# Yiddish Literature 1864-1939 Adi Mahalel

## Yiddish Literature Pre-1864

The most important writer of old Yiddish literature was [Elijah Levita](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elia_Levita) (a.k.a. Elye Bokher, 1469-1549), who adapted the Italian version of the chivalric romance [*Bevis of Hampton*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bevis_of_Hampton) into a Yiddish version known as the [*Bovo-bukh*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bovo-bukh) (1541). Levita innovated by adapting Italian forms (*ottava rima*) and rhyme schemes instead of German ones. The [*Bovo-bukh*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bovo-bukh) differentiated from the medieval chivalric romances which preceded it by a number of features: the presence of a sarcastic narrator who plays a central role in the plot; humor; the notable omission of long battle scenes; the tendency to minimize fantastical elements; and its Judafication of Christian motifs. Religious Yiddish literature was also popular in Levita's time. Numerous translations of the Hebrew Bible into Yiddish were created (he himself translated the Psalms into Yiddish), as well as moral or ethical Yiddish literature (*musar*), Torah adaptations (*Tsene-rene*), and prayer books in Yiddish (*tkhines*) for women.

The Hasidic movement produced Yiddish literature that is significant for religious and secular readers alike. The most prominent Hasidic Yiddish literature, *Sefer sipurey mayses* [*The Book of Tales*, 1815], was by the Hasidic leader [Nahman of Bratslav](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Nahman_of_Bratslav) (1772-1811). This collection of fantastic stories was published in a unique Hebrew and Yiddish bilingual edition. The motifs and plots represent a blend of East European folklore rich with symbolism taken from the kabbalah. Some scholars relate Nahman to the European Romantic Movement. *The Book of Tales* influenced many modern writers, including I. L. Peretz and Martin Buber.

### Haskalah Literautre

From the late 18th century onward the Haskalah or Jewish Enlightenment movement pushed for Jewish acculturation in Europe, pursued the promise of emancipation and equal rights, and promoted reform in Jewish education as well as the progress of Jews through the adoption of modern ‘useful’ professions.

Culturally, alongside the embrace of the state language, and the acquisition of ‘pure’ (meaning biblical) Hebrew, the Haskalah showed antipathy towards Yiddish, viewing it as a corrupted jargon and an obstacle to Jewish modernization. Despite the official negative stand, proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment (the *maskilim*) produced valuable Yiddish literature, driven by the idea that if you want to educate the people (and compete with the Hasidim), you must speak to the people in their own language (Hebrew was only read by a minority of Jews).

Out of the Berlin-based Western-European Haskalah came two bourgeois comedies: *Reb Henoch, oder, Woss tut me damit* [*Reb Henokh, or What Can Be Done with It?,* 1792] by Yitshak Euchel, and *Laykhtzin und fremelay* [*Silliness and Sanctimony,* 1796] by Aharon Wolfssohn-Halle. Both multi-lingual dramas, the plays used the Yiddish language as a marker of the unenlightened, lower-class, or deceitful Eastern European Jewish character.

When the center of the Haskalah moved eastward, the richly expressive, reflective, and folkloric possibilities of the vernacular were explored further and, in this process, Eastern European Yiddish became the standard literary Yiddish.

The first ever published Yiddish novel, *Dos shterntikhl* (The Headband; 1861), was by [Yisroel Aksenfeld](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Aksenfeld_Yisroel). Aksenfeld wrote numerous other novels and plays that were never published due to the political power of Hasidim and their monopoly on the printing-presses in Hebrew and Yiddish, a situation that limited the work of modern Yiddish writers until 1861. ‘The Headband; featured a protagonist who manages to leave a backward East European *shtetl*, and acquaints himself with the modern capitalist system in the West. He overcomes the deceptive Hasidic leader, returns to his hometown, and applies the lessons learned in the modern city by starting his own business, thus becoming a good capitalist.

