

### ***Spinning Silver* Lesson Plan 3**

#### The Magic of Language

Created by Emily Pearson and Jason Abad

**Overview:** This lesson asks students to consider the central (and magical) role that language and naming plays in *Spinning Silver* and connect that role to the themes of Jewish diaspora within the novel. This lesson focuses on passages from pages 282-379.

This lesson includes an activity that has been adapted from the “Object Lesson” exercise included in Diana Fuss and William A. Gleason’s *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 exercises for the college classroom*.

#### **Objectives:**

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Define “speech act”
- Understand the term “Jewish diaspora” and explain how it relates to *Spinning Silver*
- Articulate how names, naming, and speech acts function in *Spinning Silver*

#### **Class Structure:**

*15 minutes:* Lecture on Jewish diaspora & language as magic

- As we’ve discussed in previous classes, Miryem faces a multitude of problems at the beginning of the novel: she is impoverished, she is an unmarried woman, she is separated from most of her extended family, and she is Jewish. **Can anyone tell me about the Jewish community in *Spinning Silver*?**
- Miryem and her family are largely cut off from other people of their faith. Their religion is not the dominant one in Lithvas, and, in general, Miryem feels disconnected from this country. This is linked to the antisemitism discussed in our first lesson, and also to the fact that there wasn’t anywhere safe for Miryem and her family to go. This is a representation of **diaspora**, or the “dispersion of the Jewish people beyond the land of Israel” (OED).
  - The Jewish diaspora lasted for thousands of years and spread the Jewish peoples across multiple continents where they often faced persecution and hardship.
  - The dispersion and lack of a homeland meant that the Jewish people had to find other ways of creating and communicating culture. This problem became more urgent in the 20th century after the Holocaust, and language became an especially important tool in communicating culture and connecting with other Jewish people.
  - As Veronica Schanoes writes: “Because the Nazis murdered most of the Yiddish-speakers of Europe, and the survivors were dispersed around the world, the Yiddish language became not a primary, quotidian means of communication, but a way of indicating one’s origin and affiliation. The language ends up being a replacement for the physically destroyed homeland.”
- Obviously, *Spinning Silver* is set many centuries before the Holocaust, but this idea of creating communities and connecting through language appears again and again in this section through the importance of names and naming. Names are important here. They can bind people together, creating ties and loyalties—they create community. One example occurs when Miryem names Rebakkah.

- Read passage from p. 321
- This episode shows us the value that the Saryk people place on names and the act of naming. It gives someone an identity, it honors them, and it binds you to them.
- Flek, Tsop, Shoffer, and Rebekah are honored to be named by their queen, and Flek no longer wants Rebekah's father to give her a name because then they would be bound to him. Naming creates community and bonds characters together in a way that is both familiar and distant.
  - Can anyone remind me what the name for that is—something in fantasy that is the same yet not as our world? **defamiliarization**, specifically defamiliarization of basic patriarchal naming rituals.
  - When agreeing to Flek's request to name her daughter, Miryem follows a more matriarchal model by naming her "Rebekah bat Flek" which roughly translates to Rebekah daughter of Flek. And in case you worried that this naming stuff was a little too subtle: "Rebekah" roughly means "to bind or tie" in Hebrew.
  - In naming Rebekah, Miryem takes on a responsibility for Flek's daughter and connects her to the Jewish community. The act of naming binds these characters together.
- But at the same time that names are a generative force in this section, creating bonds and connecting peoples, they are also a controlling, destructive force that the Saryk king, in particular, fears as he refuses to give his own name and to use others' names.
- Names hold a particular significance in Novik's *Spinning Silver*. For example, as we just discussed, they have the power to bind, which, in many cases, is a kind of generative power that can bring people together to create a community. For this exercise, we're going to look at another kind of power Novik invests in names, another kind of binding: the power to restrict. This is the power to reign in--to prevent from going beyond an established boundary. For the Saryk in *Spinning Silver*, knowing and using someone's name gives the speaker the power to control and command that person.
  - For example, on page 344 of the text, the Saryk king tells Chernobog that, while he'd "never seen [Chernobog's] face before," he knows [Chernobog's] name." Later, using that name, on page 348 at top, the Saryk King commands Chernobog out of Minatias's body and into the fireplace
  - The second paragraph from the top. "A big hissing cloud of steam came off the Saryk's hands, and he looked like it hurt him, but he still grabbed the tsar, and then he threw him down into the fireplace, and said, 'Stay where you belong, Chernobog! By your name I command you!'"
  - So, names hold meaning in Novik's work. To look at this we'd like to try an activity that considers a bit more of the meaning of these names by looking, specifically, at the words she uses in place of names and how she uses the indirect address of characters to construct those characters.

25 minutes: Le Mot Juste exercise

- **Instructions:** For this exercise, provide a double spaced, large font handout of the passage below with the word "devourer" crossed out using the strikethrough function of a word processor (handout attached to lesson plan). Place students into small groups. Each group will carefully read the passage and use the *Oxford English Dictionary* or any other reference you find relevant, to consider the connotations (aka implications) and denotations (aka definitions) of a particular word. This will help students to understand

the power of using the right word at the right time. Remind students to look up the meaning of both the original and your alternative, considering their meanings AND their associations, in both the passage and the work as a whole. Ask each group to write the word they've selected on the board.

- **Passage:** But the Staryk said suddenly, fiercely, "Do you think to catch me so easily, ~~devourer~~? I have never seen your face before, but I know your name, Chernobog." He jumped forward and took hold of the chain in the middle with both his hands. Ice went suddenly shooting along its length long sharp points of icicles growing out of it like a whole blizzard happening at once, and the ice went all the way to the tsar's hands and climbed over them. He howled and let go of the chain. The Staryk threw it to the floor behind him with a crash and then he struck the tsar with the back of his hand." (Novik 344)
- Once all groups have written their selections on the board, ask each group to defend why the word they've chosen, addressing the meanings and associations of their selection and the original word.
- After each group has explained their choice, have the class vote on which word is the best replacement for "devourer."
- After the class has voted, ask the following questions about the winning selection:
  - For those of you who think [winning word] is the best alternative, what made you choose this one?
  - Thinking about this word and the original, "devourer," are there any ways in which this new word departs from the meaning of "devourer?"
  - And, what, if anything, do you think is behind the author's selection of this word from all the other words she could have chosen?

*10 minutes:* Discussion of names and magic

- Ask students to consider this passage from page 300:
 

While Myriem and her mother are waiting at the gate they meet another Jewish woman. When Myriem's mother and the woman start talking, they first mention the tsar. Then they each tell the other where they're from. Finally, when Miryem's mother mentions she's in town for her niece Basia's wedding, the woman exclaims that her nephew is Issac.

The woman uttered a glad cry and took her by the shoulders. "My nephew Isaac!" she said. They kissed each other on the cheeks, embraced, and then were talking of names of people I didn't know: they were friends, as easily as that. I did not understand how they had found each other standing in that long line of all those many people. It seemed like magic.
- Ask students to consider the following questions: Given the text's use of names, what does it mean to say that names are a kind of "magic?" And how does it connect to Jewish diaspora?

### Sources:

Fuss, Diana, and William A. Gleason, editors. *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 Exercises for the College Classroom*. Princeton UP, 2016.

Novik, Noami. *Spinning Silver*. Del Ray. 2018.

## Le Mot Juste Exercise Handout

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