

Expanding a Pedagogy of Identity Gillian Steinberg

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Instructors in literature and writing classes are increasingly aware that they cannot treat whiteness as the absence of race. White is, indeed, a race (if society remains willing to use that problematic and historically fraught categorization) and one that deserves attention for its implicit privilege and the ways that the experience of whiteness shapes characters' choices, motivations, self-perception, and movement through the world. With this knowledge, some instructors have begun to recognize that every novel is raced, and therefore that issues of race can and must be discussed in every novel. While instructors may once have treated whiteness as neutral -- the absence of race -- and therefore invisible, many now explore race in every text, including those featuring only white characters.

For example, in a unit pairing Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and August Wilson's *Fences*, both of which explore class striving, father-son relationships, and the generational trauma of broken families, students often identify *Fences* as a play "about race" while *Death of a Salesman* is a play "about class." Their sense that works featuring Black characters are raced while those featuring white characters are not is a preconception worth dismantling, and breaking down such easy binaries is part of the teacher's role in the classroom. In fact, both plays are "about race" in the sense that the Lomans move through the world as white-presenting people, with all the privilege and ease that presentation implies. Their whiteness does not erase struggle from their lives, but it may speak to the choices they are able to make and to Biff's hopeful ending. It also helps to explain Willy's sense that he can accomplish anything he wants and the lofty goals to which he aspires, even if his belief is ultimately undermined by other aspects of his existence.

Similarly, all textual analysis can emphasize gender, not only applied to those texts that feature women's voices or overtly feminist ideas. Nor does cisgender heterosexuality reflect the absence of sexual identity in a text; clearly, issues of gender, sexual identity, and power can be read through every text, even those where women are relegated to the sidelines or where every character presents as straight.

In all of these cases, the absence of an articulated identity is not the absence of that identity; when authors and their characters' feel no need to comment on those identity categories, the authors and characters themselves usually belong in categories of implicit privilege. The categories' apparent absence makes them invisible but, importantly, does not render them nonexistent. Noting that all people are shaped by racial, sexual, and gender identities is an essential step in dispelling myths and opening students to the more complex realities of human identity and diversity.

Teaching literature through this more complex and truer lens of the breadth of human experience rather than delineating texts based on which minority category -- race, gender, class -- plays a featured role offers students a more comprehensive way of seeing the world. As Dr. Hussein Rashid posited in a recent talk at the Interfaith Center of New York, "single-word nouns in our society carry power."¹ To live without hyphenation in America is, inherently, to be centered in discourse. When an individual is called,

simply, an “American,” “white” is generally implied (as is, often, male). Those without that privilege are necessarily hyphenated: African-American, Jewish-American, Korean-American, and so on. Literature teachers have the responsibility to challenge such centering by placing all characters on an equal playing field, identifying all characters as hyphenated in their own ways, which includes “white-American” or “Christian-American.” Not doing so heightens marginalization by treating only minorities as worthy of such discussions, as though majorities somehow “rise above” identity concerns.

Religion: An Overlooked Identity

Despite these valuable advances in understanding and teaching constructions of race, gender, and sexuality, however, religion continues to remain largely invisible, with Protestant Christianity assumed as “neutral” and therefore not requiring exploration. And because a wide variety of religious traditions do not feature prominently in many classic and contemporary texts, or do so only in limited and often stereotyped ways, religion remains a kind of final frontier of this essential form of identity study and awareness. Bringing religion into the literature classroom, both in its presence and its absence, can rectify this error, providing insight into both the Other and the self. As Robert Orsi argues, “The study of lived religion holds the possibility of disentangling us from the normative agendas and defamiliarizing us in relation to our own cultures.”² Literature, by its very nature, challenges normative agendas and then holds a mirror up to its readers. Thus, to combat antisemitism as well as preconceptions about other non-Christian religious traditions, instructors should encourage students to notice and explore religion in all texts, not merely those that feature religious Others. This work requires concerted effort on instructors’ parts because students may not naturally notice what feels invisible to them. But, just as literature teachers help students find symbolism, allusion, and parallelism even when students might overlook these literary techniques, so should they draw students’ attention to identity markers even when they are made practically imperceptible by their ubiquity.

