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Antisemitism as Sociocultural Response: An Analysis of Hemingway & Fitzgerald's Jewish Characters

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Recurring in Hemingway and Fitzgerald's works are Jewish characters who are subjected to common antisemitic stereotypes. In this paper, I will argue Hemingway and Fitzgerald utilize Judaism and antisemitism as literary devices that give context to the sociocultural landscape of America after the First World War.

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Introduction

Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald are undeniably formative figures in early twentieth-century American literature whose works reflected and defined the post-World War I era of disillusionment and the social tensions of a rapidly developing American society. In their nuanced exploration of the growing tension between individual desires and societal expectations, Hemingway and Fitzgerald have consistently highlighted and received recognition for their depictions of cultural anxieties, constructions of social hierarchies, and presentations of resilience, loss, and ambiguity, relevant to the 1920s and 1930s. Recurring in Hemingway and Fitzgerald's works are Jewish characters who often find themselves subject to antisemitism by other characters and common antisemitic stereotypes. Despite the connotations associated with these characters, Hemingway and Fitzgerald utilize Judaism and antisemitism as literary devices and responses that give context to the sociocultural landscape of the post-World War I and Great Depression eras (Pekarofski 53; Wilentz 192). Evaluating how each author employs Jewish characters, as intrinsically tied to antisemitism, reveals how Jewish identity within the historical and cultural context of the 1920s and 1930s illuminates broader societal tensions surrounding identity, outer appearances, and generalized uncertainty about the direction of a world undergoing rapid transformation.

Historical & Sociocultural Context

To assess how Hemingway and Fitzgerald framed Jewish characters and antisemitism as a literary device, it is imperative to consider the historical and sociocultural context of the 1920s and 1930s. In

defining the post-World War I era in the United States as a transitional phase following the tragic devastation of the War, the 1920s saw a rise in urbanization and industrialization, culminating in a shift in how American society experienced daily life, culture, and social mobility. With urbanization accelerating the growth of cities and industrial growth reshaping the workforce and providing more opportunities to citizens, the post-World War I period was marked by both optimism for positive change and stability and widespread uncertainty about the future. This era, in promoting rapid transformation, intensified questions surrounding identity, belonging, and communities. These cultural and economic changes, coinciding with the lingering effects of the War, created job opportunities for many European immigrants to the United States. This group consisted of a significant population of Eastern European Jews, which introduced challenges of Jewish visibility, curating tensions between Jewish assimilation, religious identity, and societal integration (Pekarofski 2012, 54). Despite these tensions, the industrialization and economic growth of the 1920s did increase the visibility of Jewish communities, prompting their presentation, discussion, and levels of acceptance within American society and subsequent literature.

With these rapid social and economic changes and the increased visibility of Jewish communities came a rise in antisemitism. Jewish individuals, following their immigration to and firm establishment in the United States, became more prominently engaged in more professional fields. Despite this, they became subject to and targets of stereotypes and discrimination, which positioned Jewish individuals as outsiders (Tucan & Tucan 12). Due to this outsider connotation, the early 1920s saw the formation of many Jewish conspiracy theories, originating from H. Ford's *The Protocols*, which popularized preexisting stereotypes and themes such as "such as the global Jewish conspiracy, Jewish control over banks and finance, influence in mass media and entertainment, undermining of Western society and culture, the war against Christian traditions, and the manipulation of politics and politicians" (Tucan & Tucan 12). Ford effectively popularized these conspiratorial narratives of Judaism, which aligned with a broader nationwide climate growing increasingly anxious about perceived threats to American stability and identity. There was, moreover, a resurgence of nativist ideology, which came "as a response to post-Reconstruction and to the nation's largest influx of Southern and Eastern European immigrants, whose ethnic otherness represented new challenges to a racially defined sense of nationality" (Pekarofski 52). This further prompted the enactment of anti-immigration sentiment and "religious bigotry that would become central to a re-emergent, revamped, and redefined incarnation of the Ku-Klux Klan" (Pekarofski 53). These developments framed Jewish communities as outliers in American society: to be viewed, predominantly, with suspicion.

