Melting Identities: The Formation of a Jewish-American Self

This course explores old and new perspectives on Jewish American identity through short stories, fiction, film, theater and music. We will look at issues ranging from immigration to degrees of assimilation in America, anti-immigration sentiments and political movements in the U.S. ("nativism"), American anti-Jewish sentiments, success/defeat of inter-ethnic relations in America (for example, Italians and Jews, African-Americans and Jews), Jews and the American cities (New York as Promised City), and Jewish stereotypes in America. Through some wonderful classics of Jewish American culture, this course raises questions about identity and diversity in the global world. It also explores how old parameters to talk about who we are might have become obsolete and create more "confusion" than "fusion."

The Student’s Central Role in This Course

Students count very much. Your role will be a quite active and interactive one: you are expected to think, discuss, bring up issues, teach to and learn from your colleagues. Your main task will be to read all the required texts. Your central duty will be to talk about them in class. Reading and participation are expected and considered fundamental to each student’s success. The emphasis is on critical thinking, analysis and oral exposition.

Papers, quizzes and exams are also important elements: you will be tested on your ability to recognize, identify and contextualize a literary work, to explain critical terms and specific terminology encountered during our discussions, and to write about literature in a mature, deep, critical way.

Formal Requirements

Requirements include:

1. **Responses to Reading**: For each book assigned, the professor will call on a few students to write a one-page response to the reading. As part of this exercise, the student will also bring to class:
   a. one quote from the book in question that particularly struck her or him—something you agree or disagree with, something you found beautiful or particularly relevant to your understanding of the book or to the theme of our course, etc. You will also have to explain/justify your choice;
   b. one question (not of the yes/no kind) to present to colleagues for discussion: the question is not meant to put your classmates on the spot.
2. **Surprise Quizzes**: There will be unannounced quizzes during the semester: these are not exams, but fairly easy questionnaires… for those who’ve done the readings. **Note:** If you enter the classroom while a quiz has already been handed out, you won’t be able to take it and will receive F. So be in class on time all the time.

3. **Essays**: There will be 2 writing assignments on topics decided by the professor. Directions and writing prompts will be distributed in class later in the semester.

4. **Final Exam**: The final exam will consist of: identifications, multiple short answer essays, and one long essay.

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<th>Grade Distribution:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading Responses</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<td>Quizzes</td>
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<td>Essay #1</td>
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<td>Essay #2</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<td>Final</td>
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**Objectives/Learning Outcomes**

Our reading selection and class discussions are designed to introduce students to questions of assimilation, national and group identity as revealed by the Jewish experience in twentieth-century America.

Through our readings, discussions, lectures and visual presentations students will:
- interpret texts in all their facets (literary, narrative, linguistic, historical, etc.);
- raise and address important questions regarding identity (racial, national, sexual, etc.), what constitutes identity and how one’s identity coexists with other identities;
- acquaint themselves with various existing definition of “Jewishness” within the American context—some, in fact, specific to and created by the American context—and how America and Americanization play a role (or don’t) within the various Jewish folds;
- learn to frame literary production in historical context;
- greatly improve their critical skills;
- raise interpretative questions about each text and relate texts to one another;
- build a vocabulary of over 60 basic words of Hebrew and Yiddish and will learn the meaning, provenance and significance of some important Yiddish expressions that have entered the everyday American vocabulary. (Oy vey, you might have been speaking Yiddish all along, without knowing it! Mazel tov!)

**Our Rules**

- We maintain a respectful, democratic, open-minded, tolerant atmosphere in our classroom. Everybody’s opinion, point of view, comment is welcome. Disagreement with others’ points of view is also welcome, **but** it must be expressed
with intelligence and extreme respect for our colleagues’ freedom to think independently.

- Students must attend lessons, read assigned material and do their homework. Deadlines CANNOT be missed.
- Students are allowed 3 absences (of whatever nature): instructor will exact grade penalties (½ letter grade) for each exceeding absence. (25% absence is automatic Failure.)
- Thrice late = 1 absence.
- In case of absence, it is the student’s responsibility to get information about what was discussed in class, as well as copies of hand-outs, and to be up-to-speed with new assignments.
- Plagiarism: “Intentionally representing the words, ideas, or sequence of ideas of another as one’s own in any academic exercise; failure to attribute any of the following: quotations, paraphrases, or borrowed information” (definition from Webster’s English Dictionary). You are responsible for understanding accepted definitions of plagiarism before the first assignment is due. The general rule: if in doubt, ask.

If caught plagiarizing (no matter “how much”), students will Fail and report to the Dean.

- Don’t forget two of the most important resources available to students: (1) The Library (USC library system and Public Libraries); (2) The Writing Center (for help with all your writing needs).

NO FOOD. NO TEXT-MESSAGING. CELLULAR PHONES MUST BE SILENCED during our lessons. Thank you.

Texts Available at USC Bookstore:

Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant*
Allegra Goodman, *Kaaterskill Falls*
Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers*
Israel Zangwill, *The Melting Pot*
Philip Roth, *Good-bye, Columbus*
Cynthia Ozick, *The Shawl*
Art Spiegelman, *Maus*

Remaining texts will be posted on Blackboard

Email exchanges between this class and the professor will take place exclusively through university email accounts. If you like your public account better (yahoo, gmail, hotmail, etc.) make sure all correspondence is forwarded to that domain automatically or you may miss important communication, assignments, changes in the schedule, etc.

...It sounds harsh, but it’s going to be fun... Good luck!