

Artur Piskorz

Uniwersytet Pedagogiczny im. Komisji Edukacji Narodowej w Krakowie

ORCID: 0000-0003-2714-1260

**HESTER STREET:
LIVING BETWEEN WORLDS**

**HESTER STREET:
ŻYJĄC MIĘDZY ŚWIATAMI**

ABSTRAKT

W 1896 roku Abraham Cahan opublikował *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* – powieść o doświadczeniach żydowskich emigrantów w Ameryce. W 1975 roku Joan Micklin Silver zrealizowała film, którego scenariusz powstał w oparciu o książkę Cahan. *Hester Street* otwiera emblematiczną sekwencją rozgrywającą się w szkole tańca na Lower East Side w Nowym Jorku: niezdarne ruchy, przerysowane gesty, nadmierna mimika. Na ścianie napis głoszący, że tutaj mówi się po angielsku. Poniżej to samo w jidysz. Trudno o lepszą ilustrację słynnej wypowiedzi Ludwiga Wittgensteina: „Granice mojego języka są granicami mojego świata”. W nowej rzeczywistości to właśnie język buduje pomost między starym, a nowym, tradycją i nowoczesnością, nawykami ukształtowanymi w opuszczonej ojczyźnie, a możliwościami, jakie oferuje Nowy Świat. W tej perspektywie *Hester Street* wydaje się być czymś więcej niż kolejną opowieścią o przekraczaniu granic, a raczej głęboką i wielowarstwową medytacją na temat „generowania tożsamości” jako procesu płynnego, subiektywnego i zawsze niepełnego.

Słowa kluczowe: *Hester Street* – Abraham Cahan – emigracja – tożsamość – Ameryka – Żydzi

ABSTRACT

In 1896 Abraham Cahan published *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* – a novel about the Jewish experience of immigration to America. In 1975 Joan Micklin Silver turned the book into a movie. *Hester Street* opens with an emblematic sequence set in a dance school located on Lower East Side in New York: clumsy movements, emphatic gestures, exaggerated facial expressions. There is a large inscription on the wall: *English spoken here*. Underneath the same statement is written in Yiddish. It would be hard to find a better application of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s statement: “The limits of my language are the limits of my world”, because it is the language that has to mediate the experience between the old and the new, tradition and modernity, the habits shaped in the abandoned homeland with the opportunities offered by the New World. From this perspective *Hester Street* appears to be more than just another tale of crossing borders. The paper discusses the film as a profound and multilayered meditation on the “production of identity” as a fluid, subjective and incomplete process.

Keywords: *Hester Street* – Abraham Cahan – migration – identity – America – Jews

Introduction

America has always been a country of emigrants who over centuries would either trickle in or come in sudden bursts. The second half of the 19th century brought three major waves of migration. The first was made up of people from northern Europe, followed by those coming from the south of Europe. Eventually, Central and Eastern Europeans decided to pursue their own version of the American dream. Most of them were Jews envisaging America as a potential “promised land”. Consequently, between 1880 and 1900, one-third of the entire European Jewish population migrated to America settling mainly in New York¹.

¹ A very informative description of the subsequent waves of migration to the US can be found in: Roger Daniels, *Coming to America*. New York, 2002, especially in “Part II: The Century of Immigration 1820–1924”.

Ellis Island was a symbolic gate to this promised, or, rather, no man's land: a tumble of frightened and stunned people who, filled with expectations, would make their way through the fence separating the two worlds. People divided by a multitude of languages and united by striking poverty. For it was mainly the poor who went to America in search of a better life and the hope which the New World seemed to offer².

The voyage across the Atlantic was more than just a physical relocation from 'here' to 'there'. It was both, a spiritual peregrination to the unknown and a journey within oneself. The new land was not only a patch of foreign American land, but also a vast expanse of one's own personality. Migrants had to embrace this new territory physically and emotionally. They had to answer the question every stranger has to ask themselves: what part of my character can I do without in these new circumstances and what part must I keep to retain my identity?

THE AUTHOR

Abraham Cahan was born in 1860 Lithuania into an orthodox Jewish family³. His involvement in the activities of the leftist revolutionary movement forced him to leave for the USA. He settled in New York spreading socialist ideas among the Jewish population. Cahan quickly mastered English and in 1896 published his first novel, based on his own experience. *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1897) deals with the problems of acclimatization in a new country, recounting the clash between one's own and the foreign culture, between the traditional and a modern philosophy of life⁴.

