205.
[281] Ibid., 269. Although Sara's sisters lead miserable lives in servitude of their husbands, they nonetheless weaponise the image of the "old maid" to condemn her for choosing a different path. "I've set out to do something and I'm going to do it, even if it kills me," Sara says in one scene, with one of her sisters responding: "It may not kill you. But if you're left an old maid, it's worse" (Ibid., 177).
[282] Ibid., 269.
[283] Ellen Golub, "Eat Your Heart Out: The Fiction of Anzia Yezierska," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 3, no.3 (1983): 56.

a particularly Jewish pursuit. Sara Smolinsky resents her father's narrow-mindedness, but admits that her appetite to be educated stems ultimately from him.[284] "If I ever amount to something," she writes, "is it not his spirit burning in me?"[285] While her classes in geography, science and geometry alienate her from the Jewish deistic worldview, she resembles her father closely in her "exalted reverence for the teacher."[286] Both Cahan and Yezierska's criticisms of Orthodox Judaism are thus ambiguous enough to allow them to suggest, without contradiction, that a Jewish upbringing lays the groundwork for a strenuous secular education.

Nevertheless, while Sara Smolinsky sees the logic in this arrangement, her family do not. "She's only good to the world, not to her father," says the Reb,[287] while one of her sisters remarks: "Was that what they taught you in college, to turn your back on your own people?"[288] To fully reject the trajectory prescribed for her from birth, Sara must cut her family off entirely:

> I had to give up the dreams of any understanding from Father … Knowledge was what I wanted more than anything else in the world. I had made my choice. And now I had to pay the price. So this is what it cost, daring to follow the urge in me. No lover. No family. No friend. I must go on and on. And I must go on —alone.[289]

As Herberg theorised, the elder generation invariably feel betrayed by their

[284] Yezierska, *Bread,* 269.
[285] Ibid., 286.
[286] Ibid., 269.
[287] Ibid., 248.
[288] Ibid., 246-8.
[289] Ibid., 208.

children's desires. Twice in *Bread Givers,* Sara ignores her family's pleas to return home. "I could see you later," she says, "but I can't go to college later. Think of all the years I wasted in the shop instead of school, and I must catch up all that lost time."[290] Intriguingly, Sara uses the language of migration here to describe her rise. "I felt like Columbus starting out for the other end of the earth," she writes, "I felt like the pilgrim fathers who had left their homeland and all their kin behind them and trailed out in search of the New World."[291] Just as her parents left Europe, so must Sara leave her parents. College is the new frontier, and appears as irresistibly alluring as America did to her ancestors.

As the novel progresses, Sara replaces her family with academic role models. Cripplingly aware of her father's ignorance, she longs to "mingl[e] every day with the inspired minds of great professors and educated higher ups."[292] Encountering the "cool steadiness" of the college dean in the urbane surroundings of his private library,[293] she notices that "with the older men I could walk and talk as a person."[294] The dean considers Sara an inspiring example of hard-won success, and (in an extension of Yezierska's migrant metaphor) compares her to his immigrant grandmother. "She had to chop down trees to build a shelter for herself and her children," he says.[295] He then admits: "If I had to contend with the wilderness I'd perish with the unfit. But you, child—your place is with the pioneers. And you're going to survive."[296] That these words of encouragement come from a teacher—indeed, the boss of all teachers—seems significant. By showing Sara the respect she craves from her family, the dean encourages her to view her traumas

[290] Ibid., 171.
[291] Ibid., 209.
[292] Ibid., 184.
[293] Ibid., 217.
[294] Ibid., 231.
[295] Ibid., 232.
[296] Ibid., 232.

as "treasure chests of insight" rather than "privations and losses."[297] As David Levinsky discovers in Bender's classes, understanding the world and your place in it catalyses the process of social mobility.

