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## A Critical Survey of Jewish- American Poetry

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### **Abstract**

Jewish- American literature holds an important place in the literary history of United States. The manifesto of Jewish-American literature is to give voice to conflicting pulls between secular society and Jewish tradition, which were acutely felt by the immigrants. Holocaust or the annihilation of the Jews during the Second World War is a dominant factor of the Jewish-American literature. Cultural identity, cultural rediscovery and assimilation into mainstream America are the other issues about which the literature is written.

### **Keywords**

Jewish-American Poetry; Cultural identity; Zionism; Anti-Semitism.

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Jewish-American literature is written in all forms - prose, poetry, drama and fiction. Modern Jewish novels often contain a few or many Jewish characters and address issues such as Zionism/Israel and anti-Semitism. Two Jewish-

American writers, I.B. Singer and Saul Bellow have won the Nobel Prize for literature. Magazines such as 'The New Yorker' have proved to be instrumental in exposing many Jewish-American writers to a wider reading public. The term 'Zionism' was coined in 1890 by Nathan Birnbaum. It means the national movement for the return of the Jews to their homeland and the resumption of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel. Semitic is an adjective referring to a group of races including Jews and Arabs: the semitic people. Anti-Semitism is prejudice, hatred of, or discrimination against Jews for reasons connected to their Jewish heritage. A person who holds such positions is called an 'anti-Semite'. Although Jews are generally considered an ethno-religious group and not a race, anti-Semitism is nevertheless regarded as a form of racism.

The link between Jewish-American poets and America is grounded in the very foundation of the country's symbols of freedom and tolerance. Inscribed on the statue of Liberty are these famous lines by the Jewish-American poetess Emma Lazarus (1849-1887), from her poem, "The New Colossus"

"Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore." (10-12)

In *Songs of a Semite*, Lazarus writes more of her Jewish experiences. The poems were a call to arms for Jews around the world, evoking the heroic past of Jewish history.

"Wake, Israel, wake! Recall today  
The glorious Maccabean rage  
The sire heroic, hoary gray  
His five-fold-lineage" ("The Banner of the Jews 1-4)

Lazarus was one of the first Jewish-American poets whose work was explicitly Jewish and American, but it was not until the post-world war era that there was a sustained burst of American poetry informed by Jewish experience.

Delmore Schwartz (1913-1969), who eventually found more lasting fame as short story writer turned Walt Whitman's odes to the glories of the country into an immigrant's song in "America, America"

I am a poet of Hudson river and the heights above it,  
The lights, the stars and the bridges  
I am also by self-appointment the laureate of the Atlantic  
-of the peoples' heart, crossing it  
to New America (1-5)

Schwartz had filtered Whitman's lyrical tone and glorified mundaneness into his own voice.

Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) became one of the most beloved Jewish-American poets, applying his ecstatic joy and devoted attention to the infinite variety of American experience through political critique, ballads to homosexual desire and a canny use of Biblical and religious imagery. Ginsberg made Jewishness a condition of his work, another aspect of his self that could no longer be rejected in the name of the American melting pot. In perhaps his most famous poem, 'Howl' Ginsberg turns a false God of Old Testament into the false Gods of postwar America:

Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the Long streets like endless  
Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and Croak in the fog!  
Moloch whose feet and antennae crown the cities! (II, 82)

His other lasting classic, "Kaddish" is a moving tribute to his mother, rendered as a lament and inspired by the Jewish. It is a prayer for the dead, ". . . I have been up all night, talking, talking, reading the Kaddish aloud. . ." (2), Ginsberg says in his poem.

The latter half of the 20th century saw a new strain of Jewish poets, one less inclined to outward exploration of Jewish identity of faith. Former Poet Laureate Stanley Kunitz (1905-2006) looked to John Donne and 19th century British Romanticism for inspiration. Stanley Kunitz became the tenth Poet

Laureate of the United States. Having published books throughout the greater part of the twentieth century, Kunitz had a great influence on major poets such as Theodore Roethke, W.H Auden and Robert Lowell. About his own work, Kunitz has said: “The poem comes in the form of a blessing. Through the years I have found this gift of poetry to be life-sustaining, life-enhancing, and absolutely unpredictable. Does one live, therefore, for the sake of poetry? No, the reverse is true: poetry is for the sake of the life”. In his poem “Layers” he says;

I have walked through many lives,  
some of them my own,  
and I am not who I was,  
though some principle of being  
abides, from which I struggle  
not to stray. (1-6)

Howard Nemerov (1920-1991) turned to writers and thinkers strongly influenced by Christianity, such as Dante and St. Augustine. He was a highly acclaimed poet often cited for the range of his capabilities and subject matter. He wrote poetry and fiction that managed to engage the reader’s mind without becoming academic. His poems related a broad spectrum of emotion and a variety of concerns. His poetic beauty can be seen from the following lines of “A Spell before Winter”:

After the red leaf and gold have gone,  
Brought down by the wind, then by hammering rain,  
Bruised and discolored, when October’s flame  
Goes blue to guttering in the cusp, this land  
Sinks deeper into silence, darker into shade. (1-5)

Louise Gluck’s (1943- ) poetry tends towards classical resonance with titles like “The Triumph of Achilles” and “Odysseus”. Gluck is considered as one of America’s most talented contemporary poets. She writes effectively about

disappointment, rejection, loss and isolation. Her poem “Confession” is a best example:

To say I am without fear -  
It wouldn't be true.  
I am afraid of sickness, humiliation.  
Like anyone, I have my dreams.  
But I've learned to hide them,  
To protect myself  
From fulfillment: all happiness  
Attracts the Fates' anger.  
They are sisters, savages -  
In the end they have  
No emotions but envy. (1-11)

Robert Pinsky (1940- ) translated Dante and Czeslaw Milosz and penned tributes to television and baseball. Pinsky is one of America's foremost poet-critics. Often called the last of the “civic” or public poets, Pinsky's criticism and verse reflect his concern for a contemporary diction that nonetheless speaks of a wider experience. And his poem “An Explanation of America: A Love of Death” speaks about the experience of America:

Imagine a child from Virginia or New Hampshire  
Alone on the prairie eighty years ago  
Or more, one afternoon – the shaggy pelt  
Of grasses, for the first time in that child's life,  
Flowing for miles. Imagine the moving shadow  
Of a cloud far off across that shadeless ocean,  
The obliterating strangeness like a tide  
That pulls or empties the bubble of the child's  
Imaginary heart. No hills, no trees. (1-9)

For the most part, these poets were not inclined to pay explicit tribute to their religious background, yet something lingered in their work, often in conjunction with a pan-religious, secular humanism that was used as a stepping stone.

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