

Hebrew College  
Fall 2010  
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## **LITER 602: Explorations in Jewish Literature: From the Ancient Parable to the Contemporary Short Story**

**Overview.** Whether one regards the Jews as the “People of the Book,” or the “People of the Lost Book,” texts and conversations about texts have lain at the crux of Jewish life throughout history. During the biblical, rabbinic and medieval periods, engagement with literature was primarily a religious activity; the modern period generated a rich Jewish literary culture of its own, and books continue to play a central role in shaping Jewish identity. But what defines Jewish literature? Which themes and concerns have preoccupied Jewish writers over time? Is there a connection between the prominence of Torah in Judaism and the rich and diverse cultural production of our day?

Rather than attempt a chronological survey of Jewish writing, our course will examine three literary genres that have predominated in the modern period. Like all ancient civilizations with oral traditions, the earliest of Jewish communities produced fables and parables; this form (in Hebrew, *mashal*) has a lively afterlife in the modern period. Our first unit traces this tradition of parabolic discourse and concludes with some contemporary experiments with this ancient form. Late twentieth-century Jewish culture has also been inordinately preoccupied with collective memory and personal remembering. To gain an understanding of this broader cultural phenomenon, we will read two groundbreaking memoirs of recent years: Ruth Kluger’s *Still Alive: Tales of a Holocaust Girlhood* and Amos Oz’s *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. Our final unit focuses on our own, American tradition of Jewish writing through stories by Cynthia Ozick, Phillip Roth and Grace Paley.

**Preparation and Assignments.** Our goal is to learn how to interpret and to write about literature. Thus, it is important to read everything carefully and slowly; to underline or mark important passages; and to take notes on the readings whenever possible. Twice-weekly postings, an explication assignment (analysis of a short passage of your own choosing), two creative writing assignments and a formal essay will give extensive practice in literary analysis and will help you improve your prose style.

I stress that no prior knowledge of literature or Jewish culture is needed to succeed in this course. Know that your questions are always welcome. It is also important to remember that interpretation is a subjective process, and that most of the questions we will raise have no “right answer.” (That being said, some interpretations are more convincing than others, which is why it is important to keep track of the quotations that support your understanding of the readings.) You each bring a different background and

perspective to this material. By sharing your ideas, questions, and experiences, you will enrich the course immeasurably.

**Structure.** While I may ask you to read some secondary sources and background material, our weekly back-and-forth will mainly be about the reading. Because our class begins just before Sukkot and Simchat Torah, the first three weeks will begin on **Monday mornings. Starting 10/7**, our weeks will begin on Thursday morning, so that you have the weekend to work on the assignment. From this point on, each week will have two rounds of discussion. I will post introductory material and reading questions before Thursday morning, and your response will be due by Sunday evening. By Monday evening I will have responded to your posts, and I will add a brief second round of questions, with responses due by Wednesday night.

**Readings.** Many of our readings will be available on the course website or in a course reader (TBA). We will read everything in English translation, but students interested in working with the Hebrew, Yiddish or German originals may incorporate these versions in their papers.

### **Books to be Purchased:**

Philip Roth - Goodbye Columbus and Five Short Stories, (Random), ISBN 9780679748267

Amos Oz - Tale of Love and Darkness, (HBC Trade), ISBN 9780156032520

Grace Paley - Little Disturbances of Man, (Peng USA), ISBN 9780140075571

Ruth Kluger - Still Alive, (Perseus D), ISBN 9781558614369

Cynthia Ozick, The Shawl

**Requirements.** There are five course requirements which will comprise your final grade as follows:

Participation in online discussions	40%
Explication (2 pages)	10%
Parable assignment (2-3 pages)	10%
Memoir assignment (3-4 pages)	20%
Short Essay (4-5 pages)	20%

### **Schedule of Readings**

<b>Week 1</b>	<b>Introduction: A Biblical parable</b>
9/20	The Parable of the Poor Man's Ewe Lamb (II Sam 11-12:1-15) Gila Safran Naveh, <i>Biblical Parables and their Modern Counterparts</i> (excerpts)

- Week 2**  
9/27 **Rabbinic Parables**  
David Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, Chap. 1 (1-23), chap. 2 (46-62)
- Week 3**  
10/4 **Hassidic Parables**  
Two introductions to R. Nachman (Buber, Kramer)  
Tales of Rabbi Nachman: “The Rabbi’s Son” (two versions),  
The Clever Man and the Simple Man”
- Week 4**  
10/7 (Thurs) **Neo-Hassidic Parables**  
I. L. Peretz, “The Three Gifts,” “If Not Higher...,” “Bontshe the Silent,”  
“The Pious Cat”
- Week 5**  
10/14 **Yiddish modernism**  
I. B. Singer, “Gimpel the Fool,” “The Last Demon,” “The Spinoza of  
Market Street.”
- Week 6**  
10/21 **Modernist Parables I**  
S. Y. Agnon, “Agunot,” “The Lady and the Peddler,” “Two Pairs”  
“The Kerchief,” “At the Outset of the Day.”
- EXPLICATION DUE (2 PAGES)**
- Week 7**  
10/28 **Modernist Parables II**  
Franz Kafka, “An Imperial Message,” “Before the Law,” “The Bridge,”  
“A Crossbreed,” “The Vulture,” “A Common Confusion,”  
“Four Legends Concerning Prometheus,” “On Parables,”  
“Report to an Academy.”
- Week 8**  
Nov. 4 **Modern Anti-Parables**  
Etgar Keret, *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to Be God*
- Week 9**  
Nov. 11 **Memoir (Israel)**  
Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* chaps. TBA
- PARABLE ASSIGNMENT DUE (3 pages)**
- Week 10**  
Nov. 18 **Memoir (Israel)**  
Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* chaps. TBA
- Nov. 25 Thanksgiving holiday.

**Week 11**      **Memoir (Vienna, Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, the U.S)**  
Dec. 2          Ruth Kluger, *Still Alive*, “Vienna,” “The Camps”

**Week 12**      **Memoir (Germany, New York)**  
Dec. 9          Ruth Kluger, *Still Alive*, “Germany,” “New York,” “Epilogue.”

**Week 13**      **Short Fiction**  
Dec. 16        Cynthia Ozick, *The Shawl*

**MEMOIR ASSIGNMENT DUE (4-5 pages)**

**Winter Recess Dec. 24-Jan. 2**

**Week 14**      **Short Fiction (1950s America)**  
Jan. 3          Grace Paley, *Little Disturbances of Man*

**Week 15**      **Short Fiction (1950s America)**  
Jan 10        Philip Roth, “Goodbye Columbus”  
“The Conversion of the Jews,” “Defender of the Faith,”  
“Eli the Fanatic.”

**SHORT ESSAY (4-5 PAGES)**  
**DUE JANUARY 20**