

Bread Givers Study Guide

Bread Givers by Anzia Yezierska

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Contents

Bread Givers Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters I and II.....	5
Chapters III and IV.....	7
Chapter V and VI.....	10
Chapters VII and VIII.....	13
Chapters IX and X.....	15
Chapters XI, XII and XIII.....	17
Chapters XIV and XV.....	19
Chapters XVI.....	21
Chapters XVII and XVIII.....	23
Chapters XIX and XX.....	25
Chapters XXI.....	27
Characters.....	29
Objects/Places.....	34
Themes.....	36
Style.....	38
Quotes.....	41
Topics for Discussion.....	43



Plot Summary

Sara is ten years old, the daughter of Russians who came to America in search of a better life. She has three sisters, Bessie, Mashah and Fania, and none of the three girls has a job as the story begins. As the story begins, Bessie returns home from another fruitless search for work as Sara is peeling potatoes for the family's supper. Mashah arrives, full of good humor and laughter, saying that she purchased flowers for trimming her hat. When Fania arrives and discovers Mashah spent ten cents on the flowers, she throws her own hat to the floor, kicking it in frustration. This is the typical life of the Smolinsky family where merely having enough to eat is a constant struggle.

The family lives in New York. The parents are Reb and Shenah Smolinsky. Reb is a religious man to the exclusion of everything else—including spending time with his family and holding a job. He depends on the income of Bessie, Mashah and Fania to pay the family's bills. The family undergoes a series of changes and Shenah eventually convinces Reb to move his religious books from a room he has set aside for study so that she can rent out that space. The extra income, added to the fact of all three of the older girls working, means the family finances are somewhat less stressed. Sara's job is to gather coal. She does so by scrounging through discarded ash piles in search of small bits of unburned coal. She soon refuses to do this and begins selling herring on a street corner to make the money to buy the coal. It is this attitude that will take her from her father's home into many years of study to become a teacher—her refusal to give up means that she does accomplish that goal.

Reb arranges the marriages of his three older daughters though each care about a young man. None of the marriages involve love and the last to be married, Bessie, is given to a fish-peddler with six children in return for five hundred dollars. Reb uses the money to purchase a store. However, it is a scam and he actually wastes the money. There is no indication what finally happens to the store but when Sara returns from her years at college her parents are no longer operating the business.

Sara runs away when her father berates her for trusting a girl to bring back the two pennies she owes for a bag of rice. She lives in a dingy room, works at a laundry and goes to school. She is offered marriage by the friend of her brother-in-law. Though the man is wealthy, she knows she will never be happy in the relationship and declines, earning her another severe scolding from her father.

Sara puts in her time at college working in a laundry. She does not fit in socially with the other students but soon gains the approval of the older professors. It takes some time but she eventually realizes that her lifetime of experiences have made her more qualified to succeed as an adult than most college students.

She graduates and returns to New York for a teaching job to find her mother dying. Her father quickly remarries. His new wife is a woman who expects to be kept in style and who demands that Sara and her sisters support Reb's household since he refuses to work. The girls decline and Reb is soon selling gum though he is very ill. The girls begin



offering some money and small gifts, hoping to earn Reb some peace in his household. Meanwhile, Sara has met and fallen in love with a man named Hugo Selig. Hugo wins Reb's respect by asking his assistance in learning Hebrew. Reb is still unhappy in his marriage and is talking about divorce, saying the Talmud allows it for his situation. Sara invites him to live with her and he says he will consider it. When Sara tells Hugo that her father will take over their lives, Hugo says their home will be richer for her father's presence.



Chapters I and II

Chapters I and II Summary

Sara is ten years old, the daughter of Russians who came to America in search of a better life. She has three sisters, Bessie, Mashah and Fania, and none of the three girls has a job as the story begins. As the story begins, Bessie returns home from another fruitless search for work as Sara is peeling potatoes for the family's supper. Mashah arrives, full of good humor and laughter, saying that she has purchased flowers for trimming her hat. When Fania arrives and discovers Mashah spent ten cents on the flowers, she throws her own hat to the floor, kicking it in frustration. Once, Mashah spent thirty cents on a new toothbrush and towel of her own because she had heard that wealthy people had those things. Her family is askance at the frivolous waste of money.

Meanwhile, Sara's mother takes a look at the potato peelings and chastises Sara for wasting so much. Sara tries to make up for it by going outside and picking up coal for their fire from other people's cast off coal. As Sara's mother, Shenah, is worrying, her father tells the story of a woman who wanted earthly things but discovered that acceptance of those things meant she would be without all the rewards of Heaven. Shenah tells her husband that he is right, that she is thankful for what they have and that she is just a foolish woman.

Shenah finally convinces her husband to move his books from the room where he studies so that she can take in boarders. With the help of an elderly neighbor named Muhmenkeh, the family creates a room for boarders. Sara's Father, Reb, is praying in the dining room when the collector from the landlord appears in the doorway demanding the rent. There ensues an argument and the woman "shut his book with such anger that it fell at his feet." He slaps her and is arrested but when the case goes to trial it is thrown out because the judge says the collector provoked Reb.

While Reb is in jail, Muhmenkeh leaves two quarters for the family. Mashah takes one to buy the family's dinner and Sara takes the other. She makes a deal with Muhmenkeh to buy twenty-five herring at a penny each, takes them to a street corner and sells them all at two cents each. She says she "dances" into the kitchen and shows her mother her profits.

People of the neighborhood raise money to hire a lawyer for Reb and the attorney shows Reb's Torah, which has a footprint on it. He says the slap was the reaction to having his religious book defiled and the judge dismisses the case, discharging Sara's father. For weeks, everyone is talking about the case because they are happy that a poor tenant won in a battle against the landlord. Sara says everyone is afraid of the landlord and that her father's victory is like David winning out over Goliath. With the notoriety, it is easy to find renters for the family's front room. Soon there are three young men renting the room and they all agreed to pay an extra quarter each week so the family will not take in a fourth to share the room.



Sara's mother, Shenah, is quite wealthy as a child and has her choice of suitors. Shenah's father wants her to marry an educated man and Sara's father fits that description. They are married through a matchmaker, though Shenah only briefly sees her fiancé. Then the Tsar of Russia begins forcing men into military service and Sara's family pays to have him exempted. Shenah says that once the Tsar figures out that there is money to be had, the price increases. Then Shenah's father dies. She says that her husband knows nothing of business and sells things at less than they cost, soon losing the remainder of the family fortune. She says that once everything is lost, the answer is to come to America "where Father thought things cost nothing at all."

Chapters I and II Analysis

Sara tells her mother that she will not go out into the street in search of coal among other people's ashes anymore. She says that she knows people are laughing at her and refuses to degrade herself to that point. However, when her mother chastises her for peeling away so much of the potato, Sara immediately picks up the coal bucket and goes out into the street in search of coal lumps among the ashes people have discarded. She tells herself that it is someone else's trash and so it is not stealing, and that she does not care who sees her. This pride is already evident when Sara says that the family may find themselves on the street begging for pennies if the girls cannot soon find work. She imagines the pennies as "another stab in our burning shame."

Reb has strict rules and ideas about women and their role, and Sara apparently believes those to be fact. She says women cannot hope to study the Holy Torah or to make it into Heaven on their own. Instead, they should attach themselves to a holy man and maybe a woman can slip in on her husband's good word so that she can serve him in Heaven.

Shenah is telling her husband how people of the neighborhood gave of their resources and time to help him after his arrest and his answer is that it was right that they should help. He says that he is "their light," and that the world would be dark if not for people like himself spreading the word about the Holy Torah. It is interesting that he accepts it as his due that his daughters will work for a living and that his only requirement in life is to study and disseminate the word of the Holy Torah.

Shenah spends time recalling her youth and Sara says that the dingy apartment they live in melts away with the stories. Shenah says that she was once more beautiful than Mashah and had many suitors. Though she says that her husband was a poor businessman and that he spent his time singing—as Solomon sang—rather than handling their business affairs, she does not seem to blame him. She harps at him about money but then folds to his insistence that there are other things more important—the study of the Holy Torah, for example.