² Vincent J. Cannato, *American Passage: The History of Ellis Island*. New York, 2010.

³ Encyclopedia Britannica at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abraham-Cahan> (27.03.2019).

⁴ Abraham Cahan, *Yekl and The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of Yiddish*. New York 1971.

THE FILM

Joan Micklin Silver masterfully extracted the major theme of the book turning it into a screenplay. *Hester Street* opened in cinemas in 1975. The film meticulously reconstructs the realities of life in the Lower East Side of New York at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. It is a story of four people, or two couples, exhibiting two contradictory attitudes to life in the New World: enthusiasm and credulity against caution and reserve. Jake and Mamie are amongst the newcomers who embrace their new life with open arms. Opposite them stand Gitl and Bernstein who remain more sceptical and cautious. From this perspective, the film turns into a meditation on what it takes to become a 'new man' in a 'new world.' The story touches upon numerous issues and problems connected with immigration. However, some of them stand out in terms of their significance and deserve a closer look, such as language, appearance, behaviour, religion and money.

LANGUAGE

The film opens with an emblematic sequence in a dance school located in Lower East Side: dancers moving clumsily, making emphatic gestures with exaggerated facial expressions full of tension. A large inscription on the wall provides the information: 'English spoken here.' Underneath, just in case, the same is stated in Yiddish. A perfect mental shortcut instantaneously setting the context, a context in which there is a clash between the new and the old, the 'here' and 'there.' Best summed up in the Ludwig Wittgenstein's words: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world". And the film addresses this idea right from the beginning. For it is the language that the newcomers have to struggle with from the very beginning. And it is the language that indicates their status and their 'belonging.'

Coming to America marks a new beginning. It amounts to a conscious rejection of the past, forgetting it and embracing a new reality. The first barrier to overcome is language and this involves the adoption of a new communication system: naming the surrounding world, labelling one's emotions and experiencing foreign concepts. Only conversations with the newcomers are conducted in Yiddish. They are 'green', therefore require special treatment. For those already established on the American soil the language of choice is English – often ungrammatical with incorrectly structured sentences and with words derived from the native tongue. The new consciousness is formed laboriously, with a persistent determination to forget about the past.

Jake's linguistic and mental immersion in the new reality is total and uncritical, starting with his own name. So, Yankel becomes Jake and Yossele, his son, turns into Joey. English has to take over Yiddish. A new name forges a new identity. In time even Gitl, though not without Jake's insistence, will begin to speak English. Eventually, she will realise this is the way it has to be. Thus accepting Bernstein's marriage proposal, she will answer to his 'Thank you,' with a smile and the words 'You're welcome.' This is much more than just a polite reply. This is an expression of agreement to experiencing her own version of the American dream. Paradoxically, Gitl will learn the new language from her son. For it is Joey for whom English will become his genuine mother tongue.

APPEARANCE

'This is America!' is a phrase that can be heard many times in the film. For Jake, for Mamie and for many other immigrants their past lives in the Old World have been repressed into the dustbin of memory. America has invaded their life in every shape and form. For in America one does not only speak differently, but one also looks different. The

contrasting appearance of the newcomers and those already settled is absolutely striking.

Jake, seeing his wife after three years of separation, is unable to hide his irritation and it is Gitl's traditional wig that causes his greatest objections. When she finally decides to unveil her real hair, Jake is convinced that she has just put on another wig and pulls her hair in anger. When Gitl, to rekindle her husband's passion, decides to buy a 'love potion', her neighbour, Mrs. Kavarsky, suggests that the best way to Jake's heart is through adopting the accepted look. Gitl, grabbing at air, as she obediently squeezes into a corset, hears a piece of sound advice: 'You wanna be an American, you gotta hurt.' And so it does. Literally and figuratively. It hurts Gitl's body squeezed into the corset, it hurts her soul feeling foreign and alienated. Suffering is the price one has to pay.

Joey's hairstyle also produces reservations in Jake, so he grabs a pair of scissors and violently cuts off the boy's side locks. Joey must not look Jewish, he must not stand out. On the contrary. In America one should look like a proper Yankee and Joey must look like a WASP. Even if at the price of denial of his own identity. At a family picnic Jake strikes a pretentious pose asking his wife to forget his Jewishness and look at him objectively. 'Give a look at me. Am I a Jew or a Gentile? Forget that you know me.' Yet Bernstein spoils his self-confidence wryly quipping: "The Jew will always be a Jew." The tone of his voice mixes amusement with resignation.

