Social And Cultural Connotations Of Fiddler’s Release And Its Americanization Of Judaism

The act of remembrance is strategically used to explain a group's past and to transform it into a reliable collective identity for the group’s present. In his foundational work, Realms of Memory, Pierre Nora defines memory as “subject to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting” while simultaneously “collective...yet individual.” Fiddler on the Roof (1971), an adaption of Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye the Dairyman (1884), homogenizes both the shtele and Tevye into a western mode of “reliable identity” as filtered through post-WWII memory. In order to understand why the film diverges so far from the original text, I will focus on the social and cultural connotations of Fiddler’s release and its Americanization of Judaism.

In the opening sequence of Fiddler shtetl life is depicted as dreamscape: the sun rises while the lens spans across the village, the sky takes on a pink hue as birds chirp and grass blows in the wind. The silhouette of the infamous fiddler is shown atop a roof as the scene quickly cuts to Tevye who, in breaking the fourth wall, looks directly at the camera:

“A fiddler on the roof… Sounds crazy, no? But here, in our little village of Anatev, you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof. Trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck.”

The motif of the fiddler, as it appears on stage and in film, has become analogous to Tevye and American-Jewry as a whole. The musical’s namesake was inspired not by Sholem Aleichem’s writing, but by a series of paintings by French artist Marc Chagall. In Chagall’s paintings, the shtetl is depicted as celestial and otherworldly. Where Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye lives in a small village (or dorf), America’s Tevye is placed directly inside the shtetl. Tevye’s landscape changes both literally and figuratively as the shtetl takes on the image of an idealized, holistic community. The homeland is mythologized--thus, shtetl becomes allegory for “The Old County”--irrevocably lost to today's present. The dreamscape is further enhanced by cinematographer Oswald Morris’ decision to place a woman’s stockings over the camera lens--lending to the film’s dreamlike fuzziness.

In this sense, Tevye himself becomes the shtetl--that is, until he is forced to leave it. The fuzziness that surrounds the shtetl surrounds Tevye himself. Fiction and fact are interdependent “as should become clear (…) the purely literary and the purely historical worlds were never really pure of each other, but were often all too tragically interdependent.” In creating a narrative, factual or otherwise, historical inferences can be made regarding a plurality of meaning. The blurring of identity--of fact and fiction--permits the children of suriviors to reimagine a home before the Holocaust--to claim their ancestors’ memories as their own. Tevye’s purpose is twofold--he is the grandfather of “The Old Country” while simultaneously a pilgrim of “The New World.”

In the original text, Sholem Aleichem is responding to a modernizing world through the voice of Tevye. In having Tevye address the audience directly in the film, the movie is able to echoe Sholem Aleichem’s original text stylistically. However, this breaking of the fourth wall highlights the film’s inability to distinguish the past from the present. Tevye stands as an

anachronism--filtered through the vantage point of the present. After WWII, representation surrounding Jewish identity in film took on a commemorative function--serving as both document and monument. Document insofar as the film portrays American-Jewry and establishes a collective view of a “vanished/lost” world. Monument insofar as the film seeks to commemorate shtetl life--or what is depicted as such--as it existed before. Fiddler transforms Tevye into an Americanized tradition--an ambiguous, nostalgic image of Jewry that is ultimately easier to identify with. Tevye is a man in translation and in transition; he is wholly remade--linguistically and culturally.

Jewish adaptability becomes synonymous with American individualism and idealism, as Tevye’s three daughters’ marriages alter tradition--transforming it into something more comprehensible to an audience watching in 1971. In the film, after Perchik and Model inform Tevye of their plans to marry, Tevye asks himself: “Our old ways were once new, weren't they?” In Tevye’s adaptability, there is an attempt to create a positive origin for Judaic-American assimilation. During the song Sunrise/Sunset: Golde sings: “I don't remember growing older / When did they?” Time and setting become adaptable; the shtele as place and experience takes on a universal connotation, as do Golde and Tevye as they mourn their youth. The word “they” has a double meaning: “they” as in Golde and Tevye’s daughters and ”they” as in the Jewish people and their traditionalism.