Chapters III and IV

Chapters III and IV Summary

Shenah hopes that one of the young renters will be taken with Bessie who is nine years older than Shenah was when she married. However, the young men are all taken with Mashah. Even Fania has a boyfriend and she is soon attending college classes with the young man. One day, Bessie brings home a new white oilcloth for the table, a piece of lace fabric to cover the rusty pipes under the sinks and gold paper to cover the "fly dirt" on the chandelier. Bessie asks Mashah to stay home one night to help clean the apartment and she agrees. Sara says that when her mother arrives home she wants to cover the tablecloth with newspapers and to remove the lace curtain until there is company. The "new Bessie" says that she wants the apartment to look nice even when there is no company. The following night, Bessie rushes through supper preparations, gives Mashah a quarter so that she can go see a show and then puts on Mashah's best dress though Mashah insists that no one touch her things. Bessie is larger than Mashah and rips the side of the dress. Just as she is pinning the dress back together, Berel Bernstein—a cutter in the shop where Bessie works—arrives. Soon after, Reb comes home and immediately begins to question Berel. Under questioning, Berel admits that he does not pray daily but keeps all the religious holidays, that his father is still in Russia, and that he saves some six or seven dollars each week from his eighteen-dollar salary. Reb asks how he could possibly spend so much on himself each week. Berel says that he could live cheaper with a wife to do his laundry and cooking. He says that he knows Bessie would fit his needs.

There follows a great deal of arguing between Berel and Reb. Berel says he is willing to marry Bessie without a dowry but Father says that Bessie earns more money than the other daughters and that he would be giving up his living. He suggests that Berel should pay for the wedding, for Bessie's new clothing, for a suit of clothes and new shoes for Reb himself and for Berel to set Reb up in business. Berel says he wants to marry Bessie, not the entire family. He tells Reb that in America, people have no time for the Torah and that a man has to earn his living. Berel says he could be a successful businessman if he had the money to set up a business. Berel says that if Reb is not ready to have Bessie marry, he has nothing else to say and slams out of the apartment.

The next day, Berel walks Bessie home from work and urges her to consider herself. He says that in America, people decide for themselves and tells her that they could work together for a bright future. Bessie says that she cannot leave her father. Berel says that he believes Bessie was only trying to rope him into supporting her entire family and that he is glad he came to his senses. Weeks later, Berel announces his engagement and Bessie seems to give up on life at that point. Sara goes to the engagement party. She tells him that he will "eat dirt" for what he has done to Bessie.

One day, Mashah hears beautiful piano playing from an open window and stops to listen. When the playing stops, she asks the young man to play again and he does.



After that piece, he becomes acquainted with Mashah. His name is Jacob Novak and he is preparing for a piano concert. His wealthy father pays for tutoring to prepare Jacob for the concert. Sara says Jacob spends as much time at the piano in practice as other people spend at work, and that he is done this for years in order to reach a point where others will pay to hear him play.

Then Jacob's father returns from his business trip and the two men visit Mashah at her home. Sara says that it is immediately clear that the man recognizes their poverty and that they know everything they own is worth less than one of his cuff buttons. He asks Jacob to go for a walk with him and Jacob does not return. The following day, the concert begins and Jacob does not come to pick up Mashah nor does he send any word to her. After a few days with no word from Jacob, Mashah has Sara write a letter. It is a letter of despair saying that she no longer believes in love or the power of music. Jacob says he has been a brute, that he will not allow his father to keep him from Mashah and rushes to her. She is cold toward him but Reb intervenes, saying that Jacob, having left Mashah once, will do so again and pushes him out of the apartment. He returns the following day, but Reb insists that Mashah not see him and Mashah follows her father's wishes.

Chapters III and IV Analysis

While Sara does not deny that Mashah is beautiful, she seems to believe that Bessie's traits are more admirable. She points out that Mashah will spend money on herself while the family struggles to pay the rent but that Bessie gives every cent of her pay to help the family. Mashah also spends time looking in the shop windows, washing her hair and working at her appearance, while Bessie hurries home from her job to help with the household chores. Sara seems to believe that Bessie would be as attractive as Mashah if she spent that much time and money on herself. It is interesting that Sara herself prefers to spend hours on a street corner selling herring so that she can pay for coal, rather than scrounging through ashes to search for lumps of discarded coal.

Reb seems content to depend on Bessie for the family's living. He talks to Berel as if Bessie's happiness counts for nothing and says that he can afford to wait a few more years before offering Bessie in marriage to anyone. It is Berel who says that Bessie's willingness to work has supported her father's laziness. Despite the fact that Shenah says Reb has no head for business, Reb says he can be a successful businessman but is very particular about the kind of business he might operate. He says it would have to be selling schnapps, matchmaking or working as an insurance agent so that he could "hold his learning" at the same time. The next day, Berel tells Bessie that she is the reason Reb does not work, and that if she leaves the family Reb will be forced to go to work. Bessie seems to truly believe that her father is not capable of working.

Sara's family notes that Mashah is suddenly something more than an "empty head" once she becomes involved with Jacob. She has an interest other than herself, as Sara puts it. Mashah no longer spends her evenings trying new hairstyles but spends them with Jacob. She ensures that everything at his place is perfect when he comes for



supper. Reb, apparently recognizing the financial status of the Jacob, does not ask him about how he spends his money. However, Reb says that Jacob's flaw is that he plays the piano on the Sabbath. When he tells Mashah not to give in to Jacob's pleas, she agrees and the relationship ends. Mashah continues to dress neatly and is still beautiful, but the deep sadness shows through and she is very quiet.

It is after this that Sara says she realizes her father is a tyrant. When she first realizes that she hates her father, she is fearful but says she cannot help what she feels. She fears that there will come a time when she meets a young man and Reb will chase him away with his questions. She says she wants something more for herself than even a man like Jacob, who will allow his father to boss him around. She says she recognizes that she needs education if she wants to escape her current situation.



Chapter V and VI

Chapter V and VI Summary

Reb intercepts a letter from Morris Lipkin intended for Fania. Morris says that he has dedicated his poetry collection to Fania. Reb says a writer is not good enough for his daughter and predicts that she will live in poverty. Sara immediately asks what is wrong with that. She cites her father's own words saying that "the poorest beggars are happier and freer than the rich." Shenah says that Reb should stay out of his daughters' lives and points out that Mashah would be married but for Reb's interference. She says that if he believes he can find more suitable matches, he should do so. Reb says he will go to Zaretsky, the matchmaker.

A few days later, Morris is waiting with Fania and promising to tell Reb of the depth of their love, believing that will change his opinion about their relationship. When Reb arrives, he has an obviously wealthy man with him, a diamond dealer named Moe Mirsky. Reb introduces Moe to the five women but ignores Morris and Sara says that they all feel his shame. Morris eventually walks out and never returns. Moe seems taken with Mashah and invites the entire family to Coney Island the following weekend. Mashah says that it makes no difference whom she marries and agrees to go to Coney Island with Moe. Over the next few weeks, Moe brings Mashah diamonds, then takes them back and replaces them with other diamonds.

Reb then brings home a suit and cloak dealer named Abe Schmukler who asks Fania to marry him. Sara says that people begin to hate them for their good fortune and there is a double wedding marrying both the girls on the same day. A few days later Reb is complaining because there is no meat for his meal. Shenah says the cost of meat is up to a nickel a pound and that there are two fewer wages coming into the household now. Reb rants about the thankless daughters who do not send money home for him. Then Mashah comes into the apartment, says that she is hungry and that Moe was only a clerk in a jewelry store who was fired for allowing her to wear diamond jewelry he was supposed to sell. Reb blames her for not realizing that Moe was a swindler and Mashah blames her father. Mashah stays for a week until Moe gets another job as a shoe salesman.

They receive a letter from Fania who says that Abe is a gambler, that she is lonely and wants to come home. Reb forbids it, saying that the neighbors would immediately suspect that he had thrown Fania out and would never believe it had been her choice.

One night when Sara cannot sleep, she finds that there are letters from Morris under her mattress. He writes them to Fania and they are repeated declarations of his love. Sara imagines that they are written for her and finds herself going to the library in hopes of finding Morris. She does and on their third encounter tells him that she loves him. He laughs at her which she says breaks her heart.



With the marriage of two daughters in one day, Reb becomes known for his ability as a matchmaker though he himself employs a matchmaker's services. He begins collecting names of men and women seeking marriage. Zalmon, the fish-peddler, tells Reb that it has been almost thirty days since his wife died—the required amount of time for a widower to wait for marriage—and that he wants a wife. He is fifty-six but says he wants a young woman. He has six children, needs someone to cook and tend the house and children, but promises that she will not have to work outside the home. He says that a new wife will have his dead wife's fur coat, gold chain and that he will buy new furniture. Reb decides Bessie would be a good match and Zalmon promises to pay "a few hundred dollars" to set Reb up in business in exchange for Bessie as a wife.