With Jewish communities forced to navigate a society in which their assimilation was thwarted through popularized prejudice, the Great Depression further destabilized effective integration and exacerbated antisemitism in America. With increased economic instability and generalized uncertainty about the financial state of the country, new Jewish stereotypes formed, which diminished Jewish people as "cunning, shrewd schemers" (Tucan & Tucan 44), with "hidden political agendas" (Tucan & Tucan 43), regardless of their affiliation as atheist, liberal, Zionist, or communist. Economically, many Jewish immigrants who found stability in financial careers faced antisemitism predominantly from White Christian Americans, who claimed their role in finance was inherently exploitative and evidence of a cultural threat to preestablished economic structures. Moreover, subsequent framing of Jewish people as "the primary adversaries of Christians" and "genetically alien and a threat to the nation's alleged racial purity" (Tucan & Tucan 43) further aided in the perception of Jewish Americans as easily ridiculable outsiders whose presence endangered American societal norms. In line with these outcasting scenarios, Jewish communities began to manage the boundary between economic assimilation and the maintenance of their cultural and religious identities through continued participation in synagogues or other forms of religious life (Glazer 20). This paradox brought forth debates over what being Jewish in America looks like, with some Jews and other communities interpreting Jewish assimilation as an attempt to abandon distinct cultural or religious identities, while others equated efforts to maintain Jewish practices as a refusal to integrate in American society. With conflicting perspectives surrounding

Jewish visibility, subsequent suspicions of Jews as cultural and economic threats, and ongoing debates over assimilation and identity, Hemingway and Fitzgerald's writing of Jewish characters and their embedded antisemitism serve as an environmental response to the anxieties and prejudices plaguing American society in the 1920s and 1930s.

Hemingway & Antisemitism in *The Sun Also Rises*

Throughout *The Sun Also Rises,* Ernest Hemingway directly recounts conflicting societal notions of Judaism through the character of Robert Cohn: a character marked as inherently different from his peers, a presence consistently emasculated and depicted as a foil to the story's protagonist, Jake Barnes. By deciding to open *The Sun Also Rises* with a description of Cohn from Barnes' point of view, Hemingway establishes him as an outsider and "others" him in all aspects of his life. Primarily, Hemingway introduces the notion of Cohn as a boxer who does not enjoy the sport and only participates in it as an effort to "thoroughly counteract the feeling of inferiority and shyness he had felt on being treated as a Jew at Princeton" (Hemingway 1926, 11). With this immediate statement of his Jewishness to the reader, alongside physical references to boxing flattening his nose, which improved his appearance significantly, Hemingway indicates that Cohn's Jewish identity remains intrinsically tied to how other non-Jews perceive him, their subsequent social biases, and commentary surrounding the societal landscape of post-WW1 America (Wilentz 187-188).

Even as Hemingway positions Cohn among his peers, he simultaneously reinforces his Jewish-outsider status through his inability to fit in amongst them due to his lack of masculinity. Building on this early introduction of Cohn as someone undeniably Jewish in appearance, Hemingway repeatedly emphasizes Cohn's social awkwardness in group settings, where he remains the sole Jew. In a conversation with Jake upon returning from a trip to New York to find a book publisher, Cohn confides in him and asks Jake if he, too, "ever [gets] the feeling that all your life is going by and you're not taking advantage of it" (Hemingway 1926, 19). Jake replies that he feels like this occasionally, but berates Cohn for thinking that he can "get away from [himself]" by traveling the world or simply moving from one place to another (Hemingway 1926 19), implying Cohn's emotional weakness. Moreover, in relation to other male presences in *The Sun Also Rises*, Cohn is consistently portrayed as an emasculated figure, unable to participate in activities or conversations that the non-Jewish males can. Hemingway underscores this through the inclusion of the Burguete fishing trip between Jake and his best friend, Bill. As a result of his growing fascination with Brett Ashley, the woman Jake loves but cannot maintain a traditional relationship with due to his impotency, Cohn misses out on the men's fishing trip; he hopes that Brett will return to Pamplona and the two can spend more time together. In revealing that Cohn makes this decision out of infatuation with Brett and emotional desperation for Brett to give him attention, Hemingway suggests that Cohn operates as a man with little to no interest in masculine activities. When Cohn tells Jake and Bill that he will not attend, Bill, who had never previously spoken negatively about Cohn, states, "he makes me sick, and he can go to hell, and I'm damn glad he's staying here so we won't have him fishing with us" (Hemingway 1926, 108). While Bill's anger and disdain for Cohn seems to originate from this one small, insignificant event, Wilentz argues that, in fact, "Cohn proves what Jake and Bill always knew about Jews," reinforcing their belief that Cohn's emotional insecurity and desire to be with Brett place him as fundamentally outside their notions of masculinity and simultaneously "[isolates him] from all male friendships in Hemingway's terms" (Wilentz 190). On the fishing trip itself, Jake and Bill fall into an easy pattern of engaging in the act of fishing and conversing in a homosocial, even homoerotic, manner, Cohn's absence becomes more pointed. With the simplicity of the Burguete trip fostering manly camaraderie between Jake and Bill, the decision to exclude Cohn highlights how Cohn, as a Jew, is seen not to belong in those spaces.

