Teaching Guide for: Blume Lempel’s “The Debt” (trans. Cassedy and Taub)

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This reading guide is the third in a series designed to make our translations accessible for use by educators in a variety of settings. We’d like your feedback to make these guides as useful as possible. Please write to pedagogy@ingeveb.org to tell us what you found helpful, what needed clarification, what you would like to see more or less of, and what texts you would like us to produce guides for next.

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Introduction:

“The Debt” is the story of an abortion, but it is also very much about the way a young woman shapes how she sees herself and her circumstances. The story provides a crafted study in how formal choices in fiction can transform subject matter. The surreal, evocative, and shifting descriptions of the action and the interior world of the protagonist make this story more about self-determination and less about how one act might define an individual’s sense of self. Thus “The Debt” provides a unique opportunity for readers to investigate how language shapes experience—in fiction and in life.

The first paragraph of “The Debt” is blunt and scary: a woman is strapped to an operating table, “legs spread.” If one were to read only that first paragraph, they might imagine a very different story than the one that follows. They might imagine a story that describes an abortion in clinical, visceral detail. Or they might even imagine that the scene is the starting point of a horror story in which the woman has no control.

The rest of “The Debt,” however, defies the expectations set out in that first paragraph. The story shifts its style and its focus from the act of the abortion to the movements of the mind and the eye. It contemplates the economy of the body and sex, considers the models of womanhood from which a girl can choose. As the story continues it becomes less about an abortion, and more about how a woman can define the meaning of an action, and of her own story, through imagination.

“The Debt” would be fitting for university or graduate courses on creative writing, women’s literature, Post-War American literature, translation, Jewish literature, other American voices, politics in fiction, the body, Yiddish writers, and more. The following questions are meant to draw students’ attention to how the imagery, diction, setting, and point of view create the meaning in this story.

Formal Questions:

1. Compare the first paragraph in the story and the third. What is the difference between the two scenes in terms of language, style, and setting? How do these differences change the focus of the story?
2. Find places in the story where the protagonist is at a distance from herself and what is happening to her. How does the author create that distance? Does that distance allow the protagonist to see herself in a new way? How is that depicted through metaphor?
3. The protagonist sees herself as somewhere in between the two other women at the clinic. Compare how those two women are described. What are the differences in terms of diction, and in terms of physicality? What kind of spectrum of womanhood do these descriptions create?
4. What images in the story create a sense of threat and which create a sense of calm? How do these shift throughout the story? Do they follow the plot? Are they the plot?
5. What images does the protagonist find comfort in? How does she describe them? What about them does she find comforting?
6. There are several moments in the story when the action is described through metaphor or unrelated imagery. How do these images change the meaning of the action?

7. This story is written in the third person, but we often see the scene through the protagonist’s eyes. Why do you think the author chose to write in the third person? What extra layers of meaning or opportunities for different distances does that choice allow?

8. Look at the scenes that portray the world outside of the clinic. How do they create a contrast with the clinic and each other? Are these scenes real or imagined? What kind of world does the protagonist choose to inhabit in her imagination?

9. Is the scene in which the main character has sex for money described in a similar way as other scenes in the story? Which scenes? How are they similar? Why are these scenes treated in a similar way?

10. Why do you think the girl wants to feel pain? What does pain mean to her?

11. The nurse at the end of the story also provides a model of womanhood. How does she compare to the two women at the clinic? What kind of life does she model? Look specifically at her speech, one of the few quotes in the story.

12. At the end of the story, a childhood memory is embedded in the present. What is the relationship between the story from her youth and the story of her abortion? How is that scene imagined? Is it surreal, mythical, narrative? Is the manner in which it is remembered relate to the narrative prose of the rest of the story?

13. There are erotic elements woven through the story, from the penis of a statue to the “erotic winds” steering her. How does sexuality play a role in how the protagonist sees herself? What role does it play in her life?

14. Find the questions that appear in the story. Who is asking them? The narrator or the protagonist? How do you as a reader react to these questions? Do they change your distance from the protagonist or the plot?

**Thematic Questions:**

1. How do you think this story relates to the current debates in our time about abortion, or doesn’t it?

2. How are family bonds evoked in the story? Is this different from the role family plays in other works of Yiddish literature that you’ve read? How so?

3. Does the fact that this story was written in Yiddish change its meaning for you?

4. How is womanhood depicted in this story? Are the options for how to be a woman different now?

5. How is sexuality portrayed in the story? Compare that sexuality to a contemporary short story about a moment in a young woman’s life.