Nevertheless, Sara's time in education is far from painless. While she excels academically, her classmates ostracise her. Speaking of another student, she remarks: "How quickly her eyes sized me up! It was not an unkind glance. And yet, it said more plainly than words, 'From where do you come? How did you get in here?'"[298] For Yezierska (who herself struggled to shed the "Sweatshop Cinderella" tag)[299] this is the terminal fate of the ambitious young Jew: feeling caught between where you've come from and where you want to go. "It was worse than being ignored," Sara writes, "I simply didn't belong."[300] Although she does eventually become a teacher, Sara cannot shut out the blaring din of the New York tenements:[301]

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[297] Ibid., 223. This is also true of Sara's college instructor, Mr. Edman, whose psychology course introduces her to "a new world of reason and 'objectivity'." (Ibid., 226).

[298] Ibid., 213-4. For a thorough analysis of Sara and her sisters' attempts to "pass" as American by changing their dress, see Meredith Goldsmith, "Dressing, Passing, and Americanizing: Anzia Yezierska's Sartorial Fictions," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 16 (1997): 34-45.

[299] As Babbette Inglehart writes: "Writing her first story at the age of 33, after years of poverty and loneliness, struggling to educate herself in English she won acclaim for an early story, "The Fat of the Land" (1919). Within two years, she had published her first volume, Hungry Hearts (1920), a collection of sketches and short stories of immigrant life in the NY ghetto. At this point in her life, a crucial turning, she was whisked off to Hollywood by Samuel Goldwyn, she was given more money and luxury than she had ever deramed of, and her book was turned into a movie. Offered a fantastic sum to stay on and write, this "Immigrant Cinderella" or "Queen of the Ghetto" (as the publicists labelled her) found that her creative energies could not flower here. It was the poverty and familiarity of the Old World slums that she needed, and it was to these that she returned to write the rest of over novels between 1921 and 1932. Financially independent, she was able to move further uptown and to achieve the cleanliness, privacy, and order that she desperately needed to continue to write. But her emotional roots and her creativity were nourished by the ghetto from which she could [p.3] never ultimately wander very far." Babbette Inglehart, "Daughters of Loneliness: Anzia Yezierska and The Immigrant Woman Writer," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 1, no.2 (1975): 2-3.

[300] Yezierska, *Bread,* 219.

[301] Privacy becomes something of an obsession for Sara in the novel. After earning enough money rent her own room, she writes: "In the morning, in the evening, when I sat down to meals, I enjoyed myself as with grandest company. […] The routine with which I kept clean my precious privacy, my beautiful aloneness, was all sacred to me." Ibid., 241.

> Maybe it was the terrible racket that was muddling my brain. Phonographs and pianolas blared against each other. Voices gossiping and jabbering across the windows. Wailing children. The yowling shrieks of two alley cats … The jarring clatter tore me by the hair, stretched me out of my skin, and grated under my teeth. I felt like one crucified in a torture pit of noise.[302]

While Yezierska admits here that knowledge alone cannot sever an immigrant's attachment to their heritage, Sara maintains that without her education she "might have remained forever an over-emotional lunatic."[303] While her early life furnishes her with a few teachable moments, college is where she learns to truly survive. In terms of Sara's intellectual journey then, *Bread Givers* follows the Bildungsroman trajectory, even if it uneasily resolves the more existential question of immigrant selfhood.

Juxtaposing these scenes with the opening lines of *Jews Without Money* reveals how dissimilar Gold and Yezierska were in their educational philosophies. While Sara Smolinsky's success comes despite the cacophony around her, Gold pays tribute to the Lower East Side as an enriching place to grow up:

> Always these faces at the tenement windows. The street never failed them. It never slept. It roared like a sea. It exploded like fireworks … Women screamed, dogs barked and copulated. Babies cried. A parrot cursed … Excitement, dirt, fighting, chaos! The sound of my street lifted

[302] Ibid., 164.
[303] Ibid., 226.

