
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Always Hungry: The Short Story as Cultural and Narrative Space in Anzia Yezierska’s Fiction”

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| ABSTRACT

This essay examines the short fiction of Anzia Yezierska. It argues that her literary imagination finds its most compelling realization in the short story, a form uniquely suited to the intensity, brevity, and culturally hybrid perspective of her work. Her narratives explore the immigrant Jewish woman’s struggle for cultural integration and personal emancipation, articulating a persistent tension between Old World deprivation and New World promise. Central to this study is the concept of “hunger,” both literal and symbolic, as a driving force in Yezierska’s prose, reflecting her characters’ spiritual, emotional, and aesthetic desires. The essay situates her writing within the broader context of early twentieth-century American realism and modernist experimentation, highlighting how the short story form enables her to navigate the constraints of her hybrid identity, linguistic innovation, and socio-cultural marginality. Ultimately, Yezierska’s stories are presented as a distinct narrative niche, a concentrated space where memory, desire, and cultural translation converge, producing a voice both intensely personal and resonant with collective experience.

| KEYWORDS

Anzia Yezierska; hunger; short story; *Hungry Hearts*; *Children of Loneliness*

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1. Introduction

This essay examines the short fiction of Jewish immigrant writer Anzia Yezierska. An exile from Eastern Europe who arrived in the United States around 1890, she followed an Algeresque trajectory from the extreme poverty of the New York ghetto to notable literary success, becoming the first and, for a time, the only Jewish American woman to gain national recognition for her short stories. She maintained this distinction until the 1960s, when writers such as Grace Paley and, later, Cynthia Ozick and Tillie Olsen entered the American literary scene. A pivotal moment in Yezierska’s career came in 1920 with the publication of *Hungry Hearts*, her debut collection and the work that achieved her greatest critical and commercial acclaim. The volume comprises ten short stories originally published over the preceding five years in prestigious literary journals. Its success earned Yezierska a place in the Goldwyn Picture Corporation’s Eminent Authors program, which sought to adapt successful literary works to the screen with direct authorial involvement in the screenplay. She accepted a fee of tens of thousands of dollars for a silent film based on *Hungry Hearts* (Hopper, 1922) an enormous sum for the period and unimaginable for a woman long accustomed to living at the edge of subsistence. Seemingly a dream beyond her most daring expectations, Hollywood quickly revealed itself as a nightmare she found

intolerable.¹ Her time there exposed the most materialistic facets of the American Dream, tied to a pervasive cult of appearances that dominated the industry's ethos. The ensuing discomfort devolved into open disdain. Separated from the cultural environment that sustained her identity, her values, affections, and the memories of an Old-World childhood that nourished her storytelling, Yeziarska soon faced a devastating creative paralysis. Within months she fled California and returned to the Northeast. This journey from the Lower East Side to Hollywood and back again proved traumatic, generating a crisis of identity that left her estranged from both worlds: Hollywood's ephemeral panacea and the crowded poverty of the ghetto – a place she could no longer inhabit yet recognized as her only true creative crucible. Even so, Yeziarska promptly resumed her literary work, publishing her second anthology of short stories, *Children of Loneliness*, in 1923.

For the purposes of this study, it is crucial to note that these first two collections constitute the figurative matrix of Yeziarska's entire oeuvre, fully expressing her artistic vision, deeply infused with autobiographical experience. At the heart of her work lies the representation of the American Dream as imagined by Eastern European Jewish migrant women who arrived during the late nineteenth-century Great Migration. For them, America materializes as a fantasy molded by personal ambitions: a promise of vitality and opportunity that drives them toward an unknown future. Yet this dream does not lead to a true Promised Land but to a cultural and identity-based no man's land that confines them in a state of liminality.