Of course, a curriculum should include “Jewish texts,” whatever that term might mean. “Obvious” Jewish texts -- those that address specific Jewish themes, ritual practices, and religious identities or that are written by Jewish authors -- from *The Merchant of Venice* to *The Plot Against America*, have a meaningful place in literary study, but, as this chapter will argue, all texts embed far more subtle religious content in myriad ways. A work that does not mention religious practice, belief, or belonging, or does so only in passing, should nonetheless be analyzed for its embedded attitudes towards religion just as it should be analyzed for its attitudes towards race and gender. To return to the examples above, *Fences* explores religion explicitly and highlights internal Christian diversity in its characters’ varied connections to Christianity. Most overtly, the war-damaged character Gabriel believes himself to have died, met St. Peter, and been reborn to fight the devil. Against this backdrop, Gabriel’s sister-in-law Rose becomes increasingly involved in the church as the play progresses, and Troy, her husband, believes that the church is exploiting her, trying to get her money. At the same time, Troy regularly invokes conversations and interactions with the devil, which Rose finds deeply disturbing. The play’s climax -- more in the Oscar-winning film than in the written text -- underscores Troy’s heavenly salvation that Gabriel had predicted throughout the play.

Reading this text in light of its fascinating and complex attitudes towards race and gender is important and necessary to understanding the text. But noticing the ways that this play presumes Christian readership and an intimate understanding of particularist Christian notions of redemption through faith, supernatural forces of light and darkness, and heavenly salvation illuminates the ways that Western texts often build on assumptions of Christianity as the neutral religious standard. This is not a flaw in the play -- Wilson can and should write from within the tradition that is meaningful to him and to his characters -- but teaching the play as though these images and symbols are universal rather than particularistic implicitly marginalizes non-Christian representations and reifies a Christo-centric worldview in the classroom. This kind of conversation requires significant subtlety; *Fences* is an exceptional play and deserves to be taught on its own merits. At the same time, combatting antisemitism in the classroom requires articulating for students, and encouraging them to explore for themselves, the assumptions that underlie both texts and so much of contemporary literary analysis. At the same time, *Death of a Salesman*, which is not at all -- as far as readers can see -- a play about religion, should be studied in religious terms because those characters' apparent none-ness ("nones" being the current term for people of "no religion") speaks to the characters' movement through the world.

This textual approach allows students to locate embedded religion and suppositions of religious normativity even in seemingly non-religious texts. This methodology appeared in popular conversation when the *Harry Potter* books faced criticism for their "secular" treatment of Christian holidays. Despite the fact that the world of Hogwarts separates itself fully from mainstream British customs and rituals, the wizarding world's characters faithfully celebrate a Christmas apparently neutered of religious meaning. While the primary outcry came from proponents of "put Christ back in Christmas," their argument highlights the ways that Christianity has become a kind of "wallpaper" for Western life, so pervasive that anything else feels doubly marginalized as a result.

Identifying and interrogating such textual moments as the Hogwarts Christmas rituals can help students as they begin to challenge notions of religious neutrality: is a Christmas tree a religious symbol? Is a Christmas celebration a religious ritual? Some students might feel strongly that the answers are yes while others feel equally strongly that Christmas has become merely a non-religious winter custom. One wonders how Anthony Goldstein, the only "marked" Jewish character in the *Harry Potter* series, reacted to the proliferation of Christmas talk, not to mention Cho Chang, who may have been Buddhist, and the presumably Hindu Parvati and Padma Patil. In fact, Rowling's nominal attempts at cultural sensitivity underscore the texts' superficial diversity: religious Others are merely absorbed into this offhanded -- but nonetheless consequential -- Christo-centric worldview, maintaining their ethnic names but devoid of any other meaningful particularism. Discussing such details can help students notice the way Christian images, language, and ritual are often integrated into texts but treated as though they are non-religious and therefore fully normative.