Zalmon has a beard, always smells of fish and is greasy, but has shaved, is clean and wearing new clothes the day he comes to call on Bessie. He is so changed that they almost do not recognize him. He brings his wife's fur coat, saying that his daughter Yenteh had wanted it for herself. Bessie says to give it to Yenteh and Zalmon takes it not as a rejection of the gift, but as a kindness to his daughter. When Bessie says that she does not care for jewelry, Zalmon takes it as that she feels no need to be "shined up" to walk down the street.

On the second visit, Zalmon has his youngest son Benny. Benny had falled, hurt his leg and refused to allow his father to leave him. Zalmon was concerned that Benny would hinder his courting, but sees reaction and knows that Benny is reaching Bessie in a way that he cannot. As soon as Benny is gone, Bessie is again like a trapped animal, hating the idea of marrying Zalmon. Then one day Bessie and Sara are walking by Zalmon's house and another of Zalmon's children, Dave, says that Benny is sick. Bessie goes inside and finds the child writhing in pain from eating spoiled food. She stops fighting the wedding though she does not care for Zalmon. Sara says that Bessie exchanges the burden of her own family for the burden of raising Zalmon's.

Chapter V and VI Analysis

Reb's self-assuredness shows through again as he says that he'll ask a matchmaker to find appropriate husbands for his daughters. When Shenah says that the girls can't be matched without a dowry, Reb says that the fact that they're his daughters will suffice as a dowry. While Reb and Mashah are arguing over Morris, Reb asks his wife how it is that their daughters dare to question him. He says that he and Shenah barely saw each other until after the wedding. She agrees that's so but says, "Maybe if I had the sense of my daughters in America, I would have given you a good look over before the wedding."

When the marriages of Fania and Mashah turn out to be less than Reb expected, he blames the girls for not spotting the problem before the wedding. To both, he says that they've made their beds and now must lie in them. By the time Moe gets another job and Mashah has been back home for a week, she's ready to get away from her father's preaching and readily goes back to Moe.



Shenah asks Reb why he thinks he can make a good match for Bessie when he failed with the other two girls. Reb says that the matchmaker failed and that he shouldn't have trusted someone else. He points out that they know Zalmon, that he's honest, hard-working and religious. It's interesting that Reb and Zalmon seem to accept that tending six children will be less work than a factory job. It's only Shenah who says that the children are as wild as gangsters. Bessie will work side-by-side with her husband in the fish market and say that she can never do anything right for his children. She will live in squalor among fighting children and say that she would run away except for Benny.



Chapters VII and VIII

Chapters VII and VIII Summary

Zalmon gives Reb five hundred dollars for arranging his marriage to Bessie and Reb begins to look for a way to turn the money into a business venture. He finds an ad for a store for sale. Shenah begs him to allow her to go along but he says that he will call her if it is worth considering. The owner says that he must go back to Russia and that he will sell the store for four hundred dollars. Reb arrives at the store and sees many customers, prompting him to make an immediate deal. Shenah and Sara later get word that Reb has called for them and they go to Elizabeth, New Jersey, to the address of the store. Shenah begs for a pencil and piece of paper to calculate the products in the store but Reb will not interrupt the owner who is busy with customers. At nine o'clock that night, the store owner counts more than eighty dollars—that day's sales—and hands Reb the keys and leaves him with the business. Shenah is angry that Reb did not wait for her to make the deal but relents when Reb says there was another man there with the cash to buy the business. He says the only reason he was able to make the deal was that the owner wanted to sell to another Jew rather than the other man who was Italian.

When Shenah goes to straighten a display of oatmeal, she finds that most of the boxes are empty and that only a few have oatmeal in them. The huge tub of butter is actually full of wood with only a thin layer of butter over the top of it. The sugar barrel is filled with sawdust and bricks. There are actually few things in the store that can be sold. A closer inspection reveals that the items sold that evening were actually being sold below cost—the low prices prompted the large number of customers. The following day, the Italian who made the offer for the store while Reb was trying to make a deal comes into the store. Reb offers to sell him the store after all but the man says that he was a clerk in the store and that he was only pretending to try to buy it in order to rush Reb into a deal.

Shenah goes to a number of wholesalers and asks for stock for the store on time. She gets some items and some promises of more and it begins to look as though they could make a profit of the store after all. Sara hates the area, misses the city and the feeling of accomplishment from earning her own money. A few days into their ownership, Sara allows a girl to leave with a bag of rice for only ten cents with the girl saying she will return with the money. Reb rants about Sara's action and Sara finally has enough. She packs her meager belongings and leaves with plans to go to either Bessie's or Mashah's home in the city. Shenah gives her the rent money as she is leaving so Sara has something to help her get started.



Chapters VII and VIII Analysis

When Shenah suggests that Reb become a Rabbi at one of the temples, he flat out refuses. He says that is "selling his religion" and berates the American view of the Jewish customs. He says he has to find something that will allow him to work just a few hours a day so that he can spend the rest of his time at study. Reb says he has a head for business and Shenah objects to his statement, saying that he has the same head as when he was in Russia and lost her father's fortune. Reb is actually quite immature with his attitude about work. When the store looks as though it might become profitable through Shenah's efforts, Reb is pushy with customers and says that he should have been a banker.

Shenah rants and raves at Reb about his financial failings and his tendency to study to the exclusion of everything else and seems to see nothing wrong in her habit of doing so. However, when Sara condemns her father, Shenah chastises her. Sara says that Shenah should have Reb arrested for his failure to support the family. Shenah's answer is that Reb is "innocent as a child and harmless as an angel." She calls him "The Light of the World" and says that Sara should be ashamed for saying such things about her father. However, when the family still thinks that the store will be wildly profitable, Reb says that he wants to give the first one hundred dollars to charity and Shenah says that they should save as much as possible for a house of their own. It is interesting that she is simply not willing to allow Sara to talk about her father's lack of responsibility but Shenah herself will.



Chapters IX and X

Chapters IX and X Summary

She arrives at Bessie's to find Bessie and Zalmon haggling with customers. She slips into their sleeping quarters to find children asleep all over the floor. They live in squalor and Sara eventually falls asleep in a chair. Zalmon insists that she return to her father. Bessie says that Mashah has more room and that Sara might be better off there. Bessie hates her situation and says she cannot do anything to satisfy the children. She says she would leave except that she cannot bring herself to leave Benny, Zalmon's youngest son. Sara and Bessie sleep on the kitchen floor and are awakened the following morning by the four boys fighting over a place at the sink for their morning wash. Zalmon again insists that Sara return home but Sara refuses. Instead she goes to Mashah's.

Sara sees Moe in the street, dressed in new clothes and on his way to work. She does not stop to talk to him but arrives to hear Mashah begging the milk man to allow her one more week's credit. Mashah's house is spotless, her walls painted a cheerful yellow and everything scrubbed and arranged perfectly. She has three children—Danny, Ruthy and a baby. Sara says she will stay with Mashah and contribute to the living expenses. Mashah, citing the possibility that Sara can watch the children while she goes out, agrees. When Moe comes home, it is obvious that he has eaten at a restaurant despite the fact that Mashah has no money for milk. He begins to berate Mashah for her slovenly appearance and for spending money that they do not have. Sara attacks him, saying that Mashah's appearance is his fault but then realizing that she cannot stand up for Mashah if Mashah will not stand up for herself. She picks up her things and leaves.

Sara walks all night, considering her options. The following day, she has a plan. She will get a room, get a job and go to night school with an eventual goal of earning a teacher's certificate. With that thought, she is filled with hope. She begins to look for a room. She is turned down for the first ones because they do not take female boarders. Next, she finds a room to share with three other girls but declines. She finally finds a small, grimy room for six dollars a month. She then goes looking for a job and finds a laundry that is advertising for an ironer. The shopkeeper first says that Sara is not strong enough but she asks for a chance and he hires her for "five a week." That evening, Sara stops at Grand Street Cafeteria where rich ladies feed poor working girls cheaply in nice surroundings. Sara says it is a restful break though the portions are a bit "stingy." Sara enrolls in night classes taking English and arithmetic. She spends ten hours each day in the laundry, two at night school and two for study. Adding in travel time, she is pushed for time.



Chapters IX and X Analysis

Bessie is unhappy but her life is much less complicated than that of her sister, Mashah. Sara says it is as if Mashah painted the walls a sunny color and her own color faded away. She says the floors have a luster but Mashah's hair has lost its shine. Mashah says she loves her three children and she lives for them, but they are millstones around her neck, choking her and keeping her tied to an impossible situation. When Sara asks to stay with Mashah, Sara says she will help out with expenses. Mashah seems to immediately brighten but not at the thought of having someone help pay the bills. Actually, she says that with Sara in the house, she could perhaps go out sometimes. It is interesting that Mashah still wants her freedom and is more interested in having the opportunity to escape the confines of her apartment and three small children than in having an additional income for the household.

