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Scholem Asch: Uncommon neighbors in Got fun nekome: A building shared by a brothel and a family residence

SOURCE DESCRIPTION

Got fun nekome (The God of Vengeance; 1907) is a Yiddish language play by Scholem Asch. The action takes place in the present time (1907) in one large town of a Russian province. It can be read as part of a trilogy depicting the “underworld” together with Motke ganef (Motke Thief; 1917), and Der toyter Mensch (The Dead Man; 1922). The narrative tells the story of the Tchaftchovitsch family, which consists of the father (Yankl), a brothel owner, the mother (Sarah), a former sex worker, and their teenage daughter (Rifkele). Despite parental efforts to keep her away from the “underworld” of the brothel, Rifkele becomes romantically involved with Manke, one of the sex workers at the brothel run by her father. Concurrently, Yankl and Sarah have initiated conversations with the matchmaker and are striving to ensure their daughter is considered a good candidate to marry and start a family. In this way, Yankl and Sarah hope to redeem themselves from their sins of a life linked to sex trafficking. This redemption is unfulfilled since Rifkele runs away one night with Manke. The uncertainty of Rifkele's “pureness” after spending one night with Manke makes her father sabotage the engagement. Scholem Asch (1880-1957) wrote Yiddish novels and plays. He was born in Kutno, a city from the Russian Empire, and resettled in New York City after World War I broke out where he became a US citizen. His publications and the stagings of his plays were often surrounded by public controversies shining light on contemporary sociopolitical issues. This entry refers to the German translation of the play published in 1907 by the S. Fischer Verlag in Berlin.

Space in the narrative

The action takes place in a building divided into two distinct spaces: (1) the domestic residence of the Tchaftchovitsch family on the ground floor and (2) the basement where a brothel is housed and run by the head of the same family. The two levels vertically represent a societal and moral hierarchy whereby the institution of the family is ranked as higher than that of a brothel (“rein” vis-à-vis “unrein”). However, this hierarchical division is questioned by the nature of the relationships that happen in them. In other words, the relationships depicted in the play function as defining factors of the space and, in turn, they challenge the preconceived nature of the space itself.

While the interactions between the young women in the basement are generally characterized by camaraderie, openness, and mutual support, those among the family Tchaftchovitsch are often tinted by violence, fear, and dishonesty. The binary opposition between the brothel and the family quarters is in particular debunked when non-family members enter the Tchaftchovitsch home. These scenes result in the

destabilization of the family quarters as a “respectable space.” An example of this is the visit of Reb Ali, the matchmaker, and Reb Yankev, the pious Torah scribe. Given that Rifkele's parents are trying to enhance the chances of their daughter marrying a “good” young man, they are sponsoring a Torah to be written so that her dowry seems more enticing. This scroll is intended to be placed in Rifkele's room to protect her from evil forces that would doom her to fall into an indecent life path like that of her progenitors. However, their acting as a respectable family in front of their guests reveals itself as hypocritical given that the domestic economy is dependent on a sex trafficking business. Their plan to continue running their business while housing a sacred scroll in their home contradicts a true act of repentance of the sins committed. By revealing these double standards of morality, the institution of the family as a respectable one is questioned.

While the family quarters are to be understood in opposition to the brothel, the narrative also presents other less stable and less fixed spaces offering the characters room for the transgression of their assigned roles. The staircase connecting the brothel and the family quarters serves as a liminal and transformative space that enables the characters to transition into adopting a different role. An example of this is when Manke and Rifkele kiss and hug on the staircase resulting in a transgression of their roles as a sex worker and a pious young woman respectively. Another example of a transitory space is the rain that occurs in the evening. The “first May rain” functions as a transient space where Reizel's, Basha's, and Manke's characters are not restricted in their roles as sex workers. In this passage, their characters are multidimensionally depicted as having dreams and plans for their future lives as well as being reflective of how partaking in sex work has impacted their lives, both by setting limitations but also by offering opportunities they were deprived of.