MANNERS AND ATTITUDES

The family picnic is also important as it reveals Jake and Bernstein's contrasting philosophies of life. The latter chats to Gitl and then resorts to reading and prayer. At the same time Jake, in a noisy and showy manner, teaches Joey the rudiments of baseball. When the boy falls over making Gitl worry about his clothes, Jake reprimands her: "Let him enjoy!" For

this 'enjoying' becomes Jake's life motto. As an aspiring American he feels obliged to 'enjoy' life even if this enjoyment is largely forced and feigned. Jake's uncertainty is of a poor man who stubbornly and at all costs wants to fit into a new life. And it is himself he wants to convince the most when, with ostentatious self-confidence, he parades through the streets, observes women, buys delicacies from street vendors and eats them with an open mouth 'enjoying' the new flavours. America tastes good. It must taste good.

Jake wholeheartedly succumbs to the illusion he himself creates. America is different from Europe, it does offer new opportunities, but is not free from conflicts and divisions. Jake may pronounce his conviction that the New World is devoid of hierarchy, prejudice and discrimination, when he proclaims: 'Here a Jew is a *mensch*. In Russia we was afraid to walk within ten feet of a Gentile.' But then Gitl confuses him with an embarrassing question – if this is indeed the case, why does it happen that wherever she goes, there are only Jews around. Apparently, Gentiles simply keep to themselves: segregation and discrimination are just much more subtle, less tangible, yet still there.

A new mentality and behaviour are also reflected in gender relations. Jake sees Gitl's inhibitions as an expression of quaintness, if not backwardness. Her hairstyle and clothes remind him of everything he would like to leave behind once and for all. He wants to enjoy more liberal social standards of behaviour and for him Gitl has turned into a kind of ball and chain constantly reminding him of his past life. America can be promiscuous, morals can be looser with men and women 'getting at it' with no hesitation. Jake and Mamie learn this lesson very quickly.

The relaxation of morals applies to both sexes. And there are also some new principles around. When one of Mamie's acquaintances encourages her to demonstrate a greater interest in Lipman, whose wealth is widely recognised, she explodes: 'Where is this? The old country? Is this Poland? Is this Russia? In America, you marry for love!' Yet, this

'marrying for love' does not prevent Mamie from bragging about her savings. She would not like anybody claiming they married her even though she was penniless. The old mentality persists and cannot be easily replaced with the new 'progressive' thinking. The same is true of Jake, who lectures his friends on relations with women: 'American ladies, for a good time, yes. For a wife, no. Get yourself a girl from the old country. She don't ask all the time for a new dress, a new hat. She don't run around with other mens.' Surprisingly, a woman from the 'old country' turns out to make the best wife: modest, hard-working and decent. Paradoxically, just like Gitl.

From this perspective the advances of both Gitl and Bernstein can hardly be compared to any form of courtship since neither of them would express a single word suggesting mutual interest. Gitl, after all, is married. And Bernstein is a devout man admitting that the main reason for his trip to America was his 'unclean thoughts' concerning a woman. And here it looks as if history will repeat itself. This is why the courtship is limited to an exchange of furtive glances, half-words and gestures. Bernstein cannot understand Jake's indifference to his Gitl, who, in Bernstein's eyes, is a noble woman and a wonderful mother. When they finally acknowledge their mutual interest, it is veiled and suggested rather than uttered.

RELIGION

The clash between the Old and the New Worlds also affects faith. America reveals a clear division between those who remain true to their fathers' religion and those who become indifferent. America enforces secularisation. Religion is pushed aside. Adherence to its teachings becomes limited. When Jake learns about his father's death, he puts on a tallit, trying to pray. But his Caddish finishes quickly. Jake cannot pray. He is just sitting in his chair and sobbing, resignedly. Maybe he is crying

out of a longing for his father. Or, maybe, for himself realising how much he has moved away from his own tradition? Jake's religiousness has become lukewarm for faith in America is not a priority. When Jake and Gitl divorce, he is clearly uncomfortable participating in a religious ceremony in the company of a rabbi.