Most prominently, however, the establishment of Robert Cohn as a foil to the story's protagonist indicates that the Jewish identity of Cohn serves less as an identity marker and more as a structural device intended to expose the insecurities and instabilities of Jake Barnes, as a man reflective of the post-World War I American state. From the onset of their relationship, Hemingway makes apparent that Jake both pities and finds amusement in Cohn, who appears "obviously friendless" and "overjoyed to be befriended by Jake" (Wilentz 190). When Cohn first develops feelings for Brett, Jake does not feel challenged by him because of his inability to view him as a legitimate competitor for Brett, stemming from his view of Cohn as an insecure Jew who simply desires others to pay attention to him. When Brett and Cohn begin to have a physical relationship, however, Jake begins to hate him out of a combination of emasculation and resentment. Their sexual relationship serves to remind Jake of his impotence while simultaneously causing him to resent Cohn for possessing a masculine trait that Jake lacks. With Cohn's Jewishness, which effectively separates him from the rest of his peers in *The Sun Also Rises*, and Jake's inability to maintain a heteronormative relationship with Brett because of his impotence, Cohn and Jake operate as masculine foils to one another. While Cohn embodies the masculine traits that Jake now lacks, Jake holds the social capital and recognition that Cohn desperately wants; their individual masculinities cannot exist without one another (Kaye 52). At the end of the novel, Cohn begs Jake for forgiveness to no avail, and Jake resumes his romantic relationship with Brett despite his continuing impotence. Hemingway underscores that, while Jake technically got what he wanted in Brett, his emasculating circumstance remains the same. Thus, rather than casting Cohn as a traditional antisemitic scapegoat, Hemingway utilizes antisemitism and the "othering" of Cohn to explore the construction of interpersonal and physical determinants of masculinity (Kaye 50-53).

Hemingway & Antisemitism in "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen"

Throughout the short story "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen," Hemingway places the character of Doc Fischer in a similar "othering" mold to Cohn, but ultimately utilizes Fischer's outsider status as a means to explore religious and societal hypocrisy. "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen" opens with an unnamed narrator recounting what transpired the previous day when a young boy entered a hospital in Kansas City asking to be castrated due to his "awful lust" (Hemingway 1955, 394). Hemingway eventually introduces and distinguishes between Doctor Wilcox and Doc Fischer; Wilcox disregards the patient completely, while Fischer reassures him that this is a natural experience and "[the way he's] supposed to be" (Hemingway 1955, 394). With the later revelation that the boy self-mutilated with a razor because he misunderstood what castrated meant, Fischer notes that the event happened "on the very anniversary of our Savior's birth" to which Wilcox scoffs and asks, "Ain't you a Jew?" (Hemingway 1955, 395) Fischer acknowledges that he is.