like the blast of a great carnival or catastrophe. The noise was always in my ears. Even in sleep I could hear it; I can hear it now.[304]

By emphasising his deep connection to his past, Gold counteracts Cahan and Yezierska's preoccupation with escaping the Lower East Side. His protagonist Mikey is an unapologetic product of the tenement, a "little savage and lover of the street."[305] In *Jews Without Money's* opening line, Mikey states firmly what "immigrant blues" narrators typically take decades to learn: "I can never forget the East Side street where I lived as a boy."[306] That David Levinsky utters the opposite phrase—"I can never forget the days of my misery"—emphasises the thematic switch Gold was trying to make. Although pessimistic tales of unrequited connection were in vogue, he refused to abandon what he saw as the virtues of working class life.[307]

This ethic can be traced back to "Towards Proletarian Art" (1921), the cultural manifesto that birthed the proletarian novel.[308] As Gold writes in Whitmanesque prose: "The tenement is in my blood. When I think it is the tenement thinking … I am not an individual; I am all that the tenement group poured into me."[309] The idea that this lifeblood could be neutralised through education was heretical: "Why should we artists born in tenements go beyond them for our expression?" Gold asks.[310] These ideas reflect Gold's anti-intellectual

[304] Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (Philadelphia: PublicAffairs, 2009), 13-14.
[305] Ibid., 37.
[306] Ibid., 13-4.
[307] Cahan, *Levinsky,* 530.
[308] As Gold's biographer Michael Folsom writes, "Towards Prolaterian Art" "was the first significant call in this country for the creation of a distinctly a militantly working-class culture. The American currency of the term "proletarian literature" can be dated from the publication of this article." Michael Folsom, *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 62.
[309] Michael Gold, "Towards Proletarian Art," *Liberator* (February 1921) qtd. in Folsom, *Anthology,* 64-5.
[310] Ibid., 65.

streak, which blossomed after he dropped out of Harvard College.[311] Because Gold could not afford to pursue his education beyond a couple of terms, he began to view the intellectual class as gatekeepers of knowledge and elitist agents of capitalism.[312] This imagined aristocracy hoarded all the material and cultural capital, but could only engage with a bourgeois facsimile of existence. Their artistic representatives—genteel writers, particularly literary realists—were too focussed on establishing "objective" standards of beauty to write anything truly real. They had become "contemptuous of the people" and suspicious of their experiences, and deliberately sidestepped writing about "the primitive monotony of life."[313] For Gold, this was unacceptable. Art was about capturing life*,* not escaping from it. Intellectualising or attempting to perfect the process of cultural production was stifling: it imprisoned artists in a "vacuum of logic."[314] Gold's response was to write solely about the Jewish Lower East Side. Because his life was the tenement, his art needed to be the tenement too.

In this context, liberal disciples of the American classroom embodied everything Gold despised. "The boy in the tenement must not learn their art," he wrote, "he must stay in the tenement and create a new and truer one there."[315] As his most tangible attempt to institute this creative practice, *Jews Without Money* reads as a deliberately messy and imperfect piece of life writing. In keeping with his suspicion of calculated realism, Gold uses a semi-chronological patchwork structure that imitates the unevenness of memory.[316] Every fragmented scene in

[311] Folsom, *Anthology,* 1972, 177.
[312] For detail of Gold's time at Harvard and its enduring impact on his cultural worldview, see Chapter 3 of Chura, *People's*, 65-94; & Michael Folsom, "The Education of Michael Gold," in *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, ed. David Madden (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press,1979), 222-252
[313] Gold, *Towards,* 66.
[314] Ibid., 65.
[315] Ibid., 66.
[316] Brooks E. Hefner, *The Word on the Streets: the American Language of Vernacular Modernism* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 135.

the novel encapsulates the beauty and spontaneity of "real life" as Gold saw it (that is, life on the tenement streets) and rejects the artificial forms of life found in the home, the church, and most importantly, the classroom.[317]

