

## THREE FACETS OF JEWISH DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE IN THE SELECTED POEMS OF A.M. KLEIN AND IRVING LAYTON

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### **Abstract**

*This paper analyses the selected poems of A.M. Klein and Irving Layton, prominent writers of Canadian Literature. Some features of Jewish Diaspora are discussed in this paper. It is understood through their poems that the diasporic experience of Jews identically differs from other diasporas. The poems written by both the poets picture the diasporic experience of Jews in their host lands - very importantly their bitter experience - the holocaust and the common diasporic elements can also be found in their poems.*

**Key Words:** Jewish Canadian Literature, Diaspora, Nostalgia, Anti-Semitism, Jewish Culture and Tradition, Holocaust

A.M. Klein, a poet, journalist, novelist, short story writer and lawyer, is called 'one of the greatest poets and a leading figure in Jewish-Canadian culture and Father of Canadian Poetry. Klein throughout his career is very thoughtful and has high ambitions. As said, poetry is not true poetry unless it engages some great theme, the essence of Klein's theme is community, considered to be a great theme, and more specifically the relationship of the creative individual to the community in which he is rooted. His primary relationship is not with God, or with a beloved, or even with his art, but with his community.

His writing reflects and integrates the three deepest influences in his life: the Jewish environment and heritage including the Bible, the Talmud and the Cabbala, the French Canadian milieu of his native Montreal and his acquaintance with English Literature. W.J. Keith says that Klein protests against being categorized as a Jewish poet. At the same time, he spends a life time supporting Jewish and Zionist causes. However, he never writes either in Hebrew or Yiddish language. The "Tall Tales about the Baal Shem Tov", which he refers in the poem "Autobiographical" told by his father and these tales are not known to many educated Canadians. Klein was trying to preserve the language and heritage of North American Jews by recreating the stories and traditions into English Language.

Irving Layton, successor of Klein, is one of the best known and perhaps most celebrated poets in Canada. He has changed the parameters of Canadian literature with his energetic, passionate works. Layton's poetry examines both the creative and destructive instincts of humanity and frankly satirizes the flaws of contemporary society. Layton has constantly promoted a global presence for contemporary Canadian poetry, partly by presenting much of his poetry as performance art and partly by spotlighting the concerns of Jewish Canadians.

The poems of A.M. Klein and Irving Layton are analyzed based on the three facets of Jewish diasporic experience: (i) their attachment to their homeland and to their past which gets articulated in their poetry as revealed in their eagerness to retain the culture and tradition; (ii) the agony they suffered at holocaust experience under Nazi reminding them of their painful past, and (iii) the present trauma of Jews in their host land where they experience anti-Semitism where there is animosity between the Jews and the gentiles.

Generally, Jews always identify themselves with their generation old tribe, or they do not, in other words, see themselves apart from their ancestors. In Psalm XXXVI, "A Psalm Touching Genealogy" Klein tells "Not sole was I born, but entire genesis / For the fathers that beget me..." (Collected Poems 234).

The poet is very proud of his ancestors and his heritage. He feels proud in remembering his ancestry. His proud heritage is always in his minds. As he writes:

*They dwell in my veins, they eavesdrop at my ear,  
They circle, as with Torahs, round my skull,  
In exit and entrance all day pull  
They latches of my heart, descent, and rise -  
And there look generations through my eyes. (Collected Poems 234)*

Thinking of his past ancestry heritage, Klein is highly nostalgic. In the poem "Autobiographical," Klein speaks of his Jewish background in which he is brought up. As is stated earlier, community occupies an important place and it is found in the poem "Autobiographical". He is nostalgic in remembering his childhood. He puts it in the following lines:

*Out of the ghetto streets where a Jew boy  
Dreamed pavement into pleasant Bible-land,  
Out of the Yiddish slums where childhood met  
The friendly beard, the loutish Sabbath-goy  
Or followed, proud, the torah-escorting band,  
Out of the jargoning city I regret,  
Rise memories.....  
Like sadness sweet of synagogal hum,  
Like Hebrew violins  
Sobbing delight upon their Eastern notes. (Collected Poems 271)*

The poem "Autobiographical" is full of reminiscences of the poet's childhood. He remembers 'his kindergarten' home, his brothers, 'Mirroring sisters' 'little bells,' 'Old Ashkenazi' and so on. This well-structured poem dwells upon the various periods of his life as a Jew and ends on a beautiful note, the typical nostalgia of a Jew:

*I am no old man fatuously intent  
On memoirs, but in memory I seek  
the strength and vividness of nonage days,  
Not tranquil recollection of event,*

*It is a fabled city that I seek;  
It stands in Space's vapors and Time's haze  
Then comes my sadness in remembered joy  
Constructive of the throat;  
Thence do I hear; as heard by a Jew boy,  
The Hebrew violins,  
Delighting in the sobbed oriental note. (Collected Poems 273)*

He speaks about "the four-legged," his rabbi "patting a coming scholar- head," his mother "blessing candles, Sabbath-flamed," his father "pickabacking" him to bed " to tell tales about the Baal Shem Tov," letting the Haman rattle (the death rattle of Haman, the enemy of Jews, at the time of hanging), the "torah dance on Simchas Torah night" (Collected Poems 273). Haman who descended from the royal family of Amalekites, the worst enemies of the Jews, was hanged on the gallows he had erected for a Jew (Esther 7:10).

Klein is very much attached to his homeland and the memory of the past is very well articulated in these poems. One can understand the impact of Jewish tradition and culture on him during his childhood days. The memories of his tradition and culture have an everlasting impact upon him. These poems stand testimony to his attachment to his Jewish community.