6. This story was written in a lyric, metaphorical, interior way. How did that shape the moral implications of the abortion?

**Writing Exercises:**

1. Select evocative words in the text and try out replacing them with a different choice. How does this affect the meaning of the story? Some words: fish, erotic, member, grope, poems

2. Reread the last paragraph in this story and write a scene from this woman’s life ten year later. Make sure you can find the roots of your ideas somewhere in the story here
3. Describe one scene—out a window, in an apartment, in a doctor’s office—that transforms in mood. It might move from safe to threatening, from brooding to ecstatic, etc. Make that transformation happen through the imagery and language and not through the action.
4. Place a protagonist in a room. Now imagine that the scene inside the room and the scene outside the window are polar opposites. Try to describe this opposition.
5. Describe a moment in which you felt like you decided who you were, or didn’t, using only description, no internal monologue.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Blume Lempel’s “The Debt”

“The Debt” by Blume Lempel, trans. Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu Taub, at In geveb.

Lia Friedman responds to “The Debt”, at In geveb.

Friedman reflects on Lempel’s story in light of contemporary representations of, and conversations and policy about, abortion.

Troim Katz Handler, “Blume Lempel,” Jewish Women’s Archive Encyclopedia.

A biography of Blume Lempel that includes a bibliography of her published work.


A collection of Blume Lempel’s fiction. “The Debt” is among the translations that appear in this collection.

Related Texts, Images, and Video

This collection of resources discuss the representation of abortion in popular and literary culture. Instructors may wish to ask students to select from among these texts for comparative and/or contextual reading.


Gerstein discusses her desire to represent abortion as a normal medical procedure and the ways that unplanned pregnancy, motherhood, and abortion are sentimentalized and unrealistically portrayed in popular culture.

Sohn describes the work of Manhattan public-health advocate Dr. Benzion Liber, whose 1916 book offers a frank and practical guide to sexual health in Yiddish.


The piece, which includes an image of Kahlo’s 1932 lithograph depicting her own pregnancy loss, discusses multiple interpretations and descriptions of the work.


A personal essay in which Davis describes her abortion, an unexpectedly harsh of the experience.

Sonia Pressman Fuentes, “Eh, Let It Be Already: Abortion in Pre-War Berlin.”

In this interview conducted by the Wexler Oral History Project of the Yiddish Book Center, Sonia Pressman Fuentes, co-founder of the National Organization for Women, tells the story of her mother's experiences with birth control and abortion in Berlin in the early twentieth century.

Literary Texts

This collection of resources discuss the representation of abortion in literary texts. Instructors may wish to ask students to select from among these texts for comparative and/or contextual reading.


Marge Piercy’s novel of two young women coming of age in 1950s Michigan and later New York City reflects the dangers of sex at a time when abortions were illegal. In her introduction Piercy reflects on the current battles to ensure sex and reproductive rights.


This story, which takes place in a maternity ward where abortions are also performed, represents the horrors of hospitals for women who have little knowledge or control over their bodies.


Parker’s story is a dialogue between two friends, one of whom has recently had an abortion.

Christopher Morley, Kitty Foyle. J. B. Lippincott, 1939.

A bestselling novel about a white-collar girl who falls in love with a young socialite. It includes an out-of-wedlock pregnancy and abortion. In 1940, the novel was adapted into a film.
Yiddish Women Writers


A collection of writing by women translated in Yiddish. It includes poetry, prose, fiction, and memoir.


A collection of translations of short stories by Yiddish women writers, including works by Sarah Hamer-Jacklyn, Bryna Bercovitch, Anne Viderman, Malka Lee, Frume Halpern, Rochel Bruches, Paula Frankel-Zaltzman, Chava Rosenfarb, and Rikuda Potash.


A collection of stories translated from Yiddish that feature women characters.


Short stories, excerpts, and personal essays are from thirteen women writers, including Ida Maze, Chava Rosenfarb, Lili Berger and Chayele Grober.


An anthology of women’s writing featuring eighteen geographically diverse authors from Europe, North America, and Palestine.

Yiddish readers looking for women authors from a similar time period may wish to turn to the work of Shira Gorshman and Chava Rosenfarb. Here is a short story by Shira Gorshman, translated by Faith Jones. Here is a link to Chava Rosenfarb reading from her book Di Letzte Libe.