Compared to the visceral reality of the street, the classroom is presented as a dead, lifeless space, an institutional method of avoidance. "School is a jail for children," Mikey writes, "one's crime is youth, and the jailers punish one for it."[318] In contrast to Yezierska's angelic *teacherin*, Mikey's public school teachers are "irritable, starched old maid[s]" and "stupid, proper, unimaginative despots."[319] His *cheder* schoolmasters are all "ignorant as a rat."[320] Like the theoretical elites of "Towards Proletarian Art," the intellectual authority figures in *Jews Without Money* don't seem to truly *know* anything. They exist in a hermetic, manufactured world that bears no relation to reality:

> Each week at public school there was an hour called Nature Study. The old maid teacher fetched from a dark closet a collection of banal objects: birdnests, cornstalks, minerals, autumn leaves and other poor withered corpses. On these she lectured tediously, and bade us admire Nature. What an insult. We twisted on our benches, and ached for the outdoors. It was as if a starving bum were offered snapshots of food, and expected to feel grateful.[321]

By this logic, every second a tenement child spends in an American school is a betrayal of his roots. Mikey's world could not be more different from the artificial

[317] Foley, *Representations,* 312.
[318] Gold, *Jews,* 36.
[319] Ibid.
[320] Ibid., 65.
[321] Ibid., 40-1.

one his teachers live in. He knows intuitively that nature is not taxidermy or diorama, it is the distended animal corpses floating in the "sun-spangled open sewer" of the East River.[322]

Thus, while Gold suggests that public schooling cannot free the working classes from their impoverishment, he proposes a novel alternative: becoming a lifelong student at the "East Side school of crime and poverty."[323] Throughout *Jews Without Money,* Mikey's picaresque adventures strategically impart a life lesson or initiate a rite of passage. A cast of perverts, vagrants and gamblers teach him to be wary of strangers;[324] prostitutes "expos[ing] their horrible underthings"[325] reveal the "profundities of sex";[326] his fraternal street gang ("the Young Avengers of Chrystie Street") tap into the redemptive power of play by creating rich imaginary worlds.[327] Mikey's role models are not teachers or Rabbis, but enlightened street urchins like Harry the Pimp:

> He wore good clothes, clean linen, and smoked good cigars. He was mellow, conservative and fatherly. Next to Jake Wolf, the saloon keeper, he was our pattern of American success … His favourite advice to the young and unsuccessful was to learn English. "America is a wonderful country," Harry would say, "really a wonderful country. One can make much money here, but first one must learn to speak English … Look at

[322] Ibid., 39.
[323] Ibid., 26.
[324] In one scene, the entire tenement joins forces to beat a local pervert to death. "Never would Joey or I quite trust a stranger again," Mikey writes. (Ibid., 59-60).
[325] Ibid., 179.
[326] Ibid., 46.
[327] As Mikey writes: "My gang seized upon one of these Delancey Street lots, and turned it, with the power of imagination, into a vast western plain. We buried pirate treasure there, and built snow forts. We played football and baseball through the long beautiful days. We dug caves, and with Peary explored the North Pole … It was there I vomited over my first tobacco … It was there I first came to look at the sky … No place will ever seem as wonderful again" (Ibid., 45-6).

> me; if I hadn't learned English I myself would still be buried in a shop. But I struggled—I fought—I learned English." It was Harry the Pimp who gave me my first book to read.[328]

Harry's resemblance to Bender, David Levinsky's night school instructor, suggests Gold was parodying earlier Jewish writers for aligning too closely with the intelligentsia. What Bender learns at CCNY, Harry learns from "years of meaningful pain" on the Lower East Side.[329] For Gold, this was a far more honest way to become educated, and a more democratised one too.