Highlighting Religious Normativity

This classroom conversation doesn't tackle antisemitism explicitly, nor are the *Harry Potter* books in any way antisemitic, but reflecting on presumptions of religious normativity can increase students' sensitivity when exploring texts generally, including those that do contain antisemitic imagery or

language. For example, *The Great Gatsby*, with one of the most memorably stereotyped Jewish characters in American literature, is still widely read in high school classrooms. Meyer Wolfsheim is described repeatedly as rat-like, with “tiny eyes” and a notable nose that regularly receives its own independent attention (“tragic nose,” “expressive nose,”) each time he appears in the novel. These physiological descriptions highlight common historical antisemitic or caricatured representations of Jews, with enormous noses and tiny eyes, countering conventional Western views of beauty that include large eyes and tiny noses. The profoundly religious aspects of the rest of Fitzgerald’s novel -- frequent biblical references, the all-seeing eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, Gatsby’s mentions of himself as the “son of God” -- are generally treated as religiously neutral because they fit neatly into a Protestant conceptualization of God and faith. One cynical (and false) internal reference to Daisy’s Catholicism as an explanation for her inability to divorce Tom is similarly “othered” because Catholicism, especially in the early part of the 20th century in America, was treated as a only slightly more palatable minority faith than Judaism was.

Preparing students to discuss religious identity in every text, not only those texts with an obvious focus on religion, equips them to have more sophisticated conversations about texts like Fitzgerald’s where peripheral Jewish characters have, at the very least, antisemitic implications. In fact, this pedagogy prompts conversations about the very definition of religion, which can otherwise be overlooked as too obvious. But, of course, such conversations are only obvious if we take a single model of religion -- almost inevitably the model of Protestant Christianity -- and apply it across the board. As Christopher Cotter and David G. Robertson posit, non-Protestant traditions have historically been “homogenized” into “traditions of belief and practice... recognizable to Protestant Christians,” and other religions were “construed according to Protestant norms” throughout the 19th century, a trend that took root then and continues today.³ Gatsby’s religious affiliation, such as it is, therefore need not be mentioned, as Wolfsheim’s so often is, because he fits into rather than diverges from the model. And even if he is a fully non-practicing Christian, a model exists for him in the popular imagination. Noting this fact can give students more direction for their explorations of Wolfsheim’s presentation; its ugliness is not the end of the conversation but a starting point to consider how Judaism is and has historically been defined as well as how readers should respond not only to Wolfsheim’s religion but to that of all of the book’s characters.

Other similarly flattened and negative depictions of Jews, like Simon Rosedale in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, are also presented through this cultural rather than explicitly religious lens. While nothing about Rosedale’s behavior, practice, or community seems overtly Jewish in a ritual sense, Wharton describes him as possessing “that mixture of artistic sensibility and business astuteness which characterizes his race” and as being “the blond Jewish type” with “small, sidelong eyes.” He is constantly judging and “appraising” others, as members of “his race” tend to do, according to Wharton. How can students understand these descriptions? If they think of “Jewish” as a religion, nothing about Wharton’s depiction of Rosedale makes sense. If they think about it as a race, as Wharton seems to do, they will understand only one of its possible dimensions.

Confronting Concerns in Teaching Religious Identity

Many teachers would elect not to teach a text with such problematic descriptions of a Jewish character, which leaves students with only victimized Jewish representations in texts like Elie Wiesel’s

Night or Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, as other scholars in this volume have noted. Alternatively, teachers who include a text like *The House of Mirth* or *The Great Gatsby* may note the antisemitism inherent in the works without exploring what Judaism seems to mean in these works, or why. Even without reaching definitive conclusions, asking students to consider how Jewishness represents an entirely different model of religious belonging, belief, and practice from Christianity can meaningfully draw students' attention to the ways in which the complexity of Jewish identity can be oversimplified, either through misguided attempts at kindness -- by avoiding the harshest depictions or only showing Jews as acted upon and not as actors -- or by including these works but continuing to include "Judaism" firmly in the category of faith without defining or exploring its multifaceted dimensions.