Having ascended to national prominence, Yeziarska set aside the short story to test herself against the novel, publishing five works of longer fiction. For many writers, this may appear a natural progression, yet for Yeziarska it proved a fateful step, initiating a significant artistic decline that pushed her to the margins of the literary world for more than two decades. In this light, Alberto Moravia's observation proves strikingly apt: writers accustomed to the still loosely defined conventions of the short story are rarely able to produce a fully accomplished novel (2000/1964, p. 87). Yeziarska's creative universe, thematically tethered to her personal experience of immigration and therefore restricted to a relatively narrow temporal span, proved ill-suited to a medium with vastly broader narrative and historical demands. The novel requires engagement with a reality that, in Moravia's view, is more dialectical, more multifaceted, more profound and more metaphysical than that provided by the short story (2000/1964, p. 77). Unsurprisingly, her novels ultimately form a somewhat monotonous constellation of works built upon minimal variations of the same thematic core: the aforementioned yearning for an Americanizing *Bildung*, invariably shattered against the wall of intercultural incommunicability.

Her first novel, *Salome of the Tenements* (1923), explores this very incommunicability through the account of a failed interethnic marriage. The next, *Bread Givers* (1925), charts the trajectory of a young Jewish exile's integration, foregrounding its considerable emotional costs. *Arrogant Beggar* (1929) revisits the longstanding issue of the assimilationist pressures imposed on immigrant communities during the Progressive Era. *All I Could Never Be*, published in 1932, a roman à clef centered on a fictionalized version of Yeziarska's troubled romantic relationship with John Dewey², constitutes her final creative act before a long paralysis of her writing. Exacerbated by the economic devastation wrought by the Wall Street crash, this silence plunged her once again into poverty. It remained unbroken for nearly two decades, until the publication of *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* in 1950, a partially fictionalized autobiography that reiterates the full repertoire of her earlier narrative motifs. Taken together, these works amount to a persistent reworking of the same narrative material – a corpus that, moreover, lacks a foundational ideological framework capable of sustaining robust character development or a more architecturally complex plot. As the reservoir of her figurative imagination gradually depleted, the texts likewise lost force and intensity. The title of an interview included in *Children of Loneliness* thus serves as a fitting, if unintended, epitaph for her career: "You can't be an immigrant twice" (Yeziarska 2023, p. 269). It is therefore our contention that Yeziarska's narrative imagination finds its most compelling realization in the short story, a form with which her writing shares, as we aim to demonstrate in the following pages, a distinctive structural affinity.

2. Brevity as Intensity

With regard to the fundamental principles of the short story, the aspect perhaps most suited to the specificity of Yeziarska's work is its proverbial brevity. In the present study, brevity is understood not in the Forsterian sense of mere "economy of words" – Forster metanarratively underscores this in *The Curate's Friend*, describing the short story as "suitable for reading in the train" (2014/1911, p. 73) – but rather in the Romantic-inspired sense of intensity. In his famous review of *Twice-Told Tales* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe identifies in short prose narrative an innate capacity to distill a constellation of dramatic elements and channel them harmoniously into a single plot, granting the writer what he termed "the immense force derivable from totality," with the aim of achieving "one single effect" (1979/1842, p. 632). This characteristic, both a distinctive feature and a point of strength of the genre, aligns the foundational mechanisms of the short story more closely with lyric poetry than, as might be expected, with prose.

¹ Anzia Yeziarska, the daughter of a biblical exegete, raised in the veneration of spirituality and in the disdain of materialism, never truly felt at ease in the ephemeral capitalist panacea of Hollywood. All biographical information on Anzia Yeziarska in this essay is drawn from Henriksen (1988).

² For a thorough account of their turbulent relationship see Dearborn (1988).

This view was promoted primarily by the practitioners of the medium themselves. Take, for example, authors Alberto Moravia and Elizabeth Bowen, who associate it with impressions of intensity, feeling, and imagination. Moravia, for instance, attributes to the short story an "indefinable and ineffable narrative enchantment," defining its characters in terms of "lyrical intuitions" (2000/1964, p. 77), while Bowen singles out a particular trait of "amazement" that the short story writer must be able to prolong: "The writer must so strip fact of neutralizing elements as to return to it, and prolong for it, its first power: what was in life a half-second of apprehension must be perpetuated" (1994, p. 258). This narrative compression endows the short story with the "chaste compactness" that, in Walter Benjamin's terms, ensures the stories are preserved in memory (1969/1936, p. 91), providing a striking immediacy rarely found in literary forms of greater scope.