Yet, faith still remains important to Gitl as well as for Bernstein and she is clearly impressed by Bernstein's piety and knowledge. 'To study Torah is to love God' observes Bernstein, although he acknowledges the disregard for spirituality prevailing in the New World. He knows that religion has ceased to be a vital commodity among the emigrants striving for a better life. Bernstein concludes with pessimism: 'When you get on the boat, you should say goodbye, O Lord! I'm going to America!' Bernstein's piety is mocked by Jake who brags about his own earnings: twice as much as Bernstein gets. Competition and the rat race clearly take precedence over religion.

WORK

Work is of fundamental and undisputed importance. It means everything: a new life, success, wealth, position, and respect. A Protestant work ethic as the key to success is accepted without reservations. Jake and Bernstein work in a factory owned by a Lithuanian Jew – living proof that dreams do come true in America. He clearly enjoys boasting in front of his workers that in the home country he was barely a peddler, while in America he runs his own factory and employs workers. In America he is the boss. And only in America would someone like Bernstein, a learned man, work for him and listen to his instructions. A peddler becomes a capitalist, while a yeshiva scholar toils at the sewing machine.

In time even the conservative and cautious Gitl will give in to the prevailing spirit of entrepreneurship. Slowly, but surely she will learn and acknowledge the principles of the new reality. It will be Gitl who

will come up with the idea of opening her own store, investing the money that Jake paid her after the divorce. And in a peculiar shift of traditional gender roles she decides to run the shop herself, changing into a business woman, while allowing Bernstein to stay at home and study the Scriptures. All this will be achieved with great caution, but it will build a bridge between the old habits and the new lifestyle.

Jake marries again. Mamie may be as open-minded as him, yet instead of the expected dowry and a carefree life, the savings of his new wife have to be spent to divorce Gitl. The dream of leaving his mundane and tiring work at the sewing machine is gone for good. On their wedding day Jake also learns how his new wife has managed to accumulate the now vanished fortune. They can go to the civil registry office on foot. In the end, as Mamie explains, tickets cost money. Why not save a few cents on fares? Jake's earlier comments on American women seem to be particularly ironic. For it is Bernstein who quits his job. And it is Gitl who quickly makes a fortune upon her arrival in America.

CONCLUSION

Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it. Hester Street is about such a fulfilment. In the end everybody gets what they asked for. And what they deserve. Jake and Mamie, Bernstein and Gitl, represent not only different personalities, but also different attitudes towards the world. Their behaviour provokes numerous questions: how much do you have to forget the former you to create yourself again? Do you get rid of past traditions entirely, or do you try and cultivate them in spite of the circumstances? Where is the dividing line between a mindless acceptance and a mechanical rejection of the world?

Hester Street is a story about the opportunity to reshape one's own consciousness, about making choices impossible elsewhere. But it is also about the illusion of the limitlessness of this choice. The promised land

of emigrants from all corners the world gives a chance to experience one's life differently and a chance to create oneself anew. The question is whether everyone can use this opportunity. The film does not give a straight answer but only signals potential problems, leaving the answer to be found by the audiences.

Hester Street is a discourse on acculturation, assimilation and cultural shock. But on a deeper level the film is also a philosophical meditation on a multi-faceted identity: national, ethnic, individual. The identity as a source of pressure on individual. It is a story about building one's own identity and the danger of losing it, about searching and fighting for it. It is a discourse on what constitutes identity, what defines it and what allows the individual to survive in a changing, or fluid reality.

In the aforementioned picnic scene in the film, Jake, in his excessive optimism declares that in America even his son, Joey, may one day become the president of the United States. Bernstein cools this enthusiasm: only a person born in America can become president. Yet it is little Joey who turns out to be the unsung hero of the story. For he does not experience the trauma of the New World with such intensity as his parents. The second generation of emigrants will grow up without the baggage of experience brought over from the Old World. For them America will not be a promised land, but will simply become their homeland.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cahan, A., *Yekl and The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of Yiddish*. New York 1971.
- Cannato, V. J., *American Passage: The History of Ellis Island*. New York 2010.
- Daniels, R., *Coming to America*. New York 2002.
- Gitelman, Z. [ed.], *The New Jewish Diaspora: Russian-Speaking Immigrants in the United States, Israel, and Germany*. London 2016.

FILMOGRAPHY

- Hester Street* (Joan Micklin Silver, 1975).