In cases like these, students often wish to turn to an author's biography to learn how to read texts, believing that the author's words serve as the final answer on literary interpretation, but doing so can raise more questions than answers. For example, Meyer Wolfsheim "'fulfilled a function in the story and had nothing to do with race or religion,' according to Fitzgerald, who was both hurt and puzzled by accusations of antisemitism."⁴ Asking students to consider whether a depiction of a character can be antisemitic even if its author is not antisemitic (or if its author, at least, claims not to be antisemitic) is a worthwhile and complicated conversation that can, again, attune students to the complexities of literary study and embedded religious messaging.

Similarly, does Arthur Miller's own Jewishness mean that the Lomans are Jewish? Countless critics have searched for secular Judaism in the Lomans' lives even though Miller stated that "it seems to me irrelevant" "what the religious or cultural background of a character may be."⁵ Raising this question with students can help them consider individuals' complex identities -- both authors and their fictional creations -- and consider whether Miller's religious identity should shape their reading of his characters. How does the play change if the Lomans are Jewish? While there are no clear answers to this question, the thought experiment places students in meaningful conversation with questions about identity, belonging, and the likelihood of achieving the American Dream that are implicit in the text.

How is the Secular Actually Christian?

It's worth keeping in mind that the "secular," at least in American culture, is still largely a religious stance. It is essentially impossible for any individual to exist entirely outside of religion even if that person lacks religious faith, ritual, or community. Willy Loman's "religion" seems to be a capitalist version of the American Dream, but that faith too is shaped by American, largely Protestant, religious ideals. Treating apparent secularism as its own stance in a religious world highlights for students the impossibility of religious neutrality and broadens students' thinking about religious identity in ways that benefit all teaching of religious diversity, including combatting antisemitism. The premise of this approach is that people live in a world that is shaped by religion -- as it is shaped by race, gender, sexual identity, and other categories of identity -- whether they mention it or not.

However, if characters like the Lomans can be Jewish but have no conversation about, ritual practice of, or apparent interaction with Jewish "faith," how does Judaism as a religion, culture, or identity differ from Christianity, and why do those differences matter? At the same time, if a character can be called a "Jew," as Meyer Wolfsheim or Simon Rosedale is, despite nothing but their facial features and

mannerisms representing their Jewishness, how does Judaism differ from Christianity, and why do those differences matter? These complex questions, too, belong in the literature classroom. Judaism can refer to religious belief or ritual practice, but it can also imply an ethnicity in a way that Christianity doesn't (unless it's one of the "othered" forms of Christianity, like Syrian Orthodoxy or African Methodist Episcopalism). If a class includes characters like Wolfsheim but does not raise questions of the meaning of "Jew," students are left to make their own assumptions about what it means to be a Jew. Why is Wolfsheim castigated for his Jewishness when he seems not to do anything particularly Jewish in practice? Basing that identity conversation on the Christian model simply doesn't work.

Scholars of religion have rightly noted that the conception of religion as "faith prompting practice" is true primarily for Christianity, but that model has nonetheless been applied broadly across religious traditions. Daniel Boyarin, in his historical treatment of the subject, notes that "The Rabbis, in the end, reject and refuse the Christian definition of a religion, understood as a system of beliefs and practices to which one adheres voluntarily and defalcation from which results in one's becoming a heretic... For the Church, Judaism is a religion, but for the Jews, only occasionally, ambivalently, and strategically is it so." That is, Jewish self-definition differs from definitions that were historically imposed on Jews by the Church, and continuing to use those models today results in a misunderstanding of the complexities of Jewish identity. Furthermore, "when Jews teach Judaism in a department of religious studies, they are as likely to be teaching Yiddish literature or the history of the Nazi genocide as anything that be said (in Christian terms) to be part of a Jewish religion!"⁶ While Boyarin's writing may be too sophisticated for the high school or undergraduate classroom, the points that he raises can be distilled and shared with students, who may have no sense -- as most Americans likely don't -- that "Jewish" itself is a contested category that has been absorbed into and forced to parallel a Christian model despite their widely known but insufficiently articulated differences.