Space(s) and morality

Of all the characters, Yankl is the one who freely moves between the family quarters and the brothel as he is the head of the family and the owner of the brothel. Any time the other characters leave and move to a different space, they are transgressing some sort of societal rules associated with their statuses. For instance, when Rifkele furtively visits Manke in the basement, she is physically assaulted by her father when he finds her there. Her mother had previously commanded Rifkele not to tell her father about her friendship with Manke since she is not “a respectable child, a decent Jewish daughter”. As a “good” daughter (“eine reine jüdische Jungfrau”), she is not supposed to enter the brothel. Another example of characters outside of their designated space is the scene when Hindel, one of the sex workers, and her presumed fiancé Shloyme visit the family home to discuss her leaving the brothel, Yankl insistently expresses to them that they do not belong in that space and they all must move to continue the conversation downstairs.

Yankl's roles as a brothel owner and a protective and caring father emphasize the hypocrisy and the double standards applied to different life spheres of his life. Although this also applies to other characters, the contradictions of Yankl's character are the most acute. In contrast to his physically violent actions while in the basement, he strives to show himself as caring and protective of his daughter. However, this conflict of values leads Yankl to debase his wife Sarah for her past life as a sex worker and physically assaults Rifkele as a punishment for having entered the brothel. As explained above, the most illustrative example of Yankl's hypocrisy is the fact that he is planning to sponsor the writing of a Torah scroll to be

housed at their home while still running a business in the basement of the house. His daughter and his future son-in-law's piety should make amends for Yankl's and Sarah's past wrongs and sins. However, the end of the story with Rifkele potentially having lost her virginity to one of the sex workers proves God's revenge and anger in impeding this redemption.

Stagings of the play

Got fun nekome's premiere was directed by Max Reinhardt and ran in repertoire from March to September 1910, at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. One year prior, Asch had discussed this work with his Yiddish Warsaw colleagues including Y. L. Peretz who raised concerns about some of the themes showcased in it. After Berlin, the play was presented on other European stages including other cities in Germany, Austria, Russia, Poland, Holland, Norway, Sweden, and Italy. In February 1923, the English-language production at the Apollo Theatre in New York City encountered a strong negative response from the authorities. The cast was arrested and charged with obscenity. As a response to “the wrong interpretation of [his] play”, Shalom Asch released an open letter defending the artistic morality of the piece and referring to the positive reception from various European stages.

Controversies
The play's depiction of a Torah scroll led the censor of the 1982 Beer Sheva Theatre's production in Israel to establish that the use of a prompt of a Torah was to be restricted to the upstairs of the house and not to the basement, where the brothel was housed. In Asch's text, the scroll is never in the basement even though the characters consider it to have been “defiled.” The inclusion of a kiss scene between two women which has been considered very avant-garde in the 21st-century stagings of the play caused an uproar in Broadway in the 1920s. In an open letter dated February 1923, Asch states “This love between the two girls is not only an erotic one. It is the unconscious mother[ly] love of which they are deprived.” In this way, the author explained his choice to include this scene in the play.

Conclusion

At its core, the play denounces false attitudes striving to appear righteous yet acting differently in other spheres of life. Yankl's character illustrates this compartmentalization of life that crumbles throughout the narrative. In this collapsing process, Yankl's repentance is unsuccessful given its insincere nature that relies on his daughter's actions rather than his own. This performance of religious/moral hypocrisy in front of non-Jewish audiences was another concern that was raised after the staging of the play in New York City. In this sense, Asch defended that his play was not a “typical Jewish play, [but] a play with an idea. Call “Yekel” John, and instead of the Holy Scroll place in his hand the crucifix, and the play will be then as much Christian, as it is now Jewish.” Thus, Asch defended the universality of his creation and emphasized the moral questions raised in it rather than the milieu of the Tchaftchovitsch family.

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Recommended Citation and License Statement

Juana Torralbo Higuera, Scholem Asch: Uncommon neighbors in Got fun nekome: A building shared by a brothel and a family residence, in: Jewish Textual Architectures, March 03, 2025. <https://jewish-textual-architectures.online/article/jta:article-8> [October 26, 2025].