On the linguistic level, this effect also derives from the formal constraints imposed by the brevity of the genre, which necessitates the use of techniques that Roman Jakobson classifies as "metaphoric," based on the principles of similarity, analogy, and association, as opposed to "metonymic" strategies, which favor linearity and complexity achievable only in more expansive literary forms (2012/1963, p. 45). From this perspective, the metaphoric processes inherent in the short story produce a compression of narrative material, heightening both its density and expressive intensity.

This dynamic fully enhances Yeziarska's writing, which from its inception is characterized by a pronounced degree of emotionality and sentimentalism. Her texts are distinguished by a particularly intense and vibrant narrative voice, evocative of traits rooted in the Yiddish literary tradition. This heritage, strongly grounded in oral folklore – long considered in Jewish culture as more closely aligned with the feminine than Hebrew, a sacred and male-dominated language – represents the legacy of knowledge transmitted within a restricted circle.³ The oral transmission, limited for centuries to women due to exclusion from written practice, gave rise to the so-called *bobe-mayses*, a term carrying a pejorative connotation but encompassing a fundamental mythological and cultural core. The word originates from *bove mayse*, literally "story of Bove." Bove was the Yiddish version of the name of the knight Bovo d'Antona, the hero of the eponymous medieval chivalric romance, which existed in various linguistic versions, one of which was in Yiddish, authored by Elyea Bocher Levita under the title *Bove de-Antona* and later disseminated orally by medieval Jewish minstrels. The expression *bove mayse* was eventually vernacularized as *bobe-mayses*, meaning "grandmothers' stories" (Mazte 1912, pp. 19-54); (Rosenzweig, 1997, pp. 158-189). Yet, the full integration of this deeply ingrained cultural voice proves complex, as it conflicts with the characters' conscious efforts to embrace the American cultural ideal.

3. Hunger

It is important to note that, within the economy of Yeziarska's prose, the vestiges mentioned above do not represent a conscious and deliberate recovery of elements from her literary heritage. On the contrary, as will be shown, the author often sacrifices such elements in her attempt to assert herself in the Anglo-American world. Rather, they emerge as the reactivation of a previously repressed cultural and identity fragment – a marker of an enduring attachment to a past that remains, ultimately, unforgettable. On a narrative level, what propels her constellation of female characters onto American shores is a paroxysm of sentimentalism, expressed in Yeziarska's own terms as an intense, omnipresent "hunger," the very term that titles her debut work and comes to constitute its uncontested leitmotif. Her protagonists, in the Old World spiritually and physically deprived of all resources, confined to the stoic condition of the *Broitgeberin* in service of male privilege – traditionally living a life devoted solely to religious contemplation – and constantly threatened by Tsarist pogroms, manifest a profound languor that permeates all the stories – materially, but above all spiritually and aesthetically. This is a consuming craving for freedom, emancipation, and self-determination; a vivid desire for love and beauty; not merely a hunger for life, but an unqualified celebration of it, a resounding hymn to *L'Chaim*, a distinctive hallmark of the Jewish people. Within the stories, this "hunger" is consistently expressed in all its variations through hyperbolic language, rich with metaphors and similes, often of biblical origin, which imbue the prose with an unprecedented degree of intensity and pathos, qualities that amplify its communicative power.

The protagonist of the short story "Hunger," a poor young woman without a dowry and confined to a shabby *shtetl*, dreams of a romantic union that could resolve a life otherwise empty of meaning: a prospect that appears nothing short of miraculous. Significantly, the woman equates the urgency of her emotional hunger with the fundamental physiological necessity of nourishment:

Like the hunger for bread was my hunger for love. My life was nothing to me. My heart was empty. Nothing I did was real without love. I used to spend nights crying on my pillow, praying to God: 'I want love! I want love! I can't live – I can't breathe without love!' And all day long I'd ask myself: 'Why was I born? What is the use of dragging on day after day, wasting myself eating, sleeping, dressing? What is the meaning of anything without love?' And my heart was so hungry I couldn't help feeling and dreaming that somehow, somewhere, there must be a lover waiting for me. But how and where could I find my lover was the one longing that burned in my heart by day and by night. (Yeziarska 1985, p. 17)

³ According to some critics, all women's literature can be understood as a legacy of oral culture. See Cardona (1987/1981, pp. 95, 99); Ong (1986/1982, pp. 157, 223).