Having such discussions in response to texts can clarify why Jewish students often feel excluded from certain texts -- or forced to speak the language of Judaism in certain situations and the language of the Christo-centric world in others -- even as Christian students read those same texts as entirely secular. Questioning the easy categorization of Judaism as a religion in the model of Protestantism can also encourage students to note the ways in which all readers are expected to "speak Christian" -- to understand its nuances and the ways in which it is conceptualized by adherents and others -- but are not expected to "speak Jewish." While this is only a very mild kind of code switching, it exists nonetheless and deserves attention. Students from outside the Christian tradition are inevitably expected to recognize Christian symbolism even if it is unfamiliar to them outside of the classroom: knowing that the old man from *The Old Man and the Sea* is a Christ figure or noting the initials "JC" in *The Catcher in the Rye* when Holden's classmate James Castle dies or that Finny in *A Separate Peace* represents a very Christian view of Jesus as the characters fall from the paradise of their Garden of Eden is simply an expected part of Western literary study. These baseline expectations reinforce the sense that Christianity is the neutral and foundational knowledge that all educated readers should possess.

However, students reading *Interpreter of Maladies* may not be similarly expected to recognize the subtleties of Hindu culture and religious practice embedded in the text. Similarly, the overtly religious aspects of *Maus* will almost certainly be overlooked in favor of focus on more universal themes of trauma, depression, familial relationships, and storytelling. While finding the universal in all texts can be an important and useful practice in humanizing the Other, it also prevents readers from exploring very real

and meaningful differences. Of course, teachers should want students to see aspects of themselves in the characters of *Maus*, but students should also note the ways in which Jewish culture and belief differ from others' cultures and beliefs. Nearly every pedagogical resource about *Maus*, however, including on comprehensive and widely-used sites like Shmoop, focuses exclusively on the universal and eschews the particular. Themes listed on Shmoop include power, war, race, memory, family, guilt, and more. Interestingly, religion is not one of these categories despite the novel's central topic of Jewish genocide and the inclusion of pervasive references to a specific Torah portion and to *gematria*, which are addressed only in scholarly articles (plus a single blog post and one newspaper book review). All of these themes are central to understanding the novel, but teachers (and, apparently, online resources for high school students) feel better equipped to discuss the universal aspects of the novels than the overtly Jewishly religious ones.

Pragmatic Solutions

The reasons for this pattern are very likely not nefarious or ill-intentioned. Instead, they have largely to do with numbers and history. The vast majority of Americans are Christian, as, therefore, are the vast majority of American teachers. People are obviously most comfortable teaching what they know and, not surprisingly, are more able to identify cultural, religious, and historical subtleties in texts for which they are insiders. Therefore, these individuals who recognize Christian images and symbols but not Jewish (or Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, or other religions') images and symbols will focus on the familiar. Even if a teacher suspects that she recognizes some religious image or symbol but isn't entirely sure, she may choose to avoid discussing it rather than being wrong or tokenizing minority members of the class by asking them to identify and explain the image. Furthermore, if teachers were prepared for their profession by individuals who felt more comfortable noticing and discussing Christian symbolism than symbolism of other religions -- as they undoubtedly were -- then the pattern of focusing on these symbols perpetuates itself over generations of educators.