Through this near-concluding revelation that Doc Fischer is Jewish, Hemingway frames Fischer's inherent "otherness" as a source of morality and emotional understanding that ultimately still prevents him from achieving full social and professional recognition. When attempting to ease the fears of the boy, because Fischer is Jewish (despite its unimportance to him), he lacks the knowledge of the "fundamentalist notions of a New Testament sign system" (Lamb 27), under which the boy is interpreting and understanding his body. When "the boy's final act of misreading" culminates in him "[cutting] off his penis instead of castrating himself" (Lamb 28), Hemingway establishes that Fischer could not have done anything to prevent this because his Judaism fails to give him the religious and moral authority the boy seeks. Moreover, Hemingway describes Fischer as having "gambler hands" (Hemingway 1955, 392), and then proceeds to refer to these hands as having a "willingness to oblige and [a] lack of respect for Federal statutes, [getting him in] trouble" (Hemingway 1955, 395). With his profession as a doctor and the further revelation that his wits made him "too damned smart on the coast" (Hemingway 1955, 396), Hemingway implies that Fischer secretly performs abortions. By

performing abortions, Fischer exists as an outsider in both the legal and religious sense, with Hemingway critiquing the Christian structure in both its moralizing effects on the boy and those who act against it. By positioning Fischer as a morally perceptive and sympathetic figure, Hemingway utilizes Judaism and verbal forms of antisemitism to frame Fischer's outsider status in exposing the hypocrisy of the Christian ideals.

Fitzgerald, Antisemitism, & *The Great Gatsby*

Throughout *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald constructs Jay Gatsby as a presence whose socioeconomic status and upbringing prevent him from becoming a true contender for the love of Daisy, who comes from old money. Michael Pekarofski, in "The Passing of Jay Gatsby: Class and Anti-Semitism in Fitzgerald's 1920s America," argues that Gatsby's rise from a poor farmer in North Dakota to a man of excessive wealth through illegal bootlegging at the time of *The Great Gatsby,* alongside his ambiguous ethnic and religious identity and association with Jewish figures like Meyer Wolfsheim, ultimately suggests that Gatsby himself is Jewish and must conceal this identity to integrate into Daisy's Old Money world.

When Nick Carraway reveals the origins of Jay Gatsby's upbringing to the reader in Chapter 6, he reveals that Jay Gatsby, born James Gatz in North Dakota, changed his name to Jay Gatsby following his experience working on the yacht of Dan Cody, where he became enraptured with the potential for a life filled with "all the beauty and glamour in the world" (Fitzgerald 58). While Gatsby, with his family originating from North Dakota, leaves open some speculation regarding his heritage due to the lack of a prominent Jewish community in the Midwest, Pekarofski suggests that the Gatz family originated from a broader movement of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe immigrating to the Midwest to assimilate into farming communities (Pekarofski 57-58). These experiments, designed to promote ethnic and religious integration through the simultaneous act of cultural erasure, are referenced by name by Gatsby's father at the funeral of his son. Gatsby's father says that, if Gatsby had lived, "he'd of been a great man" (Fitzgerald 99) and "a man like James J. Hill." Pekarofski reveals that James J. Hill "was [an instrumental factor] in co-founding a Jewish farm settlement on railway land located in the vicinity of Milaca, Minnesota, in 1891" (Pekarofski 58). Pekarofski argues that, by directly referencing a man associated with the economic movement of Jews to midwestern farms, Fitzgerald subliminally establishes Gatsby on a trajectory of Jewish assimilation that he ultimately fails to complete, namely, integrating into the rigid social hierarchies of Daisy's world.

Moreover, the suspicions surrounding Gatsby's true origins, originating from Tom Buchanan, situate Gatsby as a target of the same antisemitic hostility directed at established Jewish characters like Meyer Wolfsheim. When Fitzgerald first introduces us to Tom Buchanan, he immediately presents him as obsessed with white hegemonic structures. He promotes Goddard's *The Rise of the Colored Empires*, a book that fears the decline of white supremacy, to Nick when they meet for the first time. Through the development of *The Great Gatsby* and Gatsby and Daisy rekindling their relationship, Tom undertakes attempts to expose Gatsby for the fictitious nature of his wealth and the unknown circumstances surrounding his upbringing. When Tom exposes Gatsby in front of Daisy and Nick for "[buying] up a lot of side-street drugstores here and in Chicago," claims to have "picked [Gatsby] for a bootlegger the first time [he] saw him" (Fitzgerald 78), and accuses him of lying about receiving a degree from Oxford, he does not just expose him for lying about his wealth. Rather, he attempts to paint Gatsby as achieving wealth through financial manipulation and as ethnically and inherently foreign, smearing him in a manner reminiscent of 1920s and 1930s stereotypes of Jewish people.