In this sense, *Jews Without Money* strips the Bildungsroman trajectory of its bourgeois prescriptions for success. This is one half of Gold's adapted immigrant rise: an enlightened acceptance of who (and where) you really are, freed from the constant state of yearning America seems to induce. Nevertheless, there still remains the problem of the rat race itself: its fraudulence, its injustice, its seductiveness. When Mikey's parents pressure him to follow the well-trodden path—high school, then college, then a white collar job—the archetypal generational divide reappears. "You, Mikey, will be a doctor!" his father says, "it is better to have wisdom than to have money."[330] Mikey's English teacher echoes these words, sensing the potential Sara Smolinsky in him. "It would be a pity for you to go into a factory," she says, "I have never seen better English compositions than yours."[331] However, by forging his identity in the "the free enormous circus of the East Side," Mikey unburdens himself from any desire to join the intellectual

[328] Ibid., 29.
[329] Gold, *Towards,* 65.
[330] Gold, *Jews,* 110.
[331] Ibid., 303-4. Typically, Gold manages to reveal Mikey's intelligence without extolling the virtues of academia more broadly. "I had been a precocious pupil in the public school, winning honours not by study, but by a kind of intuition," he writes (Ibid., 303).

elite.[332] Embracing a sense of proletarian class consciousness, he achieves a more radical form of enlightenment:

> A man on an East Side soap-box, one night, proclaimed that out of the despair, melancholy and helpless rage of millions, a world movement had been born to abolish poverty. I listened to him. O workers' Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah … O Revolution, that taught me to think, to struggle and to live. O great Beginning![333]

While this scene is brief, my analysis here suggests it is not as "tacked on" as some scholars claim.[334] Marcus Klein writes that Mikey's epiphany falls flat because Gold does not include "the specifics of political education" in the rest of the novel.[335] In a similar vein, Michael Denning writes that "if one reads the novel … as a novel of education, the conversion of Mikey seems unlikely, a flaw of craft and aesthetic."[336] However, as the designated ideology of workers, socialism is the political extension of the ghetto Gold identifies with. That Mikey finds true enlightenment on a street corner—not in a classroom—aligns perfectly with the street education he receives throughout the novel, and is foregrounded by his rejection of high school to join the mass of labourers "tramping the streets" of New York.[337] By staying in the tenement and fighting on its behalf, Mikey finds

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[332] Ibid., 38.
[333] Ibid., 309.
[334] Foley, *Representations*, 312.
[335] Marcus Klein, *Foreigners: the Making of American Literature 1900-1940* (London: University of Chicago Press), 186.
[336] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 249.
[337] Gold, *Jews,* 306.

fulfilment outside the American mainstream, just as Gold himself sought to do.[338]

Jews Without Money thus radically revises the immigrant ascension narrative. By breaking the well-established connection between education and social mobility, Gold formulated a way station between Cahan and Yezierska's fiction and the proletarian novel of the 1930s: an immigrant Bildungsroman that better reflected the realities of working class life.[339] As Barbara Foley writes, this unique literary hybrid sits "poised between bourgeois and revolutionary discursive traditions."[340] While Gold's principles of cultural production invite the claim that *Jews Without Money* was written to convert its readers to socialism (like later proletarian texts), the novel's pastoral nostalgia and ascension structure recalls the work of earlier, more politically liberal Jewish writers.[341]

The crucial point of experimentation between these movements came when Gold shifted the site of Jewish enlightenment from the school to the street. In Cahan and Yezierska's novels, those who pursue a secular education in American institutions invariably appear happier than those who do not. Conversely, *Jews Without Money*'s Mikey learns to live honestly and without tension, all because he abandons the chase for intellectual and material prosperity. By embracing a value system that acknowledges the tenement and its flaws (socialism) he comes closer to banishing the "immigrant blues" than any Jewish protagonist of the era. Gold thus established the proletarian struggle as a new frame of literary reference, not because he was ideologically dogmatic, but because he sought to challenge the bourgeois-adjacent conventions that defined immigrant fiction in the early twentieth century.