However, if studying literature is an exercise in understanding the Other, as teachers have long argued it is, an approach bolstered by a well-documented 2013 New School study,⁷ then teachers themselves must be equally attuned to all religious imagery and symbolism, not privileging the Christian despite its prevalence in Western literary classics. (Naturally, the definition of "classic" and the choices of which texts are chosen for literature classrooms fall prey to the same patterns of familiarity and educational precedent as teaching methodologies do. But that is a topic for another paper.) One possibility is that teachers should be prepared for this task by programs like those run by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Interfaith Center of New York, which introduces teachers to the experiences of lived religion by providing panel discussions with religious leaders across a wide range of traditions; offering accessible lectures from professors of religion; and sharing impressive resources, ranging from scholarly articles to applicable lesson plans for various student levels and across religions.⁸ Even if teachers cannot participate in such an extensive professional development experience, they can access such materials and familiarize themselves with a wider range of texts and approaches to texts, thus expanding their own education as they expand the educations of their students. Without such disruption to current teaching, though, patterns will continue to replicate themselves.

Of course, some of these patterns have changed over time as society has changed, and the sensitivity to race and gender, for instance, is so much more profound and nuanced than it was even a decade ago. There is still work to be done in these areas, but teachers largely seem to recognize now -- in part because of prevalent discussions in popular culture and politics around these very issues -- that they play an important role in the literature classroom even as approaches to religion seem to have changed very little. Drawing attention to religious difference and experience in literature, as attention has been drawn to experiences of race and gender, can add an important corrective to an area of pedagogy that has remained largely static over the past several decades and beyond. While the topic may feel sensitive and therefore best avoided in the classroom -- especially with public school teachers' understandable confusion around the differences between constitutionally prohibited teaching *of* religion and appropriate, legal, and vital teaching *about* religion -- it is no more sensitive than other important topics explored in literature courses. Ignoring it can prove perilous, as students are left to their own devices to determine the central questions around religious identity and may, unfortunately, reach false conclusions, especially about minority religions with which they have minimal real-world or literary contact.

Exploring how cultural insiders communicate is an essential aspect of literary study that can enhance students' understandings of the Other, including the Jewish Other. This religiously-aware approach to reading should also be applied to texts that are overtly Jewish. A novel like *The Chosen*, for instance, can help students recognize that even individuals within a single religious or cultural community face internal divisions and find tension in their differences. While many students may feel distanced from these characters and their relatively niche concerns, the novel also bridges boundaries with more familiar topics like illness and trauma, familial relationships, and baseball. Being an outsider to cultural language enables students to flatten their perceptions of Jewishness in the world, not recognizing its internal diversity. Pulling students, even temporarily, inside the conversation with a novel like *The Chosen*, and giving them the space to discuss an otherwise unfamiliar culture, can help them to see the Jewish characters as more fully human, not as the caricatures they may otherwise encounter.

Thus, students should be encouraged to consider absences in the text as much as presences: where are the Christian characters in this novel? How are they presented? Why do they seem largely to be absent? How does the reading experience shift when Judaism is centered and Christianity marginalized? Exploring a work not only for what it includes but for what it excludes can make students more attentive readers and offer them more critical power over the reading experience, greater cultural sensitivity, and the tools with which to combat all religious marginalization, in the texts they read and in the world they inhabit.

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Notes

¹ Dr. Hussein Rashid. Religious Worlds of New York NEH Institute. "Panel discussion on Islam." July 22, 2022.

² Robert Orsi. "Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live in?" *Journal of Scientific Study of Religion* (2003) 169-174. 174.

³ Christopher Cotter and David G. Robinson. "Introduction: The World Religions Paradigm in Contemporary Religious Studies." in *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*. Routledge, 2016. 6-7.

⁴ Arthur Krystal. "Fitzgerald and the Jews." *The New Yorker*. July 20, 2015.
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⁵ Robert A. Martin. "The Creative Experience of Arthur Miller: An Interview." *Educational Theatre Journal*. October 1969.

⁶ Daniel Boyarin. "The Christian Invention of Judaism: The Theodosian Empire and the Rabbinic Refusal of Religion." *Representations* (2004). 21-56. 47.

⁷ "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Empathy." *Scientific American*. October 4, 2013.
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/novel-finding-reading-literary-fiction-improves-empathy>.

⁸ Tremendous resources on teaching lived religion in secondary literature, history, and other Humanities classes, including dozens of teacher-created, open-source lesson plans, can be found here:
<https://religiousworldsnyc.org/>.