

A Tradition in Theatre:
An Examination of Theme in Stein's *Fiddler On the Roof*
(1,951 words)

Though written over fifty years ago, Joseph Stein's 1964 musical *Fiddler On the Roof* is still incredibly thematically relevant, especially in today's social and political climate. As each of Tevye's three oldest daughters fall in love and leave the house, they present not only challenges to tradition, but also represent major themes. For instance, Tzeitel and Motel represent the rich versus the poor, and the values in hard work versus a life of luxury. Hodel and Perchik introduce ideas of feminism and equal rights, as well as the idea of action versus passivity. Lastly, Chava and Fyedka represent the struggles between love of a child versus love of a concept. While the play deals with heavy themes, ultimately, it serves to show human strength in addressing these themes, and by combining flexible love with the stability of tradition, the characters can navigate their changing world.

The first challenge comes when Tevye's oldest daughter Tzeitel refuses the marriage that Tevye has arranged for her. In Anatevka, marriages are arranged by the matchmaker and approved by the father, and Tevye made a bargain with the rich butcher Lazar Wolf. However, it's revealed that Tzeitel made a pledge to marry her childhood best friend Motel, the poor tailor; she begs her father to reconsider the match. Thus, Tevye must decide: does he honor a bargain already made, or does he honor his daughter's choices? Is it better to be rich and miserable, or poor and happy?

Tevye was born into poverty, and likely would die in poverty; in arranging the marriage to Lazar Wolf he thought he was saving his daughter from a life like his own. Tevye longs for the day in which he wouldn't have to work so hard, in which he could have some status. He never

got the luxury of choosing his own spouse, so for him the goal was never a great love story; his goal was simply to live a life that is more than survival.

However, Tzeitel has also grown up in poverty, and because of this, she knows that it's not the worst thing in the world. She's grown up seeing both her parents work hard, so she's used to a life like that. If she has a chance at love, then that's what she wants to pursue. While Tevye thinks that the great bonus in life is money, Tzeitel thinks that it's love.

Tevye may not entirely understand Tzeitel's mindset, but he does understand familial love. So, when Tevye decides to give the couple his permission, it's not because he understands what they're going through. Ultimately, it's love of his daughter that motivates Tevye's decision. "Look at my daughter's face, / she loves him, she wants him, / and look at my daughter's eyes, / so hopeful." (Stein 46) In the end, Tevye knows that they'll both work hard, and Motel will not let Tzeitel starve. And, if love is really what the two of them want out of life, then Tevye can't bear to deny his daughter happiness. Thus, a tradition is broken, and a marriage is made.

With Tzeitel and Motel, Tevye thought they would be a one-time exception to the tradition, and that his remaining daughters would fall into line. This was incorrect. So, when Hodel strays from tradition, she brings more intense themes, and higher stakes. While everyone was busy worrying about Tzeitel and Motel, Hodel was falling in love with Perchik, the young communist revolutionary who gives lessons to Tevye's daughters for food. Perchik is a radical in many ways; firstly, he's a man of action. Perchik believes that there's much more to life than just talk, and everyone should make the change they wish to see, a sentiment he learned at the university in Kiev. He reprimands Tevye and the others, who stand around discussing the news, without ever doing anything about it: "Why do you curse them? What good does your cursing

do?... You stand around and curse and chatter and don't do anything. You'll all chatter your way into the grave." (Stein 17). Perchik doesn't want to read the news, he wants to make the news.

Additionally, Perchik is an early feminist:

"Tevye: And until your golden day comes, Reb Perchik, how will you live?

Perchik: By giving lessons to children... Do you have children?

Tevye: I have five daughters.

Perchik: Five?

Tevye: Daughters.

Perchik: Girls should learn too. Girls are people.

Mendel: A radical!" (Stein 19-20)

This is manifested at Tzeitel's wedding. As the town starts criticizing the marriage between Tzeitel and Motel, Perchik shuts them all down:

"Perchik: Quiet, quiet! What's all the screaming about? "They drank on it"... an agreement... a sign... It's all nonsense. Tzeitel wanted to marry Motel and not Lazar.

Mendel: A young girl decides for herself?

Perchik: Why not? Yes! They love each other." (Stein 65)

Perchik then proceeds to not only defend love as a valid reason for marriage, but starts dancing with Hodel, which isn't exactly forbidden, but which is strongly against tradition.

Perchik is of the mind that tradition should not be followed simply for tradition's sake, and that traditions must change as society does.

Perchik's progressivism is one of the things that attracts the strong willed Hodel to him, and their partnership is that of equals. Rather than staying in the house and making a home, Hodel works, helping Perchik to turn the world upside down. They don't even ask Tevye's permission to marry; they only request his blessing. This shocks Tevye. He likes Perchik a lot, but Perchik is also probably the most untraditional Jew Tevye has ever met. On the other hand, Perchik stands for justice for the poor and working classes, equality of women, critical thinking, education, and, of course, freely chosen love. He may go against tradition, but is he really so harmful? Tevye decides no, and gives his blessing *and* permission.