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[338] Lee, "Never," 42-3.
[339] Ibid.
[340] Foley, *Representations,* 284.
[341] Hefner, *Vernacular,* 132.

Conclusion

This dissertation has established a variety of constructive parallels between *The Rise of David Levinsky, Bread Givers* and *Jews Without Money*. By proposing that these novels examine immigrant gender and family dynamics in fundamentally compatible ways, I have counteracted the tendency among scholars to divide them into separate literary and political traditions. By addressing these traditions in turn, I will now reflect on the significance of my approach and analysis.

The first two chapters of this project establish that Cahan, Yezierka and Gold share a common interest how Jewish men *and* women adapted to life in America, rather than a narrow partiality towards male or female experiences. As the multiple studies of masculinity in Cahan's work suggest, his titular protagonists have come to exemplify the upwardly mobile immigrant man who strives to live his own "sensational adventure" in America.[342] Michael Gold, similarly, has been accused of exhibiting a "vigorously masculine style" in his fiction, undoubtedly because of his macho (and often chauvinistic) theoretical writing for *The Masses.*[343] Conversely, modern feminist scholars have used Yezierska's work to critique the more stereotyped depictions of Jewish women elsewhere in early twentieth-century fiction. As Alice Kessler-Harris suggests, her "independent and self-willed" heroines provide a refreshing counterpoint to the more "romanticized and sentimental" portrayals in novels like Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912).[344] Moreover, after the emergence of ethnic studies, Yezierska's writing has

[342] Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 61.
[343] Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 222.
[344] Alice Kessler-Harris, introduction to *Bread Givers*, 3rd ed. by Anzia Yezierska (New York: Persea Books, 2003), xxxiv-xxxv.

diversified histories of twentieth century labour by providing, in the words of Mary V. Dearborn, "valuable documentary evidence that ethnic women existed."[345]

While these distinctions have proven useful over the years, most critical studies of Cahan and Gold's novels ignore or undervalue their female characters, while Yezierska's men are usually treated as auxiliary foils to her rebellious women. By identifying two first-generation character types, I have attempted to address this imbalance. On the one hand, these novels can be framed as studies of alienated immigrant men, who falteringly try to balance their tender Judaic selves with the rugged Americans they feel obliged to become. The resilient Jewish mother then provides a moral and political counterforce. While early texts portray her as protective and rebellious, she eventually evolves into a radical pillar of the tenement community. Jewish fiction in this period thus revolves around portrayals of strong women *and* weak men, and dissects the array of gendered conflicts they encountered in a holistic and harmonious way.

This reading particularly helps to soften Gold's macho reputation. Like Cahan and Yezierska, he considered Jewish women to be the perfect proletarian agitators, and castigated immigrant men for their petit-bourgeois posturing. My analysis also bridges the political divide between these writers. As prototypical examples of American ascension, Cahan and Yezierska are remembered as moderate liberal interlocutors between Orthodox Europe and capitalist America. After turning *The Jewish Daily Forward* into the third most widely read newspaper in New York by 1912,[346] Cahan wrote *The Rise of David Levinsky* at a time when

[345] Mary V. Dearborn, "Anzia Yezierska and the Making of an Ethnic American Self," in *The Invention of Ethnicity,* ed. Werner Sollors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989),108.

[346] Richard S. Pressman, "Abraham Cahan, Capitalist; David Levinsky, Socialist," Studies in American Jewish Literature 12 (1993): 3. As Ronald Sanders writes: "One need only substitute the words 'Yiddish press' for 'cloak and suit trade', and David Levinsky seems to become Abraham Cahan." Ronald Sanders, *The Downtown Jews* (New York: Harper,

his mounting wealth had softened his socialistic beliefs.[347] Anzia Yezierska, similarly, was writing lucrative Hollywood scripts by 1920, and quickly swapped tenement houses for spacious uptown apartments.[348] Whilst comparing these affluent writers with Michael Gold (the lifelong communist who famously wrote: "No, not every Jew is not a millionaire") might appear unusual, I show here that these novels share a common concern with documenting the competing claims to Jewish immigrant selfhood, regardless of politics.[349] Indeed, as my final chapter shows, *Jews Without Money*'s conversion ending does not reflect its author's radicalism, but rather speaks to his ambitious desire to resolve the "immigrant blues" in an innovative and class conscious way.