Sara decides that she can clean her little room to make it as beautiful as Mashah's apartment. Then she comes to the stark realization that there is too much to do and not enough time to do it all. She also realizes what it costs Mashah to keep her home so clean and shining and Sara decides that she will simply have to live with the grime.



Chapters XI, XII and XIII

Chapters XI, XII and XIII Summary

Sara is working at the laundry when she begins daydreaming about food and burns a shirt. It costs her three dollars in wages. She is already facing financial difficulties. She carefully goes over her expenses. She pays carfare but does not feel she can eliminate that because there simply is not enough time for her to walk to work and then to her night classes. She is barely eating enough to survive and is hungry. At the Grand Street Cafeteria, there is an advertisement for beef stew for twenty cents. She asks for a bowl and the server gives her a small portion. The man behind her gets a large bowl with chunks of meat and Sara complains. She is urged to take the bowl or step out of line. She decides that she is going to starve the following week because of the three dollars in lost wages and decides to start getting accustomed to being hungry.

One night, as Sara is trying to study and hovering under her blankets for warmth, her mother arrives with a feather mattress and some pickled herring. Shenah says she wants nothing in return except for Sara to visit. Sara says she is too busy to visit.

Sara is cooking oatmeal in her room when Fania and Bessie burst in. Fania says that she cannot believe Sara is living in the squalor of the tiny room. Fania cries, saying her life is miserable. She says she has no friends, that she plays cards because there is nothing else to do, and that her husband constantly gripes about any money she spends. She says if she spends a hundred dollars for a dress, she has to lie to Abe and tell him it is half that. Fania says Abe has a partner and offers to "rope him" for Sara. Sara declines, saying anyone who could be partners with Abe is not someone she is interested in.

Sara is seventeen when she leaves home and is now twenty-three. She says she is hungry for learning but is disgusted with the subjects she has to study in order to be admitted into college. Sara is not accepted at work and looks at herself in the mirror to discover she looks "drab." She says other girls without color add color and goes to purchase makeup. When she arrives at work the following morning, the girls say she must have put on the makeup with a shovel and laugh at her. She throws herself more fully into her studies, looking forward to the day when she will be surrounded by educated people who do not care about appearances.

Chapters XI, XII and XIII Analysis

Sara is so hungry that she begins thinking about her mother's cooking. She says her mother's simple dishes were filling and tasty. Sara is not ready to go home but she comes to see there were some aspects of her home life and her family that were positive. Shenah slips out of the house in order to visit Sara and to bring her the mattress and the herring. Sara says she realizes the bond between them is stronger



than she ever considered. She is suddenly past her anger at the people at the cafeteria and is more hopeful. Despite that, she is so wrapped up in her dream of school and her work that she has no time to visit her mother.

Sara is cooking oatmeal at her room alone, remembering that at their home they all sat down together to eat at mealtimes. She admits there was continual arguing but seems to miss that togetherness. When Fania and Bessie arrive, they argue about what is worse—living under the rule of a man or as an old maid.

It is interesting that Sara is concerned with her appearance enough that she spends some of her hard-earned money on makeup. Years earlier, she did not understand when Mashah did the same thing.



Chapters XIV and XV

Chapters XIV and XV Summary

Fania tells Sara that her husband Abe has a business partner and that he will make a good match for Sara. One day, Sara gets a letter from Fania with the news that Max Goldstein believes Sara would make him a good wife and that he is coming to visit. That Sunday afternoon, Max knocks on Sara's door. She is in a poor state of mind. She has just failed geometry and feels life is passing her by. The handsome man is taken with her and she says she feels instantly at ease with him. Max says he admires Sara for her willingness to make her own way. He says he ran away from home as a young man, that he built his own fortune by hard work and that he has become wealthy trading on the property market in California. He tells her about his real estate investments, which at first entrances her. Later, she comes to realize he talks only of money and of ways to make money.

Max takes her to a vaudeville show but she does not like the loud, vulgar joking. He notices and takes her instead to a dance club where she enjoys the music and says that she suddenly feels that she is living. Sara is transformed and says that overnight her face becomes a shining example of a young woman who has a man at her side. They stay out until well after one o'clock but Sara still works the following day. That night, Max wants to take her to the theater but she asks to go someplace quiet, like the park. Max says that he cannot sit still for five minutes. They go out and set the pattern for the rest of the week. Then Max says his agents are holding up a deal until Max returns to California. He urges Sara to marry him and to return with him. He says there is no need for a college education because he has money, which means he has the power to hire and fire college graduates. Sara tells him that she is only happy alone and is destined to be an old maid. When he is gone, she wonders if she made the right decision. Then she sees her school books and says there is nothing so beautiful as the mastery of knowledge.

The leaving of Max Goldstein creates in her a desire to see her father. As she considers this, he arrives at her apartment. She says she is excited to see him but he immediately asks if she turned down Max's offer of marriage. She says she does not love him and her father says she should have recognized the advantages she would have attained by marrying Max. Reb begins to "preach at" Sara. She says nothing is going to change and tells him to simply leave her alone. When he is gone, she says knowledge is "more important" than anything. She then repeats a phrase Reb has often said—she has made her bed and must now lie in it.

Chapters XIV and XV Analysis

It is a testament of Sara's dedication to her education and herself that she does not give in to Max Goldstein's requests for marriage. He offers her a life that she has only



dreamed of, a life without the need for constant work and worry about her next meal. Added to that is the fact that Sara is not doing well in her studies and has doubted her ability to actually finish a degree. However, Sara knows that marriage to Max is not what she really wants for the rest of her life despite the fact that it would be a good escape from her current situation. Sara is at one moment irritated and at another ignoring his faults. She says that her one need, surpassing all others, is the need to be loved.

Reb refuses to consider that Sara might have had an appropriate reason for refusing Max and sees only the financial side of the situation. Sara says she realizes Reb is unconcerned with her happiness. It is interesting that she wanted to see him, somehow thinking he would understand, when he worked so hard to profit from the marriage of Sara's three sisters without giving any thought to their happiness.



Chapters XVI

Chapters XVI Summary

Sara is accepted to college in a relatively rural setting. She is amazed by the fact that people have yards in front of their houses and that there is so much fresh air. She gets a job at the George Martin Hand Laundry and Mr. Martin allows her to work as many hours each day as she wants. She is sometimes there so late that he sends her home so that he can close the shop. She attends classes and lives in a small room much as she did in New York. She still does not fit in. She tries to talk to several of the students but is not warmly received.

Then Sara is informed that she is required to take a physical education class daily. When she arrives, she is told that she needs specific clothing for working out. She does the exercises that day in her street clothing and is soon required to jump over hurdles. She cannot master it and her classmates laugh at her as she continues to fall. In anger, she smashes one of the hurdles. She goes directly to the dean afterwards. She tells him that she works in the laundry after her classes everyday and has neither the time nor the energy to waste on an exercise class. He considers it for a moment, then tells her she is excused from the requirement. Later, Sara will say the dean is among those she counts as her friends at the college.

One day, Sara's longing to fit in overwhelms her. She takes a dollar from her food money and goes to a dance. She soon realizes she does not belong there and flees. Then Sara fails geometry and receives a bill for retaking the class. She goes first to the bursar then to the dean, saying that it is not fair for her to pay for taking the class over. She says she has paid to learn, not to fail—but neither agrees and she pays to retake the class.

One of Sara's most difficult subjects is psychology. The teacher, Mr. Edman, asks the class for examples of strong emotion that interferes with rational thought. Sara remembers Zalmon arguing with a woman over a few pennies to the point that he throws a dollar's worth of change at the woman. Suddenly, she understands and realizes her lifetime of experiences has prepared her for her education. From that day, she is enthralled with psychology. She asks for extra reading and longs to discuss what she has learned but Mr. Edman tells her he does not have time for outside activities. She is hurt but later discovers that all the professors are overworked.

When she returns from summer break, which she spends working in a canning factory, she encounters him at the post office and he tells the worker there his new address. She walks by his apartment building and discovers a room for rent. Though it is more than she can afford, she rents the room and waits to walk to school with him that first morning. Then he tells her that he does not want to see her outside class and she is crushed. However, she wins over the older professors. They are anxious to hear about her Hester Street experiences and she says that it is an exchange—her stories for their



knowledge. It is the dean who tells her that she would have done well in the pioneer days.

