

The Gambler and The Journey

A Comparison of Worlds in Two Short Stories

Lesson Plan

Ages: **Middle and High School**

Duration: **Two to Three Lessons**

- **Introduction**
- **Educational Objectives**
- **Lesson Procedure**
- **The Stories:**

[The Gambler](#)
[The Journey](#)

- **Questions on The Gambler**
- **Questions on The Journey**
- **Information on the Author**
- **Answer Sheet for the Teacher**

Introduction

Joe Lumer has given readers a look into the rich tapestry of Jewish life in Poland between the two world wars. The tragedy of the Holocaust casts an overwhelming shadow over the preceding period, obscuring the vibrancy that pulsed through the Polish-Jewish world. This collection of short stories written by Joe Lumer helps to restore the fabric of Jewish communities living side-by-side with their Christian neighbors, focusing on life before rather than the ensuing catastrophe.

Noah the Water Carrier and Other Stories is an age-appropriate anthology for middle and high school pupils. This lesson plan is based on two short stories in this collection which highlight the contrasting Jewish worlds in Poland.

Educational Objectives

- After reading these stories, pupils gain a better understanding about Jewish life before the Holocaust.
- Pupils will better grasp how Nazi anti-Jewish policies destroyed Jewish communities in existence for hundreds of years.
- Pupils will read about different life styles, social strata and levels of religious observance amongst Jews in Poland.
- Pupils will learn about minorities in society.
- Pupils will learn about Jewish customs, traditions and symbols.

Lesson Procedure

After the pupils have read "The Gambler", they can start answering the questions below either individually, in pairs or in small groups. Alternatively, the teacher may wish to ask three or four pupils to dramatize the story with a narrator in front of the class.

The two stories can be studied independently. However, the contrast created by reading both stories highlights the different worlds they depict and the last question of "The Journey" links the two stories with an interesting task for the pupils.

The Stories:

1. The Gambler. To read this story online, [click here](#).
2. The Journey. To read this story online, [click here](#).

Questions on The Gambler

1. The story presents two main groups of men. How would you describe the main differences between these two groups?
2. How would you describe any similarities you notice between them?
3. Anton is the leader of one group. How would you describe him to someone who hasn't read the story?
4. Anton's friend Lazer is described in the story as having " a *Talmudic* passion for detail". What do you think this phrase means?
5. Do you think this expression is complimentary or derogatory?
6. Read the last paragraph of the story again. In what way could Lazer be described as the hero of the story?
7. The three main Jewish characters in the story are very different from each other. Compare and contrast Max, Anton and Lazer.
8. Ephraim, Max and Lazer's parents all work in different professions. Describe the social class to which their families belong.
9. There are only two indirect references to the traditional, religious Jewish life style in this story. Is the social milieu in which the friends grew up and their behavior in the story surprising to you? Explain your answer.
10. Match the following two lists to form expressions appearing in the story. Six nationalities are mentioned in these expressions. What effect does this multi- national aspect create in such a short story?

Polish - cigarettes

Russian - pigs

Bulgarian - insurance agent

Ukrainian - sausages

Zhid (Jewish) - accent

German - smugglers

Questions on The Journey

Glossary:

Reb Alter - an elder in the community

Four fringed *tzitzis* - ritual vest or undershirt

Shacharis - the morning prayers

Book of Jonah - Scroll read on *Yom Kippur*

Ulica Zydowska - "Jews" Street in Polish

Kipah - religious head covering

Shul - synagogue

Shammes - sexton, synagogue assistant

Shabbes - the Sabbath

Amalek - an enemy of Israel mentioned in the Bible

This story, in contrast to "The Gambler", denotes a very traditional, religious picture of Jewish life in prewar Poland. The story is peppered with italicized references to Jewish sources and prayers and is the polar opposite of the reality in which Anton, Lazer and Max live in the previous story.

1. The whole story is suffused with Jewish traditional motifs as we follow Reb Alter on his way to *Shacharis*, the morning prayer service. However, the last two lines of the story provide a surprising contrast. What might the author have intended when he invoked the cathedral's bells echoing just as Reb Alter is approaching his *shul*?
2.
 - o The following quote contains some of Reb Alter's reminiscing and thoughts on the past.

"Krakowska Street. How many times Rivkele and I strolled here on a Shabbes afternoon and looked into the windows with their chocolates and dresses and fancy hats and looked down the street toward the dome of the new railway station and the other Jews walking with their families in the park and we met them and nodded our heads and the women talked and the men too and the summer afternoons drifted by. T. was a good town then, before the great war."

