**Agnon, Shmuel Yosef (1888–1970)**

Nobel laureate Shmuel Yosef Agnon is perhaps the most prominent figure of modern Jewish and Hebrew prose. Born as Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes in the city of Buczacz in Galicia (now Ukraine), Agnon wrote numerous stories, novellas, and novels, which have become the subject of extensive academic research.

Agnon’s prose can be characterised as constantly struggling to present modern themes in a classical Jewish form. He was committed to the traditional text in all formal aspects: language, genre, style, and even structure. And yet he was innovative and groundbreaking, introducing a completely new concept of modern Jewish prose. In his work, he combined realism with fantasy and surreal imagery with harshly ironic criticism of contemporary Jewish society in both Palestine and Europe. The traditional tone of his work makes it seem harmonic, even naive; yet, as famous Agnon scholar Baruch Kurzweil has argued, this cover hides a stormy and all-encompassing modernism (1963, 6).



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Agnon began publishing poetry and short stories in Hebrew and Yiddish in his teens, but it was his first story, ‘Agunot,’ to be published in Palestine (where he arrived in 1908), that marked the beginning of the better-known part of his writing career. ‘Agunot’ already included many of the themes that would be present throughout his work; its title and major theme became one of Agnon’s prevalent images, and was even adopted by the author as his last name. An aguna (the singular form of agunot) is a woman who is not allowed to marry according to Jewish law, because she is bound to a husband who is absent, but who has not legally divorced her. This legal status became an important allegorical motive in Agnon’s work, as an allusion to the traditional relationship between God and the exiled people of Israel and as a representation of an existential state of longing, whether individual or national. Moreover, this theme is associated throughout his work with meta-poetic problems such as the tension between the aesthetic aspirations and the materialistic reality of the artist. In ‘Agunot,’ as in his later fiction, Agnon also alludes to other traditional genres, such as *midrash*, Kabbalah, and the Hassidic tale.

Agnon’s next major work and first novella, *Ve-haya he-akov le-mishor* (*And The Crooked Shall be Made Straight*, 1912), also employs the theme of the aguna. It presents the story of a Jewish couple who lives in the town of Shabush, a fictional version of Agnon’s hometown, where many of his works are located (after the Holocaust Agnon refers to the town by its real name, Buczacz). The two lose their fortune, and the husband is forced to leave the town in order to make a living. This simple folk-tale is the frame for a modern tragedy, and, as Ariel Hirschfeld has argued, is the beginning of a long chain of works that deal with the essence of tragedy and its place in the modern world in general and in modern Jewish lives in particular (2011, 176).

In October of 1912, Agnon moved to Berlin, where he met many Hebrew and Yiddish modernists. During the twelve years he spent in Germany, he wrote some of his most famous stories, such as ‘Ha-nidach’ (*The Far-flung*), ‘Bi-ne’urenu u-vizkenyenu’ (*In Our Youth and Our Old Age*), ‘Bi-demi yamyeyah’ (*In Her Youth*), and his short Poland stories.

In the summer of 1924, a fire broke out in Agnon’s home in Bad Homburg, and his entire personal library was lost, along with all of his manuscripts, including that of his incomplete first novel, *Bi-Tzror ha-Hayim* (*In the Bundle of Life*). Following the fire, Agnon returned to Palestine and settled in Jerusalem, along with his wife (whom he had met in Germany) and two children. The fire became a frequent motif in his work, and Agnon employed it in a few of his stories allegorically, associating it with national catastrophes, such as the holocaust (see for example in his story, ‘Im knisat ha-yom’ [*At the Outset of the Day*]), or using it to represent the anticipation of national and individual redemption.

His first novel *Hakhnasat Kalah* (*The Bride Canopy*) was published in 1931, first in the form of short stories and later as a novel. It describes the long journey of Reb Yudil Hasid to find a groom for his daughter. Scholars have considered this work an attempt to combine the ancient form of the epic with the new and modern form of the novel, a combination that served as an ironic statement on the loss of the world’s innocence. The novel has been compared to great modern novels such as *Don Quixote*, *Tristram Shandy*, and *Ulysses*, and has been seen as the metamorphosis of a traditional Jewish tale into a modern epic.

In 1932 Agnon started working on the first stories of his *Sefer ha-ma’asim* (*The book of Deeds*, begun in 1932 and published in 1950). Most of the stories in this collection are structured as a surreal journey, perhaps a metaphoric, internal soul search. Many critics have compared them to Kafka’s and have argued that they offer a modernist experience of the fractured self, an impressionist representation of the core of the modern soul.

In his four next novels, *Oreah nata lalaun* (*A Guest for the Night*), *Sipur Pashut* (*Simple Story*), *Temol Shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*),and *Shira*, this theme is treated in a more realistic style and is developed in the context of a specific time and place. The characters in these novels struggle with issues associated with modernity, such as fate and religious life in the new and changing world, nationalist and specifically Zionist ideology, and problems related to artistic expression.

Jewish society, the Jewish nation and the Jewish man in the face of modernity are central themes in Agnon’s work. Using a unique combination of traditional and modern styles and genres, Agnon describes Jewish reality in the face of modern crisis, including the First World War, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Second World War.

In 1966 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. Agnon died in Jerusalem on February 17, 1970. The Collected Works of S.Y. Agnon were published by Schocken in eight volumes between 1953 and 1962, updated with the eleven works that appeared posthumously.

**References and further reading**

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**List of Works**

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*Me-az u-me’ata* (*From then and From Now*) (1931). Berlin: Schocken.

*Sipur pashut* (*A Simple Story*) (1935). Berlin: Schocken.

*Be-shuva va-nahat* (*In Returning and Peace*) (1935). Berlin: Schocken.

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Elu ve Elu (*These and These*) (1940). Berlin: Schocken. (Ha-nidach, Ve-haya he-akov le-mishor, Takhrikh shel sipurim, Be-ohel beyti, Dorot Olamim, Sipurim shel Shabat and more).

*Temol Shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*) (1946, 1957). Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken.

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harokhel”, “Sefer ha-ma’asim” and more).

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Written by Neta Stahl