Yeziarska's female figures, in particular, aspire to acquire a status denied to them within the tradition of Orthodox Judaism: that of a subject, or, in their own terms, a "person." Their privileged route to this status in the new American reality, as they perceive it, is through engagement with the hegemonic culture, aimed at achieving spiritual communion with their adopted homeland. An indispensable prerequisite for this goal is intellectual emancipation: first, mastery of the American language, and subsequently, the acquisition of a secular education. Accordingly, they do not hesitate to replace devotion to the Scriptures with the rich literary heritage available in the United States. In this light, whereas in Eastern Europe the synagogue constituted the privileged site for ritual practice – and, for women, primarily the domestic sphere – in the United States this function is assumed by educational institutions, especially schools, libraries, and universities. Not coincidentally, the emotion inspired by the aura emanating from these institutions is rendered in Yeziarska's narratives through a wealth of confessional similes and metaphors (De Biasio, 1992, p. 9).

Consider one of the most significant stories in *Hungry Hearts*, titled "How I Found America." Initially set in a *shtetl* ravaged by poverty and constantly under threat of Cossack offensives, the story opens with a communal reading of a letter from America. Its sender is a fellow villager who emigrated some time before, the protagonist of an irresistible upward trajectory from impoverished foreigner to successful self-made man, embodying the "progressive ideals" (Jillson 2004, p. 5) underlying the American Dream. The images of the New World evoked in the letter, a triumph of prosperity and well-being, ignite the imagination of the very young protagonist, Sara Reisel, catalyzing desires she has struggled to suppress. Notably, by blending biblical imagery with the principles of contemporary American nationalist propaganda, she expresses a fervent yearning for education, which in her eyes signifies emancipation, freedom, and spiritual elevation:

In America is a home for everybody. The land is your land [...]. Everybody is with everybody alike in America [...]. 'Plenty for all. Learning flows free like milk and honey'. Learning flows free'. The words painted pictures in my mind. I saw before me free schools, free colleges, free libraries, where I could learn and learn and keep on learning. In our village was a school but only for Christian children. In the schools of America I'd lift up my head and laugh and dance – a child with other children. Like a bird in the air, from sky to sky, from star to star, I'd soar and soar (Yeziarska 1985, p. 112).

A similar fate is reserved to the teaching profession, elevated to a superhuman level, invested with almost miraculous powers, and consequently depicted in hyperbolic terms, as if approaching the Divine itself. One of the most famous short stories from *Hungry Hearts*, titled *Wings*, depicts the immigrant "greenhorn" Shenah Pessah losing herself in a genuine, unrequited veneration for a young teacher, a genteel WASP named John Barnes. From his first appearance in the story, he embodies the personification of the woman's most daring fantasies, a mirage in the desert of her existence, a source of absoluteness, a spiritual nectar ready to satiate her primal hunger: "She only felt an irresistible presence seize her soul. It was as though the god of her innermost longings had suddenly taken shape in human form" (Yeziarska, 1985, p. 4).

Analogous religiously-inflected similes are employed by another of Yeziarska's heroines, the protagonist of *The Miracle*, when describing her English teacher at the evening school in the ghetto: "My teacher was so much above me that he wasn't a man to me at all. He was a God. His face lighted up the shop for me, and his voice sang itself in me everywhere I went. It was like healing medicine to the flaming fever within me to listen to his voice. And then I'd repeat to myself his words and live in them as if they were religion" (Yeziarska, 1985, p. 57).