However, shortly after their engagement, Perchik is arrested in Kiev for revolutionary activities, and Hodel goes to join him. Tevye then loses his daughter to a settlement in Siberia, where he may never see her again. It's exactly what Hodel wants, but nonetheless, it puts her in danger, and the stakes associated with her love are higher than they ever were for Tzeitel. It shows that there's a price for action and progress: in expanding beyond one's hometown, or one's traditional ideals, one gets to experience so much more of the world; at the same time though, it opens up opportunities for new dangers, too.

With Tzeitel and Hodel gone, that leaves Tevye's third daughter, Chava. The exact middle child, she spends her days reading, quietly expanding her mind while no one else in the family notices. Over time, she develops a relationship with a quiet Russian soldier, after he defends her from other, more malicious Russian soldiers, and this relationship is the most controversial of all.

Like many good relationships, theirs starts over literature:

"Fyedka: Would you like to borrow this book? It's very good.

Chava: No, thank you.

Fyedka: Why. Because I'm not Jewish? Do you feel about us the way they feel about you? I didn't think you would..." (Stein 58)

Basically, this whole exchange is challenging Chava's ideas about race and religion. Essentially, Fyedka is asking her, "are you racist like the soldiers who just harassed you?" The encounter continues:

"Fyedka: Go ahead, take the book... It's by Heinriche Heine. Happens to be Jewish, I believe.

Chava: That doesn't matter.

Fyedka: You're quite right. Good." (Stein 58)

As an educated woman, Chava doesn't want to be narrow minded, and to prove this to Fyedka, she does take the book, despite her many insecurities about the exchange.

Unlike her two older sisters, Chava must hide her romance at all costs. It's forbidden to marry outside the faith, and when she does finally approach Tevye about it, it does not go well.

"Chava: He has a name, Papa.

Tevye: Of course. All creatures on earth have a name.

Chava: Fyedka is not a creature, Papa. Fyedka is a man.

Tevye: Who says that he isn't? It's just that he is a different kind of man.... Some things do not change for us. Some things will never change." (Stein 90)

Tevye cannot bring himself to compromise his faith, which prohibits this sort of marriage. His faith has been the one constant in his life, and if he bends too far, he fears he'll break. At Tevye's refusal to change his views, Chava elopes with Fyedka. Tevye disowns her, and declares her dead.

While Chava and Fyedka were obviously written to address the idea of clashing faiths, the real theme they represent is the struggle between love of a child, versus love of an idea. In this way, their romance clearly echoes the struggles in the LGBTQ community in current times. Many queer youth fear coming out, knowing that if they do, they may be cast out of their homes, declared dead by parents who previously loved them. Set in current day, if Chava brought home a girlfriend instead of Fyedka, Tevye's response could have been almost identical as it was in the original script. Alternatively: what if Chava fell in love with a transgender man? "It's just that he's a different kind of man."

Moving away from religion and sexuality, Chava's plight could also echo interracial relationships. Indeed, she's ethnically Jewish, while Fyedka is not; in 1964 America when this play was written, the issue of race was certainly hotly contested. Perhaps that's why her story remains relevant; it can be applied to many similar situations throughout the decades.

At the end of the play, all of the Jews are forced to leave Anatevka, and Chava and Fyedka come to say goodbye. An interesting aspect of Chava's return is costume choice; Fyedka

has ditched the soldier uniform, but he has not adopted the Jewish hat or prayer cloth; Chava has not changed costume at all. Neither abandons their culture or beliefs to be together. This visual symbol is one of the ways that the format of drama lends itself to the story in a way that novels cannot do.

While Tevye never fully accepts their marriage in the duration of the play, eventually love for his daughter wins out again, and however slightly, he does close the gap between them a bit. This is one of the most hopeful parts of the play; what seemed initially to be an irreconcilable difference still had room for growth in the presence of love. Fyedka tries to reason with Tevye, saying, "Some are driven away by edicts; other by silence." (Stein 103) In response, Tevye never actually faces them; instead, he mutters "God be with you", and gestures to Tzeitel to pass on the message. Golde tells Chava where the family will be staying in America, so they can exchange letters.

While this is not an open reconciliation, it's a start. Thus, the connection is reestablished, however slightly, before they all move and lose each other forever. Once again, love wins out. Tevye may not be able to stand the union, but he can't turn his back on his daughter entirely, and love gives them hope for further reconciliation in the future.

Fiddler on the Roof is a comic tragedy. It's humorous throughout, but ends on a dismal note; the family is separated, and they're all forced to leave the home they've lived in for generations, due to racially motivated violence. However, tragedy ultimately reveals human strength, as characters address the tragedies. So, while not all issues are resolved, *Fiddler* does end with some note of hope; because of the strength of familial love, and because of tradition, characters have the tenacity to carry on.

Works Cited:

Stein, Joseph. *Fiddler on the roof*. New York: Music Theatre International, 1964. Print.