Moreover, Gatsby's status as a potentially Jewish outsider becomes more apparent through his relationship with Meyer Wolfsheim. Wolfsheim, in existing as a narratively defined Jewish character, is tarred with many antisemitic notions familiar to this era. Meyer Wolfsheim exists as a character

perpetuating the 1920s and 1930s stereotype of Jews commonly existing in spaces of financial power and reinforces it through his villainous characterization (Kopf 95). Fitzgerald also establishes Wolfsheim as an embodiment of physical Jewish stereotypes; when Gatsby initiates the first introduction between Nick and Wolfsheim, Nick refers to him as "a small, flat-nosed Jew [with a] large head" (Fitzgerald 40). By physically categorizing Wolfsheim as a Jew before we learn anything substantive about his character, Fitzgerald maintains the period-typical trend of viewing Jews as identifiable through stereotyped physical features. Moreover, the name Wolfsheim consists of an animal reference, which Fitzgerald utilizes to describe Wolfsheim's "animal-like characteristics" (Kopf 97). Specifically, of all of the characters in *The Great Gatsby*, Wolfsheim's name takes on a direct correlation with his character, where Wolfsheim takes on "bestial traits such as [Fitzgerald describing him] eating with 'ferocious delicacy'" (Kopf 97-98). In likening Wolfsheim to an animal, Fitzgerald, whether intentional or not, harks back to the 1920s and 1930s religious bigotry, painting Jews as less than human. Furthermore, Fitzgerald refers to Wolfsheim partaking in a shady business, which further delineates Wolfsheim as something other than human because "the mysteriousness of Wolfsheim's business" promotes the idea of "Wolfsheim as a wizard" (Kopf 198).

These dehumanizations also extend to Gatsby, who, by getting into business with Wolfsheim, becomes implicated in the same antisemitic assumptions that structure Wolfsheim's character. Although Fitzgerald never explicitly defines Gatsby as Jewish, his willingness to work so closely with Wolfsheim allows others, most prominently Tom Buchanan, to view Gatsby as suspect. Wolfsheim, who Gatsby alleges "fixed the World Series back in 1919" (Fitzgerald 40), positions Wolfsheim as the embodiment of this era's stereotype of Jews as suspicious and malevolent when it comes to financial and institutional power. By having Gatsby rely on Wolfsheim to maintain his image of wealth and prosperity, Fitzgerald implicitly links the two characters as reliant on one another, as outsiders in the Old Money society of East Egg. With Gatsby's success and image in West Egg contingent on his bootlegging connection to Wolfsheim, Gatsby, regardless of whether or not he is Jewish, becomes implicated in the same antisemitic stereotypes that define Wolfsheim.

Conclusions

Throughout Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen," as well as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* antisemitism is evoked by the Jewish characters in these works, a result of the cultural prejudices and social hierarchies of the 1920s and 1930s. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway presents Robert Cohn as a Jewish figure, who, because of his religious and ethnic identity, comes across as innately different from his peers. This becomes apparent through physical descriptions fitting him under traditional Jewish stereotypes, his inability to fit in with his male peers because his Jewish identity marks him as unmasculine, and through his dynamic with the protagonist Jake Barnes, where their relationship evolves from friendship to enemies in part due to Jake's antisemitic judgments of Cohn. In "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen," Hemingway utilizes the Jewish character of Doc Fischer and the short story's late revelation that Fischer is Jewish to critique the Christian authority that prompts the tragic self-castration of the young boy. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* scholars theorize that Jay Gatsby exists as a Jewish-coded character in his ambiguous upbringing and in conjunction with his connection to Meyer Wolfsheim, who Fitzgerald clearly outlines as Jewish and defined by antisemitic stereotypes. This positions Gatsby as a figure who cannot successfully join the social world he strives to because of his Jewish coding and Jewish associations.

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