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US History 163, Block 2B

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Window:

“I was the thinnest, smallest girl in our shop, and I earned by piecework bigger wages than the big women. And yet, when I’d bring home the wages to Father, he’d never let me have the money to buy myself something I needed.

A tenth of the children’s wages Father always used to give to charity. And then he belonged to so many societies and lodges that even without our ever getting anything we wanted for ourselves, the money didn’t stretch enough to pay for all the charities Father had to have.”  
(Yeziarska 89)

Mirror:

“‘You’re young yet. You have plenty of time.’

‘It’s because I’m young that my minutes are like diamonds to me. I have so much to learn before I can enter college. But won’t you be proud of me when I work myself up for a school teacher, in America?’

‘I’d be happier to see you get married. What’s a school teacher? Old maids-all of them. It’s good enough for *Goyim*, but not for you.’

‘Don’t worry. I’ll even get married some day. But to marry myself to a man that’s a

person, I must first make myself for a person.’” (Yeziarska 172)

### Window

This passage of the novel explores the ramifications of Sara’s ties to her family and her struggles as an immigrant child of the Old World growing up in America. In this part of the novel, Sara describes her forfeiture of education for family, and exemplifies the conflict between her ideas and those of her father. Sara shows a desire to have her own possessions and money and to be independent, whereas her father believes that she must fulfill her duty to help him. This part of the story interested me because it differs from my own experience in several ways. First, Sara’s father subjects her to a great deal of pressure to conform to his cultural and religious expectations. As the child of American parents, I have not experienced such a cultural struggle and have been encouraged to pursue my own path in life. In addition, her father, following the influence of the Old World, forces Sara to give most of her wages to him so that he can fulfill his religious obligations to give to charity. I have not needed to contribute to my family’s finances because my family is financially secure, and my family believes that the money that I have earned is mine to keep. Finally, my parents are not religious, and consequently I have never experienced the influence of a father who adheres to a particular religion and expects his own children to do the same. It is under these circumstances that Sara’s unique personality and desire to achieve higher education express themselves. In contrast to Sara working mostly for her father’s benefit and being discouraged by her mother from pursuing becoming a teacher, my parents have encouraged me to become educated and to learn to be independent. This quote demonstrates the impact of cultural prejudice on the individual, and the pressure that Sara faced to become more like her sisters.



## Mirror

This quote also exemplifies the contrast between the Jewish traditions of the Old World and life in early twentieth century America. It shows that Sara feels very different from her sisters, which appealed to me because it is something that I have personally felt throughout my life. I myself have felt that I was different from my own sibling, my brother, due to our age difference and his own lack of personal ambition. Sara tells her mother that she must “make myself for a person”, implying that a real person is one who has achieved a certain sense of dignity and accomplishment, and in doing so has become a real human being. She believes that selling herring and working at a paper-box factory is not enough because she needs to gain a sense of pride in herself by making her own choices. She shows a very human aspiration to educate herself and to become independent. I have also had similar feelings, including the same spirit of seeking independence by taking responsibility for my own life. For example, I have chosen to use money that I have earned and received to learn about investing through trial and error, thereby educating myself. I feel a sense of pride because I have learned how to invest money on my own. However, like Sara, I also feel as if I am torn between spending more time to be a greater part of my family and going my own way to determine my future. Sara wants to be a real person, and to go about this, she does not define herself merely by monetary status and its social implications but rather by a greater sense of accomplishment that she cannot explain. Sara’s ability to declare this sentiment to her mother leads her to pursue different things in life rather than simply following the advice of the Torah. Similarly, I want to follow my own interests and feel a sense of accomplishment as opposed to simply following my family’s advice concerning my future. My mother replies that I am still young and that I have time, but I still

feel the same urgency to fulfill my destiny. Sara's response to her mother's suggestion that she get married shows that she faces the difficult decision to reconcile her interests with her mother's interests. This holds true for most of her encounters with her family, and when she never fully reconciles her first decision to leave the shop and her family, she becomes more aware of her deviation from the norms and values of her peers. Although there are some very real differences in time and heritage, the fundamental idea and situation portrayed in the passage is relevant to me.