 - What period of time does the quote refer to?
 - How does Reb Alter feel about this time in his life?
 - o The following quote brings us forward in time to his thoughts as he walks to morning prayers:

"...he sees the black wings circling the sky, watching with evil intent the weak

old Jew crossing that sea of cobblestones. You again. Every morning, it is you again. Waiting for me to fall, waiting for death. I know you want my flesh, black beak tearing at my heart, but you will have to wait one more day, Amalek!"

- How do you explain his change of mood in light of the changing historical currents?
 - Who does *Amalek* represent for Reb Alter?
3. Reb Alter lives Jewish tradition and the author's portrait of him is a loving depiction of the religious, observant way of life. Yet both his body and his mind are betraying him in his old age. Describe the different ways the author portrays the traditional Jewish life-style through Reb Alter?
 4. **(The following question is designed for classes that have read both stories.)** Reb Alter and the three young men from "The Gambler" live in completely different Jewish worlds. Imagine a meeting between Reb Alter and the three young men from "The Gambler" and write a short dialogue that the four of them might have about their different life-styles. (The dialogue should include some of the terms outlined in the glossary.)

Information on the Author

Joe Lumer was born in a Displaced Persons Camp in Germany at the end of the Second World War. In 1984, he accompanied his father on a trip to Bilgoraj, his father's home-town in Poland. The trip had an important effect on the author's sense of being surrounded by a vanished world, triggering him to compose these stories about people who might have once walked the streets of Polish towns and cities.

If you would like your class to establish contact with Joe Lumer as a result of 'meeting' some of his characters, [click here](#).

Answer Sheet for the Teacher

THE GAMBLER

1. The first group is comprised of young Jewish men, adventurers, who, after a game of cards at the Rivers Inn, leave to meet with the second group of men, Ukrainian non-Jews involved in smuggling activities with the Jewish group. The reader becomes aware of an underlying antisemitic attitude of the Ukrainians to the Jews.
2. Both groups are involved in illegal activities involving smuggling across the Polish border.
3. Anton is the natural leader of his group. He is well dressed, projects a dominating image and we are led to imagine a good-looking young man who could pass as a

non-Jew. The word 'contemptuous' is used to describe his card playing style and this description reverberates in the story.

4. "*Talmudic passion*" is usually a positive quality that involves mastering details.
5. The author is coloring the personality of Lazer in a complimentary way by linking it to the time - honored world of the *Talmud*.
6. Although Lazer is described as a slight figure, he is the protagonist who administers the saving blow to the Ukrainian at the end of the story.
7. Anton: the undisputed leader of the group.
Max: the short tenacious fighter of the group who is sent ahead to meet the Ukrainians. He is described as fearless.
Lazer: the thin, intelligent member of the group
8. Max's father was a furniture mover, Ephraim's father was a butcher and Lazer's parents had a stall in the fish market. All three families came from the poorer working classes of Poland.
9. All the young Jewish men in this story are apparently not part of the traditional, religious Jewish life-style pursued by other segments of the Jewish community in Poland. They appear assimilated and involved in illegal smuggling activities.
10. Polish - insurance agent
Russian - accent
Bulgarian - cigarettes
Ukrainians - smugglers
Zhid (Jewish) - pigs
German - sausages

The young reader is subtly introduced to the European reality of very varied populations living in close proximity one with the other and the subsequent cross-pollination of cultures.

THE JOURNEY

1. The story focuses on Reb Alter's 'journey' from his home to the synagogue to attend the morning prayers. Through much reminiscing and other stops along the way, he approaches his destination with the ironic call to prayer of the 'cathedral's bells'. The church bells remind the reader that the Jewish minority existed within a Christian majority in Europe. This juxtaposition at the end of the story could be interpreted as a call for the universality of prayer wherever it ushers forth.
2.
 - o The first quote refers to the period before 'The Great War', prior to 1914. The author paints an idyllic picture of Jewish families strolling at their leisure, meeting friends and discussing daily news.

- The second quote is an ominous premonition of things to come. The invocation of the biblical *Amalek*, representing the constant adversary of the Jewish people creates the contrast from the period before 1914 to the advancing twentieth century and its descent into the Second World War and the Holocaust.
3. The author portrays traditional Jewish life by means of the following:
- frequent quotes from the Bible.
 - mention of prayers from the daily prayer book
 - Reb Alter's determination to get to morning prayers despite his advanced age and the sheer physical difficulty.
 - his reminiscing invokes the Jewish family traditions he and his late wife had observed together.
4. This exchange could be presented by the different groups of pupils in front of the class or given as a homework assignment. Teachers may wish to further discuss these dialogues as part of a class discussion on multi-culturalism.