Graduation is bittersweet for Sara. She has reached her goal and completed her education but she is now faced with leaving the security of the college life that she has come to love. She writes an essay for a contest, telling about her experiences and wins the thousand dollar prize. She accepts the award to the chants of her classmates.

Chapters XVI Analysis

Sara talks about the beauty of the rural setting where she is going to college, and about the beautiful people. She cannot wait to become friends with them, to be accepted into their homes and their minds. It takes her some time to realize that the social order is like the social order elsewhere and that she is still going to be considered an outcast because she is different and did not grow up among these young people.

Sara asks Mr. Edman to discuss her psychology outside class and he declines. She first thinks he is just ignoring her but then overhears some professors talking and discovers they are all overworked with little free time. With that understanding, her attitude changes. Then she meets him one day and he asks about her reading. She is suddenly enamored with him and cannot wait for the opportunity to spend time with him. When he rebuffs her attention, she says that it is a return of her experience with Morris Lipkin. She says she makes a fool of herself over men and she does not know why. She has said that she wants to be loved, indicating that she recognizes that need. However, now she says she has no idea why she would go to such lengths to gain the attention of a man and should simply accept she is to be alone. She reminds herself that she is at college to work and her dream of completing her education seems to get her past this newest heartbreak.



Chapters XVII and XVIII

Chapters XVII and XVIII Summary

Sara returns to New York much better off than she was when she left the city. She left with her belongings wrapped in newspaper and tied with clothesline. Now she has a new satchel. When she left she ate bread, herring and a pickle, sleeping when she could in her seat. Now she orders what she likes from the dining car and sleeps in a berth. She says that she can go into a department store and buy whatever she wants but she chooses a well-made suit for school. She finds a large, airy room to rent and furnishes it very simply, leaving much of the space open.

Sara has been away six years but now she is going to visit her parents. When she arrives, she finds that her mother is desperately ill. Sara is filled with horror at her memories of leaving her mother behind and of the night Shenah had come all the way from Elizabeth, carrying a feather bed on her back for Sara's warmth. Shenah is in pain and Sara promises to get the best doctors. The doctor says she needs to have her foot amputated because gangrene has set up in the limb but Shenah refuses to go to the hospital.

Fania arrives while Sara is with Shenah. Fania brings roses and Shenah says that she does not want them now that she is dying because no one brought flowers to her while she was well. Bessie and Mashah then arrive and the girls are deliberately cheerful for their mother's sake. When Reb arrives, he immediately begins to berate Sara but Shenah stands up for her and continues to say she is amazed that her daughter has become a "teacherin." However, when the doctor arrives, Reb proudly announces that Sara is a teacher. He says that she "has a head on her," even though she is a girl. Then Reb asks the doctor how many fathers would give up the wage a daughter could bring in just so that the daughter could go to college.

Sara realizes that her mother, having refused the operation, is dying. She cannot come to terms with the thought and berates herself for not taking time for her family during the years she was struggling for an education. At the moment of her mother's death, Sara feels her "soul enter my soul like a miracle." Then she faints, waking to find her sisters and neighbors shrieking in anguish over Shenah's death. The undertaker arrives and in keeping with tradition, uses a knife to cut the clothing of the family in mourning. Sara refuses to bow to the tradition, saying that it will not help her to cut up her only good suit. Those gathered call her "American" and say she has a "heart of stone."

Chapters XVII and XVIII Analysis

With her new apartment, Sara says she has accomplished something teachers preached at her as a child—a place for everything and everything in its place. The day Bessie calls on Sara and Mashah to help clean their apartment those many years ago,



Sara said she had been told things should be put away. She says the problem for their family then was that there were not enough places for things. Now, she deliberately keeps her space cleared of clutter and dirt, and has only those belongings that can be put away.

Sara's arrival at her parents' apartment coincides with her father's departure for his daily prayers. Shenah is begging Reb not to leave her, and is afraid to be alone. Reb refuses to stay, saying that he has never missed his prayer time and is not going to start now. He tells Shenah that if he goes to pray, God will heal her. When Reb returns to find Sara with Shenah, he says she has been heartless to have been away all those years. Shenah immediately begins to argue with Reb, saying that he is just waiting for her death so that he can move in with the Widow Feinstein. When Shenah dies, Mrs. Feinstein "howls" out for Shenah to "be a good messenger to God for me."

Reb is concerned that his "burden bearer" has left him. He cries out over Shenah's death but it is focused solely on how it impacts him personally—there is no one to care for his house or for him from this point. Sara finds herself numb and does not cry again, earning herself the condemnation of the gathered neighbors. When Sara refuses to allow the undertaker to slit her clothing, she is condemned further. She says it is her only good suit for teaching and she needs it. She says she "feels terrible enough without tearing my clothes."



Chapters XIX and XX

Chapters XIX and XX Summary

Sara feels bad that she did not give her mother the understanding she needed. In keeping with her mother's dying wish that someone watch over Reb, Sara visits him every day after school. She says begins wearing his best clothes every day, polishing his shoes and eats three times a day at Mrs. Feinstein's. Reb extols Mrs. Feinstein's virtues, saying she is a "diamond treasure" and that she works to make him happy. Sara believes the woman to be merely scheming how to get her hands on Reb's "lodge money" from Shenah's death, but feels she cannot explain it to Reb. A few days later, Sara arrives at Reb's apartment and he says he has something to tell her. She says she feels something terrible coming and he reveals that he and Mrs. Feinstein have married because he simply cannot stand to be alone. He says the law of the Torah requires a man wait thirty days and he has done that. Sara tells her sisters and the "room is filled with wailing." None of them will visit Reb and his new wife.

Then Sara gets a letter from her new stepmother. It is written by a professional letter writer since the woman does not know how to write. It says there is trouble at her father's house and that she must come immediately. Sara arrives to find the apartment newly furnished and the woman—now Mrs. Smolinsky—dressed in new clothes. She says Reb does not earn any money and that the daughters must care for them. She says they have spent all the lodge money from Shenah's death fixing up the apartment. Sara is angry, thinking back on the way her mother lived and scratched for every cent. Mrs. Smolinsky says Reb promised the girls would support them but Sara and her sisters say they will not keep the couple though they agree that they will care for their father if that is needed. Then Sara sees her stepmother pay a man demanding grocery money from a fat wad of bills, though she claims to have nothing.

The windows of Sara's classroom face the street where she sold herring seventeen years earlier. From her childhood, she remembers the music of the hurdy-gurdy man and the dignity of the teachers. She says it was her father that ingrained this respect for teachers but now that she has reached the goal, she feels empty. The teachers "lost their glamour" and are merely "peddling their little bit of education for a living." The exception is Hugo Seelig, the principal. Sara admires his way with children while she herself is struggling to help her children escape years of learning poor pronunciation. One day, Hugo asks Sara to see him after class. She arrives to find a letter telling of her lack of support for her father and saying that half her wages should go to her father.

The next day, Hugo tells her a mother has offered a compliment about one of Sara's students. By chance, they walk from the building at the same time that day and begin walking home together daily. They discover that they have much in common, including that they came with their families from the same area of Poland.



Chapters XIX and XX Analysis

Reb belongs to a number of lodges and spends almost every evening at some meeting. Each requires membership dues and some pay out money on the death of a loved one. Those payments are how Zalmon the fish-peddler had money to pay for Bessie upon their marriage. Now Mrs. Feinstein is expecting that large payoffs have been made to Reb and that she will be kept well if she marries him. When Sara is faced with the stark reality of the situation, she agrees with her sisters that she does not want to support the couple. However, then she fears what will happen to her father if she "abandons" him to her stepmother's care. She says she wants to do her duty but does not know what that might be.

Sara fears she will be fired when Hugo reads the letter but she seems to be even more fearful that she will lose his respect. The day after the letter, they walk home together and Hugo says the letter drew him to her. He says it actually offered more insight into her life than he had previously had. Then he says it is obvious that Sara's will to fight for what she wants came from her father.



Chapters XXI

Chapters XXI Summary

Three months pass and Sara is leaving school to prepare for dinner with Hugo. He calls, saying he has been held up at a meeting and asks her to meet him at Orloff's Café on East Broadway. She hurries in that direction but bumps into an old man selling gum. She stops to help him pick up his wares and discovers it is her father. He is obviously ill and she takes him home. Her stepmother arrives after Sara has already put Reb to bed. Mrs. Smolinsky howls out her despair, saying it appears she will be burying another husband. The doctor arrives and says that with rest, Reb will recover. As soon as school is over the following day, Sara rushes to Reb's side and finds he is worse. Mrs. Smolinsky says that he cannot seem to swallow and begs him to tell her where she should expect lodge money upon his death. She says he has not the energy to fight back sickness "like a younger man." Sara realizes she cannot leave her father alone with the woman again, takes a leave of absence from school and stays with him until he is well.

