

Essay on Jewish American Literature

Jewish-American literature is one of the most important literary phenomena in the history of American literature. Jewish-American literature is being practiced by these writers almost for a century. During its initial period between 1885 and 1935, though Jewish-American literature was written in Yiddish by the immigrants, nowadays it is primarily written in English as Yiddish is 'hardly used in America at the beginning of the 21st century.' This literature is said to be a 'corpus of writing about the Jewishness in America'. However, there are some Jewish writers who oppose to be called as 'Jewish' as they feel that such a reference to their literature is harmful as it limits the horizons of their works.

The course of Jewish-American writing took a huge turn with the arrival of 1881. It was the year when the Russian Czar, Alexander II, was assassinated. His son Alexander III took over the reins of the country in his hands resulting in Russian government's policy of persecution of the Jews. The atrocities at home forced millions of Jews to migrate to America. As these Jews spoke Yiddish, naturally, they also wrote their literary works in their own language. The main writers of this period are Morris Winshevsy and Morris Rosenfeld. Yiddish literature is radical and secular in its approach. These writers, since the inception of their literature, had been propagating their radical ideas through their literary works. These ideas can be seen exhibited in the poetry, novels, theatre and journalistic writings of Saul Bellow, J. D. Salinger, Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud, Chaim Potok, and Philip Roth. However, before gaining its foothold in other forms of literature, Jewish literature in America started with memoirs and petitions of the immigrants who had come to the American shore as early as the 17th century. The main thematic concern of the Jewish-American writing was the dilemma of identity. Being the outsiders, the Jews in America were usually treated as outsiders and hence were discriminated by the European Whites on the basis of their religion and culture. Consequently, the Jewish community felt alienated from the American mainstream social structure. They tried to establish their own individual Jewish identity which was very tough task given the social circumstances in which they were forced to live. After the initial efforts at establishing their identity, it is seen that the Jewish community tried to get assimilated with the American mainstream. These efforts are effectively reflected in the latter works of Jewish-American writers.

Leon Uris is one of the very outstanding Jewish-American writers who is known for his brilliantly written novel Exodus. This work narrates the story of the struggle to create the modern state of Israel. Isaac Bashevis Singer and Saul Bellow are the Jewish- American writers who have won the Nobel Prize for their works. Jewish-American writing reached to a huge number of readers with its translation in various languages including Russian. This literature usually contains Jewish characters which enables the writers to address the issues close to the lives of their people.

Perhaps the most important Yiddish writer of the early twentieth century was Abraham Cahan. He is known for his brilliantly written novel, The Rise of David Levinsky. This is a story of a Jew, named Levinsky, who gives up his Jewish heritage and becomes a secularist. It leads him to be a successful millionaire in the American society. Through this novel, Cahan shows the emptiness of Levinsky's life despite his material success. The other writers who stepped upon the footsteps of their predecessors are Anzela Yeziarska, Sidney Nyburg, Samuel Ornitz and James Oppenheim. These writers have also exhibited their ideology of life through their works according to which secularism is the most important aspect in human life which helps to address and effectively solve many of the problems of human life. These writers rejected the narrow concept of Jewishness and almost discarded the Jewish tradition. They were more interested to present themselves as secular rather than Jewish. Even there were some Jewish-American writers like Nelson Algren, Isadore Schneider and Albert Halper who considered socialism to be the more effective answer to the problems of the Jewish community all over the world. During the second half of the 20th century the writers like Tillie Olson, Cynthia Ozick, Herbert Gold, Stanley Elkin, Joseph Heller, E.L. Doctorow, Saul Bellow, Grace

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Paley, Bernard Malamud, Hugh Nissensen Elie Wiesel, and Phillip Roth dealt with various problems of the Jews through their works.

During the 1950s, Jewish American literature became a part of the mainstream American culture. Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* with its famous opening lines 'I am an American, Chicago born,' announced that Jews should be looked upon as an integral part of the American society. At the same time, *Gimpel the Fool* by Isaac Bashevis Singer came up with its very different approach which 'remembered, celebrated, and romanticized the old world of Judaism. These two approaches - one that of complete assimilation of the Jews with the America and the other that of celebration of Judaism - have been there for quite some time now.