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| Aleichem, Sholem [pseudonym for Sholem Rabinovitz] (1859-1916) |
| Sholem Rabinovitz |
| Sholem Aleichem was born in Pereslav, Ukraine, and grew up in Voronkov, recollections of which would later inspire his fictional Jewish shtetl of Kasrilevke. His merchant father combined respect for traditional religious learning with respect for secular study, including contemporary Hebrew literature in his son’s lessons. Sholem Aleichem read and was influenced by Dickens, Shakespeare, and Cervantes as well as the Russian masters, especially Gogol. But his Yiddish writing is replete with Jewish tradition, albeit with a modernist satirical twist. He rebelled against the popular sentimentalism of Yiddish writers such as Shomer, and at age 29 cast himself famously as the artistic ‘grandson’ of the pioneer Yiddish literary writer S. Y. Abramowitz (Mendele Moykher Sforim), who was only 58 at the time. |
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Jeremy Dauber wrote, ‘Sholem Aleichem is Jewish modernism writ small,’ thus explaining how Sholem Aleichem’s career captures a full sweep of change and conflict that transformed Eastern fin-de-siècle European Jewish life. Though he wrote first in Russian and Hebrew, he was most prolific in Yiddish across the genres of fiction, nonfiction, and drama. He grew so widely beloved in the Jewish world that perhaps 200,000 mourners lined New York City’s streets for his 1916 funeral procession, representing every ideological gradation from right to left.  English-speaking readers best know his character Tevye, whose much-adapted stories include *Fiddler on the Roof*, among the world’s most widely produced plays. The ever-hopeful, ever-unlucky investor Menakhem Mendl, the musician Stempenyu, and Kasrilevke’s inhabitants are prominent among his other characters.  Ruth Wisse notes how Tevye’s stories alone, of all the great modernist depictions of generational rebellion, are told sympathetically from the traditional father’s perspective rather than the children’s point of view. As Dauber writes, ‘Sholem Aleichem was a master at using *tsuris fun kinder*, trouble with children, to stand in for the changes and stresses of the modern period’ (192). Tevye’s stories deal with market capitalism (Menakhem Mendl squanders the meagre savings Tevye invests with him), socialist and Zionist ideas, the threat to Jewish survival from cultural assimilation and Russian tyranny, and perhaps most of all romantic love and the dislocation it wreaks on the traditional Jewish system of fatherly-sanctioned betrothal.  Rabinowitz the man (Sholem Aleichem was a pen name, a putative first-person narrator) inherited a fortune when his father-in-law died unexpectedly. He financed and edited two volumes of *Di Yidish Folks Bibiliotek* [The Jewish People’s Library], anthologies in which he sought artistically to elevate Yiddish literature. He then lost his fortune in the Kiev stock market, much like his character Menakhem Mendl, and eventually made a genuine if always precarious living as a Yiddish writer, supporting his large family by newspaper serialization and playwriting. He visited New York City in 1906 and returned in 1912 until his death.    Sholem Aleichem’s work was celebrated in the Soviet Union, prompting stage and film adaptations. In the United States, he was often called the Jewish Mark Twain; both writers displayed outwardly folksy but artistically elegant satirical humour that captured the national spirit of each writer’s people. List of WorksPrinciple Fiction *Reb Sender Blank un zayn fulgeshetste familye*, 1888 [*Mr. Sender Blank and His Respected Family*]  *Stempenyu*, 1888 [*Stempenyu: A Jewish Romance*, 2007]  *Der mabl*, 1907 [*The Flood*]  *Menakhem-Mendl*, 1909 [*The Adventures of Menahem-Mendl*, 1969]  *Motl dem khazn’s*, 1932 [*The Adventures of Motel the Cantor’s Son*, 1999]  *Ksavim fun a homi-voyazher ayzenban-geshikhten*, 1911 [*Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*, 1996]  *Tevye der milkhiker*, 1912 [*Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*, 1996]  *Blondzhende shtern*, 1912 [*Wandering Stars*, 1952]  *Maryenbad*, 1913 [*Marienbad*, 1985]  *Der bluiker shpas*, 1915 [*The Bloody Hoax*, 1991]  *In shturem*, 1918 [*In the Storm*, 1985]  *Menakhem-Mendl: Nyu York, Varshe, Vin, Yehupets*, 1976 [*The Further Adventures of* *Menakhem-Mendl*: New York, Warsaw, Vienna, Yehupetz, 2001] Principal Nonfiction *Shomers mishpat: oder der sud prizyazhne af ale romanen fun shomer*, 1888 [*The Trial of Shomer, or, the Verdict of the Jury on All the Novels of Shomer*]  *Af vos bedarfn yidn a land*, 1898 [*Why Do the Jews Need a Land of Their Own?*, 1984]  *Funem yarid: lebns-bashraybungen*, 3 Vol, 1916-17 [*From the Fair: The Autobiography of*  *Sholem Aleichem*, 1986]  *Briv fun Sholem Aleichem*, 1995 [*Letters of Sholem Aleichem*] Principal Dramas *Yaknehoyz: oder dos grose berzn-shpil, a komedye fun fir aktn*, 1894 [*A Trifling Matter*]  *Tsezeyeyt un tseshpreyt: bilder funem yidishn lebn in dray aktn*, 1906 [*Scattered and Dispersed: Pictures from Jewish Life in Three Acts*]  *Stempenyu oder yidishe tekhter*, 1909 [*Stempenyu, or Jewish Daughters*]  *Dos groyse gevins*, 1915 [*The Jackpot*, also known as *200,000]* |
| Further reading:  (Dauber)  (Denman)  (Wisse) |