Americanization, however, does not constitute a compensatory solution to the long-standing deprivation experienced by the protagonists. On the contrary, it exposes them to a different form of isolation, caused both by the forced renunciation of their original cultural, ethical, and religious traditions and by the impossibility of fully integrating into those of their new homeland. The result is a persistently unresolved condition – not a complete restoration of identity, but rather a distinct form of alienation (Vegso 2010, p. 27) – which, in the case of the immigrant women in question, takes the form of a *No man's land* straddling two opposing and irreconcilable worlds.

In this regard, consider Frank O'Connor's volume *The Lonely Voice*, in which he attributes a preeminent role in the development of the short story primarily to geopolitical factors. He observes that the genre exhibits greater vigor and intensity precisely within literary traditions of ethnic or national provenance that, for geographic and historical-political reasons, have experienced isolation of the population or particular social strata. O'Connor cites as examples Russia, Ireland, and above all, the United States. From this perspective, the brief narrative form of the short story constitutes the most effective means of artistically rendering a viewpoint that is geographically, socio-politically, and culturally eccentric relative to prevailing realities – both at the general and individual levels – a characterization that perfectly describes the defining features of Anzia Yeziarska's work (O'Connor, 1963, p. 14). Due to the author's condition of substantial cultural irresolution – and, by extension, that of her protagonists – the stories unfold within the narrow confines of what might be called a sociocultural isthmus of a hybrid nature: a space inhabited by what Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, terms 'interstitial' people, characterized by 'cultural ambivalence'. (1994, p. 7).

A primary artistic and literary consequence is, first and foremost, a narrative material necessarily brief in memory, which the short story effectively contains. In Yeziarska's prose, no concession is possible to the overpowering pull of the past; on the contrary, her linguistic and literary heritage – Yiddish – is deliberately sacrificed in favor of a writing intensely focused on the *hic et nunc*.

Regarding language, she does not merely renounce her native tongue but also the adopted one, favoring instead a compromise solution: a kind of *sui generis* Pidgin English. This sophisticated invention reproduces in English the rhythms and cadences of the ethnolect of Russian and Polish immigrants in the Lower East Side ghetto. Yezierska isolates and defines the foundations of this raw, shapeless, and intangible linguistic material, then renders it in English as fluidly and harmoniously as possible. The result is an unusual linguistic hybrid marked by an excess of Yiddish intensifiers blended with constructions typical of migrants’ broken English, along with deliberately simplified syntax, interspersed with literal translations of idiomatic expressions from the mother tongue. This configuration corresponds closely to what Homi K. Bhabha, reformulating Benjamin’s conception of translation, defines as an act of “cultural translation” (1994, p. 224) in which language manifests the heterogeneity of a population within the framework of a nation.

4. Conclusion

Closed in her own isolation, Yezierska’s fiction shows an inevitable reduction in figurative and technical means, a structural inability to go beyond the specificity of her own experience, toward the contemporary literary and philosophical context and/or toward future glory in posterity. On the one hand, the already mentioned culturally hybrid perspective indeed enforces the impossibility of drawing on the richly endowed literary tradition of her adopted homeland, especially the expressive potentials offered by intertextuality. On the other hand, the predominance of a purely mimetic intent in her writing necessitates the use of traditional narrative tools, akin in many respects to the realist literature of social protest widespread in the first decades of the twentieth century in the United States, and the contextual renunciation of the experimentalism embraced by the then-emerging modernist avant-gardes. In conclusion, it seems plausible to assert that, in Yezierska’s case, the short story form functions almost like a niche, a figurative equivalent of the constant ghettoization endured by the Jewish people throughout their history, a condition consistently reproduced even with the arrival on the longed-for American shore. A space certainly narrow, custodian of memory, consciousness, and experience with a necessarily brief reach, of a painfully circumscribed gaze, yet, as has been observed, bearer of an intense narrative voice, burning with desire and passion, sometimes broken by suffering, bent by the brutality of the Old World and the rigid exclusivity of the new American reality, but always, stubbornly, indomitable. In proudly Yezierskian terms: always hungry.

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