Sara begins to look for an alternative for her father. At his request, she investigates the "Old Men's Home" but feels he would never be happy there. Reb says he wants to leave his wife but there is no where else for him to live. Sara decides to see if she can buy her stepmother's loyalty. She gives her some money and promises that her sisters will do the same. Mrs. Smolinsky soon has new earrings and seems to be kinder.

Then Sara brings Hugo to meet her father and the two men seem to hold a respect for each other. Reb is still not happy with his marriage and says that the Torah allows for divorce in his current situation. Sara reluctantly offers to allow him to live with her. He asks Sara if she has forgotten her sacrilege in running away from home or her contempt for God's law when she refused to allow her clothing to be cut on the day of her mother's death. He says that if she promises to keep sacred all that he holds sacred, he will consider it. Sara is angry but then realizes all he has left is a "fanatical" adherence to his religion. She says it is within her power to allow him this and that she should not deny it. With that thought, she reaches out and takes his hand.

When Sara tells Hugo of her father's plight, he says that Reb "must come with us." Sara argues that Reb will take over their home but Hugo says that "our home will be the richer if your father comes with us." Though Sara is relieved, she says that the weight of responsibility is still present but that it is not merely her father who creates that burden—it is the generations before that made her father what he is.

Chapters XXI Analysis

Sara feels fortunate in her life and looks around with a new understanding of the suffering of others. It seems that it takes a deep happiness within herself—fueled by her



new-found love for Hugo—to make her fully see the suffering of others and to make her want to do something about it. She even tries to think of her stepmother with less hostility and brings her presents in order to soften the woman's attitude toward Reb. It is also what seems to soften Sara's attitude towards Reb's religious fervor.

Reb asks Hugo how much he makes as a principal and Hugo says he makes a living but that he is not smart enough. He asks Reb to help him learn Hebrew and Reb immediately agrees with overflowing gladness. It seems Reb is pleased by the fact that Hugo makes enough money and yet still has a desire to learn something Reb considers vital and religious.

Sara does not offer details of any engagement or marriage plans between herself and Hugo, but there must have been because she consults him about having her father live with "them" and he says her father "must come with us." Hugo's easy-going nature makes Sara love him more when they are faced with this decision.



Characters

Sara Smolinsky

The main character of the story. She is ten as the story begins and living in poverty with the constant fear of being thrown out of their home for back rent and with hunger an ever-present threat. She is the youngest of the daughters but has always taken on the worry of the household as if she were a mother herself. One day, her father is arrested for striking the rent collector and none of her sisters are working. An elderly neighbor gives them fifty cents and Sara takes a quarter of it. She goes to that same neighbor and buys twenty-five herring at a penny each, selling them on a street corner for two cents. The power of making money makes her feel independent, a feeling that will drive her throughout her life.

Sara watches as her father arranges marriages for his three oldest daughters with nothing in mind except how he can benefit from the arrangements. With the third marriage, he collects five hundred dollars and uses almost all of it to purchase a store he believes will be a huge money-making venture. It is only a scam and when Sara trusts a girl to bring two pennies she lacked for the purchase of a bag of rice, her father berates her, prompting her to leave home.

Sara does not attend school as a child and sometimes believes she has been deprived because of it. However, when she goes to school as an adult, she discovers that, in her lifetime of learning on Hester Street among the poor tenants of the crowded apartments, she gained knowledge and an understanding of life that surpasses what she would have gained in school. She works her way through preparatory classes and then through college, often going hungry and barely making ends meet to pay the bills. She breaks ties with her family during this time, an act she later regrets. However, she sees no other way to earn her diploma.

As a teacher, Sara returns to New York where she finds her mother desperately ill. A month after Shenah's death, Sara's father marries a widow who wants only to be supported. Sara declines, hating the woman for trying to take Shenah's place and hating her father for his attitudes and his willingness to take this woman as his wife. She soon discovers that her father is being mistreated and eventually realizes that his fanatical attachment to religion is all he has left in life. She becomes involved with the principal of her school and the two apparently plan to marry. They agree that Reb should live with them in his old age and he says he will consider it.

Reb Smolinsky

Sara's father. Reb is fanatical about his religion and is willing to have his wife and children do without basic necessities in order to pay dues for his many lodge memberships and to contribute to charities. He believes women are completely useless



except as servants to tend a man's needs. Sara recognizes his tirades for what they are and leaves home at an early age, before her father can arrange a marriage for her.

Reb does not work and never has. Shenah says he has no head for business and that he wasted the fortune left them by her father. They spent the remainder of what they had to pay so Reb would not be forced into the military. Reb arranges marriages for his three older daughters but focuses on finding men who will help support him, with no thought to the happiness of his daughters. One marries a man who claims to be a diamond dealer but is actually only a clerk in a store and is soon fired for taking the diamond jewelry from the store for his personal use. When Reb finds out, he tells his daughter that she should have seen through the ruse and that she must now live with the situation.

When Shenah dies, Reb is heartbroken but it is because he now has no "burden bearer." He quickly marries again, though the woman is a tyrant who hopes Reb will support her. When she discovers he will not work, she becomes abusive to him and threatens to sue him for non-support. Reb briefly sells gum on the street corner but quickly becomes ill. He decides he will divorce the woman but has nowhere to go. When Sara invites him to live with her, he says he does not think he can accept because of her actions of sacrilege—such as the facts that she lives alone as a young lady rather than marrying and would not tear her clothes in anguish upon her mother's death.

Shenah Smolinsky

The mother of the family. Shenah is constantly worrying about the bills but gives in to father's demands when he says she must not worry so. Shenah says she is only a foolish woman and must depend on Reb for guidance but then berates him for his attitudes and his lack of support. She is actually a strong woman and when Reb buys a store that seems to be a good deal but is actually a scam, Shenah applies for credit and helps get the store to a point of making a living for the couple.

Shenah loves her daughters but is unable to stand up to Reb on their behalf. When Sara runs away from home, Shenah gives her some cash for a start in the city and later travels many miles through the freezing cold to bring Sara a feather mattress for warmth.

As she is dying, Shenah accuses Reb of having plans to marry the moment she is gone. As it turns out, she is right. When Sara sees the fine furnishings of Reb's home with his new wife, she says her mother would have been happy to have had any of those possessions rather than the rags she lived with her entire life.

Bessie Smolinsky

The oldest sister. It is noted that the family is hanging on to Bessie and that if she does not get work soon they will be thrown out into the streets. Bessie hurries home from work to help with the chores and always hands over her entire pay to her father. She



bears the responsibility for her family as a duty. When a young man asks for her hand, Reb says he cannot do without Bessie's earnings and Bessie refuses to go against her father. She ends up married to Zalmon, the fish-peddler. She actually resists his courting efforts and seems ready to run away to avoid the marriage, but is taken by Zalmon's youngest son, Benny. She later tells Sara that she would run away from Zalmon except for her affection for Benny. All the things Zalmon promised, including that Bessie would not be required to work outside the home, are untrue. Sara notes that Bessie—the "burden bearer"—trades one burden for another with her marriage.

Mashah Smolinsky

Another of the sisters. The first look at Mashah is of a young woman who has just spent ten cents for flowers for her hat when the family is not certain how they will pay the rent. Mashah can spend her lunch money for fashion accessories and never feel the hunger of doing without food. Mashah falls for a pianist but his father objects to the match. When the young man asks Mashah for another chance, Reb interferes and forces Mashah to stop seeing the young man. Then Reb arranges for Mashah to marry a man who claims to be a diamond dealer. It turns out that he is only a clerk but he and Mashah have children together and she lives her life in abject poverty.

Fania Smolinsky

Another of the sisters. Fania is actually attending school with a young man who is a writer when Reb arranges for her to marry a man from California who is very wealthy. Fania, though she has money, is never happy with the man who ignores her and gambles often.

Berel Bernstein

The young man who visits Bessie. He is a cutter in the shop where she works. He says he wants to marry Bessie though she has no dowry. Reb says he does not need a dowry for Bessie because she provides the family with a living and he is not ready to allow her to marry and leave behind her familial obligations. He says he will allow the marriage if Berel pays for the wedding, buys Reb new clothes and sets him up in business. Berel declines and is soon engaged to someone else.