This claim takes on new significance when we revisit the formal literary movements these writers traditionally inhabit. Cahan modelled *The Rise of David Levinsky* on his mentor William Dean Howells' 1885 Bildungsroman *The Rise of Silas Lapham*,[350] and based David on several Dickensian heroes including David Copperfield, Pip from *Great Expectations* and *Dombey and Son's* Paul Dombey.[351] While Yezierska was more of a vernacular modernist than a realist,[352] *Bread Givers* employs a similar ascension structure to *Levinsky*, and can be considered another example of the immigrant Bildungsroman. While *Jews Without Money* is typically considered a proletarian novel, my contention that it lacks the radical fervour of

1969), 419.
[347] Pressman, "Socialist," 16.
[348] Babbette Inglehart, "Daughters of Loneliness: Anzia Yezierska and the Immigrant Woman Writer," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 1, no.2 (Winter 1975): 2-3.
[349] Michael Gold, Author's Note to *Jews Without Money* (Philadelphia: PublicAffairs, 2009), 10.
[350] Nancy Von Rosk, "'Go, Make Yourself for a Person'": Urbanity and the Construction of an American Identity in the Novels of Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yezierska," *Prospects* 26 (2001): 300.
[351] David Green, "The Price of Success: Use of the Bildungsroman Plot in Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 12 (1993): note 1.
[352] See: Brooks E. Hefner, The Word on the Streets: the American Language of Vernacular Modernism (London: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 108-126.

Gold's non-fiction calls for an amendment in terms.

I propose in my final chapter that Gold stripped the immigrant "rise" trajectory of its association with capitalist individualism. While Cahan and Yezierska place affluence and intellectual gentility at the pinnacle of their protagonists' journeys, Gold's characters culminate as enlightened citizens of the proletariat. *Jews Without Money* was thus a key point of experimentation in immigrant fiction—a radically experimental novel of the 1920s—rather than a conventional (and ideologically dogmatic) novel of the 1930s. While proletarian writers replicated Gold's leftist conversion arc *en masse*, *Jews Without Money* is best imagined as a vital aesthetic link between the liberal and radical literary traditions that emerged either side of the Depression.

Thus, while Abraham Cahan is remembered for writing "the work that would set the tone and pattern for subsequent Jewish-American fiction," Michael Gold was the first truly *revolutionary* Jewish writer.[353] While several literary scholars have come around to this view already, Patrick Chura's recent biography of Gold presents a new opportunity to re-evaluate his work and influence.[354] I have proven here that placing *Jews Without Money* alongside earlier, more canonical works of immigrant fiction (and questioning Gold's historical reputation as a "wart on the buttocks of American literature") establishes profound lines of communication between seemingly conflicting literary traditions.[355] Looking forward, this approach hints towards a more holistic reading of proletarian novels like Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934) and Pietro Di Donato's *Christ In Concrete* (1939), which adapt and experiment with the conventions of immigrant writing in

[353] Pressman, "Socialist," 3.
[354] Patrick Chura, *Michael Gold: The People's Writer* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020).
[355] Michael Folsom, Introduction to *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, ed. Michael Folsom (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 7.

a similar way to *Jews Without Money.* While *The Rise of David Levinsky* and *Bread Givers* have been considered valuable historical documents of Jewish alienation since the 1960s, future scholarship could look to analyse their array of connections with more politically radical texts, as I have done in this dissertation.

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