A CRAVING FOR HISTORY: IMMIGRANT THEMES IN JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract
This dissertation is a cross-generational study of three immigrant themes in Jewish-American literature: transformation, freedom, and connection. It covers a number of twentieth century writers whose central concerns revolve around issues of assimilation. Chapter I gives a brief overview of the topic.

Chapter II examines the various means by which the immigrant sought to achieve American status. Writers discussed include Mary Antin, Anzia Yezierska, Elias Tobenkin, Michael Gold, Norman Podhoretz, and Saul Bellow. Chapter III is an in-depth study of Abraham Cahan's The Rise of David Levinsky (1917), a rags-to-riches story of a poor immigrant's rise up the ladder of success in the garment industry. The chapter emphasizes the psychological strains of transformation.

Chapter IV deals with the second generation's flight from immigrant neighborhoods into the larger American sphere, and the necessity to give shape to this new freedom. The writers discussed are Anzia Yezierska, Henry Roth, Daniel Fuchs, and Alfred Kazin. Chapter V is a close reading of Isaac Rosenfeld's Passage from Home (1946), a study of an adolescent's attraction to an aunt who leads a bohemian life far removed from the boy's familiar middle class world. This chapter examines the nature of the boy's alienation.

Chapter VI concerns the attempt by modern Jews to recover aspects of their tradition. It looks at a number of non-fiction memoirs as well as fictional works by Mark Helprin, Cynthia Ozick, and Hugh Nissenson, works in which both memory and imagination are enlisted in an attempt to recover "the useful past." Chapter VII is a close reading of Johanna Kaplan's O My America! (1980). This novel focuses on an immigrant son who has escaped his past by creatively fashioning his alienation into an intellectual style. The chapter looks at how his escape is countered by his daughter's attempt to understand the cost of such transformation. A brief conclusion speculates on other uses of my analysis.

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