Morris Lipkin

A young man who boards with Zalmon the fish-peddler. He writes poetry for Fania and attends school. Soon, Fania is also attending night classes. Morris dedicates his collection of verses, "Poems of Poverty," to Fania. He promises to talk to Reb in an effort to gain approval to marry Fania but Reb freezes him out so completely that Morris leaves without speaking. Later, Sara finds his letters to Fania, imagines that they are



written for her and says she is in love with him. When she approaches him, he calls her a silly child and laughs, breaking her heart.

Jacob Novak

Mashah's boyfriend. It is noted that she suddenly has an interest other than herself when she becomes involved with Jacob. He is a pianist and is preparing for a concert. His father forbids him to see Mashah, apparently because of the family's poverty. Jacob first accepts this, then begs Mashah's forgiveness. At this point, Reb says Jacob cannot be trusted and Mashah gives in to her father's demands that she break off the relationship.

Moe Mirsky

The man who says he is a diamond dealer and is chosen by Reb to marry Mashah. It is later revealed that he is only a salesman in a jewelry store and he is fired for allowing Mashah to wear the diamonds he is supposed to be selling to customers. His next job is as a shoe salesman and he spends money on himself while Mashah and the children do without even the most basic of necessities.

Abe Schmukler

The man who is in "cloaks and suits" and selected by Reb to marry Fania. Fania later says that he is a habitual gambler and that she is lonely because he is never at home.

Zalmon

The fish-peddler. This is the man Fania's boyfriend boards with and who later comes to Reb asking for a match because his wife dies and leaves him with six children.

Benny

Zalmon's youngest son. When Zalmon tries to win Bessie and fails to touch her at all, it is Benny who reaches her. She tends to his skinned knee and later cares for him when he eats bad food. The living conditions at his home are bad and Bessie says she would leave Zalmon except for Benny.

Max Goldstein

The wealthy man who is a friend of Fania's husband, Abe. He is well-dressed and Sara immediately feels at home with him but soon realizes there are many things about him that she does not like. He does not see the need for her to continue with school and



spends almost every minute talking of his real estate investments. She says he is caught up with the need to make money and then to spend it having a good time.

Hugo Seelig

The principal at the school where Sara teaches. The two become involved and it is Hugo who says that having Reb live with them will be a positive thing. He also asks Reb to teach him Hebrew and seems to win the older man's respect with that request.



Objects/Places

Hester Street

Where the family lives and where Sara stands on a street corner selling herring to make twenty-five cents profit.

Grondo

The larger Russian city near Berel Bernstein's home. Berel says he grew up just a few miles from Grondo.

Grand Street

The location of the department store owned by Jacob Novak's father.

Chicago

Where Jacob Novak's father has been on business and where he returns from in order to meet Mashah and her family.

Poems of Poverty

The collection of poetry written by Morris Lipkin. He dedicates the work to Fania.

Elizabeth, New Jersey

Where Reb buys a grocery store.

Grand Street Cafeteria

Where Sara sometimes goes to eat because it is cheap. There are tablecloths and pretty flowers but the portions are small and Sara's hunger eventually prompts her to argue because the men get more food for the same price.

Orloff's Cafe

A café on East Broadway in New York where Sara is to meet Hugo one day. However, Sara bumps into her father in the street as he is peddling gum and does not keep the date.



Potters Field

Where the poor are buried and where Reb tells Sara she is going to end up if she does not settle down with a husband.

George Martin Hand Laundry

The business owned by Mr. Martin where Sara goes to work. He allows her to work as many hours a day as she wants and she is there so late that he tells her she cannot live there, sending her home so he can lock up.

Eighteen Banks Street

The address of the boarding house where Mr. Edmon lives and where Sara moves to.



Themes

The Need to Be Loved

Sara has little affection from her parents though it is obvious her mother loves her. The need to be loved drives many of her decisions throughout her life though she is not willing to compromise her principles and ideals to gain the superficial love of another person. Her first hope of love comes in the form of her sister's former boyfriend, Morris. Sara discovers Morris's letters written to Fania, now married to another. Sara reads the letters again and again until she becomes convinced the letters were meant for her and that they now share a connection. She puts herself in a place to meet Morris and finally confesses her love for him. Of course, she is younger and has built the relationship from pure fantasy which ensures that Morris is not at all taken with her. He laughs at her and it breaks her heart.

Later, she is taken with a man named Max Goldstein. Max is a friend of Sara's brother-in-law and he and Sara share an instant connection. She says she is at ease with him and he says he admires her independence, evident in the fact that she is making her own way in the world. However, Sara quickly realizes she is not in love with Max and that she never could be. She breaks off their relationship which earns her the wrath of her father. While Sara could have traded her hard life for the easy life Max promises, she is certain that true love waits for her somewhere. She also is not willing to compromise her idea of love for what Max offers.

Sara is not the only person who longs for love. Her older sister Bessie is the last of the three older girls to have a boyfriend. She is so anxious to gain this young man's love that she breaks her own rules, spending money for a new tablecloth, a piece of lace fabric to hide the rusty sink pipes and a bit of gold paper to hide the "fly dirt" on the chandelier. When her father refuses to allow the match, Bessie becomes a shell of her former self. When Reb arranges for her to marry the fish-peddler, Zalmon, she resists because she says she cannot love him and that he will never love her. Then she meets Benny—Zalmon's youngest child. It is her love for Benny that prompts her to accept the marriage and she later tells Sara that she would leave Zalmon except for Benny.

The Need to Dream

Sara's dream is to finish school and become a school teacher. Though it is not really mentioned while she is seeking her degree, she later says her father's respect for teachers plays a role in her decision to become one. Sara puts herself through school in very trying circumstances. She goes back to give herself the education she missed out on as a child and then works her way through college in order to fulfill her dream.

Sara is not the only one to dream her way out of her current circumstances. Her mother recalls her youth in Russia when she would dance at parties and when the family was



very wealthy. She talks of her father's dreams as well, saying he wanted an educated son-in-law. That dream prompts him to select Reb as Shenah's husband. Sara says that as her mother talks of the days of her childhood, their own reality of a dingy apartment and never enough money simply melt away.

For Mashah, beauty is the way out of the reality of their dismal existence. Sara says Mashah's need for pretty things means that she can use her lunch money for a new flower for her hat and never feels the hunger of missing lunch. Sara says anyone else in the family would ache from the hunger but such a frivolous purchase was worth the cost to Mashah. After her marriage, Mashah is willing to work herself almost to death in order to have a clean, shining home. The cost is high and Sara says it is as if she uses the golden shine from her own life to paint the walls of her apartment. The more her home shines, the less Mashah does.

Reb himself dreams of seeing his daughters successfully married so that they will care for his needs. He spends a great deal of time trying to make it happen but none of the three older girls have happy or successful marriages. Later, he seems to dream only of the afterlife and of his religious practices. He spends his time away from his family in order to follow his own dreams. Even as his wife lies dying, he says he has never missed a prayer time and leaves her alone. Sara will eventually admit these practices are all Reb has to his name and will say it is not right to deny him these dreams.

The Desire to Belong

While working in the laundry in New York, Sara finds she does not belong among her co-workers because their lives are simply so different. The other young women are filled with talk of boyfriends, evening activities and fashion. Sara has no boyfriend, is too busy in the evenings with her studies and too poor to follow the latest fashions. Despite the importance of her dream to finish her education to become a teacher, she spends some of her hard-earned money on makeup only to discover that she applies it too heavily, prompting the other girls to make fun of her. At one point, she moves close to the noontime circle of talk but soon finds she does not belong and is laughed out of the group.

That desire to belong follows Sara to college. She finds young people there without the desperate look of always wanting food and basic necessities and predicts that they will soon be her friends. However, she finds she is not accepted because she is an outsider. She says she does become favorites of the older professors and she counts the dean among her friends. That apparently is enough to salve her need for friendship to some degree.

Back in New York, Sara finds her memory of teachers does not reflect the truth. She seems to want to be part of a group of educators who are on fire to share their knowledge. Instead, she says they are the same as pushcart peddlers on the street, but the teachers are selling their bits of education rather than the used clothing of the pushcarts.



Style

Point of View

The book is written in first person from Sara Smolinsky's point of view. The view is limited only to those things she can see, though the reader will also learn things Sara knows or remembers. For example, she recalls little from her childhood before the family's arrival in America but she knows about her mother's childhood from the stories her mother tells. The point of view is not overly limiting in this instance though it does leave some questions. For example, Sara runs away from home while her parents are working and living in a store they buy in Elizabeth, New Jersey. When Sara returns, they are no longer in the store but there is no indication what happened to the business.