In Sholem Aleichem’s text, the central conflict revolves around Chava--Tevye’s favorite daughter--and her marriage to Fyedka, a Russian gentile. The marriage as it was originally written, leads to Chava’s abandonment of the Jewish faith and conversion to Russian orthodoxy. In the film, Chava does not convert, only marries outside the faith. In reshaping Chava’s narrative, the central conflict and Tevye’s moral principles are completely reimagined. In the text, Tevye is grief-stricken--accommodation is acceptable but conversation is not-- and a line is finally drawn. Chava is dead to him, “...she’s not my daughter anymore. She died…” In the last episode, Lekh-Lekho, Chava returns to her family--without Fyedka--joining them in exile. Despite her return, Sholem Aleichem leaves it up to the reader to decide if Tevye will forgive Chava.

Unlike the original text, Fiddler ends with Chava returning to her family, with Fyedka, only to announce they, too, are leaving the shtetl for a more just society. Tevye ignores her, and in response, Fyedka--acting as a mouthpiece for The United States--says: “Some are driven away by edicts, others by silence.” This confrontation eventually ends with Tevye acknowledging Chava by calling after her: “God be with you!” The heroic moral authority is put into the mouth of the non-Jewish Russian, bringing into question the function of Fyedka in the 1971 film. Though Tevye’s suspicion towards Fyedka is maintained, the marriage is legitimized in the context of a “modern” mixed marriage. In Fiddler, not only is there a chance to affirm a Jewish-American identity in Tevye, but there is an opportunity for the United States to solidify their own heroism in the non-Jewish Fyedka. The United States can revise it’s isolationism in post-war consciousness.

The sense of hope that is felt at the end of Fiddler is undermined by the image of forced eviction and the traumatic recollections that image conjures in a post-modern world. In the last minutes of the film, there is imagery that cannot be separated from The Holocaust. The Russian Soldier who delivers the edict but was “just following orders” is shown looking distraught as the scene transitions to clip after clip of Jewish men, women, and children forced to leave their home, marching in the cold. The shtetl becomes a symbol for before--a site of memory.

In creating an origin for the Jewish-American identity, Fiddler is able to establish continuity where continuity has been lost. Events in Jewish history and their literary representations have “always been incorporated as paradigmatic points of references used to organize current catastrophes.” In Fiddler’s case, the Russian pogroms become an archetype through which the Jewish identity is measured. Meaning, the pogroms are recast in different lights and cultural contexts. This is not because the event itself is analogous to that of The Holocaust, but in the collective minds of Americans, the Jewish identity--or Tevye and his family’s eviction--are seen through the lens of post-WWII memory.

In the last episode of Sholem Aleichem’s series, Tevye, after his forced eviction by the Tsar, writes: “Today Pan Sholem Aleichem, we met on the train but tomorrow may find us in (...) Warsaw, or maybe even in America… unless, that is, the Almighty looks down on us and says, ‘Guess what my children! I’ve decided to send you my Messiah!’” Temporally and spatially, Tevye is meant to be adaptable. This is clear to readers of the original text as the stories were published sporadically over the course of almost 20 years. Despite Tevye’s adaptability, his religious and moral integrity always stays intact:

“Mi ke’amkho yisro’eyl goy ekhod, as the Prophet says--how can you even compare a goy and a Jew? Anyone can be a goy, but a Jew must be born one.”

In his (mis)quoting of the Torah, Tevye asks: “Who in the whole earth is like the one nation, thy people of Israel?” Goy, meaning “nation,” indicates a sense of Jewish identity drastically different from that of the Americanized Tevye. The 1971 film ends with the image of the fiddler, smiling at Tevye as Tevye and his family leave the shtetl behind and start their journey towards America. This question of nation vs. people is extremely relevant in understanding collective memory in the nation-state as it pertains to group identity--especially that of “other” or immigrant. De-historicizing Tevye to fit into an Americanized canon, that is, to fit the mold of western modernity--the exact thing Sholem Aleichem warns against--defeats the purpose of Sholem Aleichem’s text. Fiddler sets forth a set of moral implications completely outside Sholem Aleichem’s vision and instead, creates an origin for the “new” Jew--a Tevye who isn’t Tevye at all.