Other major Yiddish authors of the Haskalah include [Shloyme Ettinger](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Ettinger_Shloyme) (1803-1856), who wrote the play *Serkele* (1861), which played an important role in the development of Yiddish theatre. Yitskhok Yoyel Linetski (1839-1915) wrote the very humorous anti-Hasidic satire *Dos poylishe yungl* [*The Polish Boy*], which was serialized in the late 1860s in the newly founded Yiddish press and became popular among the Hasidim themselves. [Ayzik Meyer Dik](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Dik_Ayzik_Meyer) (1807-1893) was the only Yiddish writer of the Haskalah who became a bestseller. Through his rich body of work he was able to use the older literary form of chapbook stories and blend this with social criticism. His short story *Di behole* [*The Panic*], gave a satirical view of the commotion in a small Jewish town when a decree is issued to limit the marriage age to eighteen. The town itself plays the protagonist in the story. Indeed, the small Jewish town or *shtetl* would continue to inspire urban modern city writers as a literary metaphor for the decades to come.

## Literature from 1864

Modern Yiddish literature can be said to have been invented during the late 1880s by Sholem Aleichem. In his articles, stories, and almanac (*Di yidishe folksbibliyotek*), he created a history for Yiddish literature, in which its founding grandfather was Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (1835–1917) and Sholem Aleichem was the self-designated heir.

Abramovitsh, commonly known by his literary persona Mendele Moykher-Sforim (Mendele the Book Peddler), created works that set the standard for modern Yiddish literature. Works he wrote in the 1860s-70s, such as *Dos kleyne mentshele* [*The Little Man*, 1864], *Dos vintshfingerl* [*The Magic Ring*, 1865], *Fishke der Krummer* [*Fishke the Lame*, 1869], *Di klyatshe* [*The Nag*, 1873], *Kitser masoes Binyomin hashlishi* [*The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third*, 1878] – he continued to rewrite and republish until his death. Abramovitsh, though a *maskil*, successfully embedded his prose with a sense of irony towards some maskilic motifs by including commentary against poverty under capitalism, and by identification with the simple *shtetl* Jews, writing in an idiomatic Eastern-European Yiddish, rather than in synthetic Germanized Yiddish.

Sholem Aleichem picked up where Abramovitsh left off. He excelled in the monologue, thus freeing himself from the supposedly objective maskilic narrator. He produced many works in this genre during the 1890s and the first decade of the 20th century. His monologues were often narrated by lower-class folksy Jewish characters: a milkman named Tevye in *Tevye der milkhiker* [*Tevye the Dairyman],* talkative Jewish market women (most famously in *Dos tepl* [*The Little Pot*]), Jewish pimps in *A mentsh fun Boenos-Ayres* [*A Man from Buenos-Ayres*], a young man who desperately needs marriage advice in *An eytse* [*Advice*], and many more. In these talkative stories, Aleichem maximized the raw potential of the century-old vernacular. Underneath their humorous qualities, his seemingly simple characters reveal profound psychological depth and complexity.

Considered to be the third classic writer after Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem, I.L. Peretz (1835–1917), introduced modernist trends into Yiddish literature. From his Yiddish writing debut with the long faustian poem *Monish* (1888), to his psychological short stories, social protest literature, and symbolist plays during the following decades, Peretz brought a new urban style into Yiddish literature. In his literature, the consciousness of the modern individual is already embedded within the narration. He also stimulated numerous other writers from his home in Warsaw to do the same. Writers including Sholem Asch, H.D. Nomberg, Avrom Reyzn, Dovid Pinski, Yehoyesh, and S. Ansky (1863-1920) were inspired both by Peretz's commitment to writing in Yiddish and by his project of incorporating Yiddish work into current trends in European literature, such as symbolism and decadence. Ansky, a political leftist radical who also wrote the anthem of the Jewish Labor Bund party *Di shvue* (The Oath), was inspired by Peretz's stylizations of Hasidic folklore. The production of Ansky's play *Der dibek* [*The Dybbuk*, 1914], defined the modernist-expressionist signature style of both the Yiddish and the nascent Hebrew theatre of the 1920s.