Sara tells the story as she lives it but she also leaves out many details. The reader learns she goes to college in a rural setting and works that first summer at a nearby canning factory. There are few other details about her college career after that, except that she grows to love psychology. She does not describe other summers or even other school years and it is left to the reader to fill in those gaps. There are other similar details omitted and left to the readers' imagination. These are not vital to the story-line and their omission does not detract from the novel.

Setting

The majority of the book is set in New York City in a slum area around Hester Street. The city is real and the conditions described are believable. There comes a time when Reb Smolinsky has five hundred dollars and purchases a store in Elizabeth, New Jersey. There is little description of that town except that Sara says it is not nearly as busy as New York. Sara eventually goes to college in a town that is more rural than New York City. Though the town and college are never specifically identified, Sara describes the area to some degree. She says the houses all have yards, and so are very different from the tenement housing she is accustomed to. She says the difference in the town creates people who look different. She talks of the impact of the abundance of fresh air. Her room is apparently not the squalid, dingy space she rented in New York, but she spends little time describing her living space.

Upon her return to New York, Sara describes her large, airy room that is so clean and so much more easily scrubbed to a dirt-free shine than her childhood home. As a child, the family struggled to merely survive. Sara says that her oldest sister, in an attempt to impress a suitor, once purchases a new oilcloth for the table, a piece of lace fabric to hide the rusty pipes under the sink and a bit of gold paper to cover the "fly dirt" on the chandelier. Sara says that once they cleaned their apartment, she was impressed with how it had looked but knew that merely living in it would bring the dirt back out. On her own with a teacher's salary to live on, she surrounds herself with as much wide open space as possible.



There are only clues to determine the time frame of the story. It seems feasible that the story takes place following the Depression era of the 1930s.

Language and Meaning

The book is written in a straight-forward style that most readers will find easy to follow. There are words and phrases that might be unfamiliar to some readers but most are evident within the context of the sentence. Reb continuously refers to his attitudes about women—that they are useful only for tending a man's needs and for work. The attitude reflects Reb's background and upbringing, as well as the time frame and culture of Reb's life. He mentions only the basics of his religion and there is no depth to his descriptions, meaning the reader won't get caught up in religious debates.

That lack of depth is sometimes distracting. Years pass with only a few events described. In some cases, there are few or no clues of the passage of time. Occasionally, Sara's age is mentioned which helps with this. For example, there is no real indication of how many years pass between the beginning of the book and the time Sara runs away, except that the reader knows Sara is ten as the story opens and it is later revealed that she is seventeen when she leaves home.

The book's title, "The Bread Givers," seems to refer to those who provide a living for Sara's family. It is noted that Bessie is often called the "burden bearer" because it is her pay that pays for the family's shelter and food. When she leaves home to become a wife to Zalmon and mother for his children, it is said that she trades one burden for another.

The book is somewhat depressing in its realism, with Sara facing overwhelming odds to reach her goal. The ending is an epiphany, with nothing changing other than Sara's own attitudes. This makes the outcome somewhat predictable. Despite the lack of surprise, these changes will be interesting to most readers and do not necessarily detract from the story.

Structure

The book is divided into three sections and these are further divided into twenty-one chapters. Each is titled and these titles provide insight into the events likely to happen during that chapter. The three sections are "Hester Street," "Between Two Worlds," and "The New World." The events of the first section occur during Sara's childhood. "Between Two Worlds" is the events that occur as she is trying to escape her past to gain her education. "The New World" is the description of everything that happens to Sara after her return to New York with her teaching degree. The chapter titles are also indicative of what is likely to happen. For example, "Death on Hester Street" is the chapter following Sara's return to New York. She arrives to find her mother desperately ill and most readers will accurately predict that the death refers to Sara's mother.

The book includes several photographs from scenes from the movie, "Hungry Hearts," also written by Anzia Yezierska. The photos show old-fashioned settings of people who

could very well be those described in the "Bread Givers." The photos offer an aid for those who have trouble visualizing what the characters might look like. There are only a few photos and they are all in black and white and set on a page alone.

The book includes a brief biography of Yezeirska's life. The look into the author's own background offers some insight into particular details of the book and some readers may find this valuable to understanding the story.



Quotes

"I was about ten years old then. But from always it was heavy on my heart the worries for the house as if I was mother. I knew that the landlord came that morning hollering for the rent," Chapter 1, p. 1.

"But the more people get, the more they want. We no sooner got used to regular towels than we began to want toothbrushes, each for himself like Mashsh. We got the toothbrushes and we began wanting toothpowder to brush our teeth with, instead of ashes. And more and more we wanted more things, and really needed more things the more we got them," Chapter II, p. 29.

"Ach! I was thinking to myself, if only we didn't have to pull out the torn bedding from its hiding place to sleep—the rags to dress ourselves—if only we didn't have to dirty up the new whiteness of the oilcloth with the eating, then it would shine in our house always like a palace. It's only when poor people begin to eat and sleep and dress themselves that the ugliness and dirt begins to creep out of their black holes," Chapter III, p. 38.

"Mother always said that, with her bitter heart, what were such little things as too much or too little salt in the soup. But now, because of Jacob, we all had food cooked and salted as it was never cooked and salted before," Chapter IV, p. 55.

"More and more I began to see that Father, in his innocent craziness to hold up the Light of the Law to his children, was a tyrant more terrible than the Tsar from Russia. As he drove away Bessie's man, so he drove away Mashah's lover. And each time he killed the heart from one of his children, he grew louder with his preaching on us all," Chapter IV, p. 65.

"Do you want a houseful of old maids on your neck? If these men are not good enough, why ain't you smart enough to bring somebody better?" Shenah, Chapter V, p. 70.

"No wonder it says in the Torah, 'Woe to a man who has females for his offspring!' 'And woe to us women who got to live in a Torah-made world that's only for men,'" An exchange between Reb and Shenah, Chapter VI, p. 95.

"If I were only a widow, people would pity themselves on me. But with you around, they think I got a bread giver when what I have is a stone giver." Shenah, Chapter VII, p. 127.



"Ten hours I must work in the laundry. Two hours in the night school. Two hours more to study my lessons. When can I take time to be clean? If I'm to have strength and courage to go on with what I set out to do, I must shut my eyes to the dirt," Chapter X, p. 163.

"Everything about me was gray, drab, dead. I was only twenty-three and I dressed myself like an old lady in mourning," Chapter XIII, p. 181.

"Maybe Fania was right. If I keep on wearing out my years stuffing dead ashes of learning in my tired brain, later, when I'll want to live and love, it will be too late. I'll be too old," Chapter XIV, p. 186.

"You think millions of educated old maids like you could change the world one inch? Woe to America where women are left free like men. All that's false in politics, prohibition, and all the evils of the world come from them," Chapter XIV, p. 205.

"The fight with father to break away from home, the fight in the cafeteria for a piece of meat—when I went through those experiences I thought them privations and losses; now I saw them treasure chests of insight," Chapter XVI, p. 223.

"Each time, after making a crazy fool of myself over a man, I was plunged into thick darkness that seems the end of everything, but it really led me out into the beginnings of wider places, newer light," Chapter XVI, p. 231.

"And this, my youngest, is a teacherin. She has a head on her. Takes after her father, even though she's only a girl," Reb, introducing Sara, Chapter XVIII, p. 249.

"Not one of the teachers around me had kept the glamour. They were just peddling their little bit of education for a living, the same as any pushcart peddler," Chapter XX, p. 270.

Topics for Discussion

Why does Sara refuse to gather coal from the neighbors' ashes? What does it say about her personality? What is it that prompts her to go out with her bin and gather again? What does she do to stop the cycle?

Why does Sara want to be a teacher? What sacrifices does she make in order to make it happen?

Describe Reb's matchmaking efforts for the three older daughters. What is it that prompts him to begin that endeavor? What are the results?

What was Reb's attitude towards women? What does he say about Sara when she runs away from home? What does he say differently about Sara after she has achieved her teaching degree? Is it a true reflection of his attitude or is it show for a guest?

Describe the marriages of Bessie, Fania and Mashah. What problems do the three girls encounter? What is Reb's attitude about their problems?

What is the relationship between Sara and her mother? What does Sara feel when she returns home to find her mother dying?

Why does Reb marry again so quickly? What action does Sara take in an effort to help her father? How does that change and why?

Why does Reb seem to like Hugo? How does Sara's attitude change toward her father? What is it that prompts Sara's change of attitude on this subject?