In America, the huge influx of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe enjoyed the absence of czarist censorship, and modern Yiddish literature flourished. American Yiddish poets set trends for their Eastern European Yiddish counterparts. They included radical-leftist poets such as the ‘sweatshop poet’ Morris Rosenfeld, and the anarchist Dovid Edelstadt. Neo-romantic impressionist poets – *Di Yunge* (Mani Leyb, Zisho Landoy) – and symbolist poets (Moyshe L. Halpern, H. Leyvik), who refused to create poetry for political purposes, claimed to be writing ‘art for art's sake’, and to focus on the experience of the individual.

The introspective poets – *Inzikhistn* (Jacob Glatshteyn,A. Leyeles) – created in free verse, fragmented ‘kaleidoscopic’ poems that reflect the psyche of the modern urban individual. In his poem *1919*, Glatshteyn (1896-1971) portrays the effect of contemporary major world events on his tiny existential (arguably ‘Jewish’) dot. At the same time in Europe, poets such as Moyshe Broderzon, Uri Tsevi Grinberg, Peretz Markish, and Melech Ravitch brought expressionist aesthetics into Yiddish, forming the literary group *Di Khalyastre* (The Gang). Although they shared common aesthetic beliefs, including chaotic imagery and aggressive language, the fact that these poets came from contradictory ideologies (Zionism, Communism) no doubt contributed to the brief duration of the group (five years).

Female writers in America, such as Celia Dropkin, Anna Margolin, and Malka Heifetz-Tussman, brought women’s voices into Yiddish poetry. They wrote about the daring themes of female sexuality and homosexuality, while embracing modernist aesthetics like free verse and individual perspectives. Kadye Molodowsky (1894-1975) and Rokhl Korn were active both in Europe and in North America. Molodowsky had belonged to the modernist circles of the *Khalyastre* in Warsaw. In America, she wrote about her tormented psyche upon hearing about Jewish suffering in Europe. She also became well known for her children’s poetry in Yiddish and in Hebrew translation.

In the early years of the Soviet Union, Yiddish culture was cultivated by the state and flourished there. The writer Dovid Bergelson (1884-1952), who had created the first important modernist Yiddish novel in his *Nokh alemen* [*After All Is Said and Done*, 1913], settled there in the 1930s. Modernist poet and author Moyshe Kulbak published a comic family saga, *Zelmenyaner* [*The Zelmenyaners*], in installments (1929-1935), which dealt with the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution on one Jewish family and their process of becoming ‘Soviet Jews’. *Zelmenyaner* was published before and during the soviet requirement for ‘social realist art’.

The influx of WWII Jewish refugees into Israel after the establishment of the state created a Yiddish-Israeli literary scene. Most notable was the poet Avrom Sutzkever (1913-2010), who before the war had been part of modernist literary groups in Vilnius (*Yung-Vilne*); now he led the group *Yung-Yisroel* (Young Israel) and was the editor of the journal *Di goldene keyt* (1949-1995). Finally, the modernist writer Yosl Birstein (1920-2003) wrote in Yiddish about Kibbutz life, Jewish-Palestinian relations and more, and was associated with *Yung-Yisroel*.

## References and Further Reading

Jean Baumgarten, Introduction to Old Yiddish Literature, ed. and transl. Jerold C. Frakes (Oxford: University Press, 2005); Ken Frieden, *Classic Yiddish Fiction* (Albany, N.Y., 1995)

BenjaminHarshav, Sing*, Stranger/A Century of American Yiddish Poetry: A Historical Anthology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006);

Mikhail Krutikov, *Yiddish Fiction and the Crisis of Modernity, 1905–1914* (Stanford, Calif., 2001)

Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1973)

Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl: And Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination.* New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000

David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).