The following poems focus on anti-Semitism. The racial anti-Semitism reached its most dangerous form during Holocaust where about six million Jews were killed. The two thousand year history of Jews in Europe was almost completely obliterated. Even after having suffered centuries of hatred and discrimination, Nazism sent a bitter message to Jews. Nazis hated Jews not because they were different but because they were trying to become like them. Nazis called Jews as 'racial enemies' who were subjected to arbitrary arrest, imprisonment, persecution and murder.

The poem "The Hitleriad" attacks anti-Semitism of the Third Reich, the German State during the third period, between 1933 and 1944. The poet invokes the muse to be with him for he falls from grace to sin,

*Spurning this day thy preferred hippocrene,  
To taste poison'd lager of Berlin!  
He would have been happier with other themes  
Adolf I sing only since I must. (Collected Poems 186)*

He cannot sing about blossoming flowers and birds sitting in an ivory tower while he hears. Once again like a typical Jew he states:

*I am the grandson of the prophets! I  
Shall not seal lips against iniquity  
Let anger take me in its grasp....  
... let the world see that swastika-stain  
That heart where no blood is, but high octane. (Collected Poems 186)*

The poet speaks in wrath about the cruelty of Hitler and he wants the aid of the muse:

*Aid me, and in good time, for as I talk  
This knave goes one step nearer to the dock;  
And even as triumphant cannon boom  
He marches on his victorious - to doom! (Collected Poems 187)*

The next poem is "Meditation upon Survival" expresses the fears of Jews about their survival, especially in Hitler's time. He thinks of many dying in concentration camps and other places and identifies himself with their agony:

*I grow bitter at my false felicity-  
the spared one - and would almost add my wish  
for the centigrade furnace and the cynade flood.  
However, one continues to live, though mortally. (Collected Poems 288)*

The whole poem is a kind of lament for his tortured brethren. He concludes thus:

*O how are you reduced, my people, cut down to a limb! -  
upon the roads the flights of the bodiless legs.  
Myself to recognize: a curio:*

.....

*O not my father's vault - but the glass-case  
some proud museum catalogues Last Jew. (Collected Poems 289)*

"O how are you reduced....." are a God's words to Israelites. Perhaps he will be the last of the tribe and his bones will not be buried or cremated but kept in museum as show-pieces.

Irving Layton's poems also discuss his diasporic experience. The Holocaust, also known as The Shoah, is the genocide of approximately six million European Jews during World War II, a programme of systematic state-sponsored extermination by Nazi Germany throughout Nazi-occupied territory. Approximately two-thirds of the population of nine million Jews who had resided in Europe before the Holocaust perished.

Layton views holocaust as an opportunity for an empowered response, through military strength and political independence, to the Jewish history of victimization. Layton's combative and didactic approach strives to shock and awaken his readers. For Layton, Israel functions as a model for how all Jews should live. He is acutely aware and a strong defender of his Jewish heritage and he embraces Israel as a symbol of Jewish heroism; yet at the same time, he rejects the orthodoxy of Jewish ritual.

Layton's poems focus on a wide spectrum of Jewish themes. He is emotionally confrontational, as neither the society nor religion failed to protect Jews from the atrocities that occurred to them. He shows his anger towards the society in the poem "To the Victims of the Holocaust," where Layton writes:

*I live among the blind, the deaf, and the dumb.  
I live among amnesiacs (Fortunate Exile 108)*

The premise of this poem is the forgetfulness of others and the corrosive silence with regards to Nazi atrocities. The Holocaust that is spoken today emerged slowly as a separable, singular, paradigmatic event from the overall course of the war and the deaths of fifty million people in that war. Familiar as it is now, it was unknown at the time. Nazi persecuted Jews from the beginning of Hitler's rule. Newspapers of that time world over witnessed how the Jewish middle class intellectuals, financiers, physicians were forced out of public life. They knew that Nazis regarded Arabs, Africans, slaves and Orientals in general as *untermenschen* (subhuman), but they kept their special venom for Jews. Hitler ignored Jews from having German citizenship and basic human rights as far back as 1935. They were forbidden to go to concerts or films, to drive, to sit on park benches or buy newspapers. Marrying an 'Aryan' was punishable by death.

In the poem "Rhine Boat Trip" Irving Layton uses allusions to the Holocaust to communicate his view that a place will forever be haunted by its past. When something horrible happens in a place or house, that place is never seen the same again; for example, a death, a suicide or a murder occurs in a house, and the people affected by the incident see only this death whenever they enter the house. Like that Rhine River is told to be a very beautiful place, but Layton, instead of seeing its beauty, sees only the horror of its past. Images of "ghosts of Jewish mothers looking for their ghostly children," "murdered rabbis," and "cattle-cars" used for the transportation of the Jews, all allusions to the Holocaust, are what he sees when travelling this river. A place can be extremely beautiful, a paradise, but its past can forever mar this beauty; this is what Layton wants one to see. By alluding to the Holocaust, one of the most violent events in the history of the world, he effectively gets his point across; the Rhine River will forever be haunted by the ghosts of the Holocaust.

Irving Layton continues to make this point by using contrasting imagery. A beautiful image is depicted at the beginning of each stanza; however, in the rest of the stanza, Layton associates a darker, uglier image with the beautiful one; an example of this can be found in this quotation:

*And the clusters of grapes  
in the sloping vineyards  
are myriads of blinded eyes  
staring at the blind sun. (Fortunate Exile 113)*

Normally, the grapes in the vineyards of the first two lines would be considered a quaint, pretty image, but in the rest of the stanza, it seems that even they cannot escape the tragedy of the Holocaust. Blake does not see them as grapes. When he sees them, they symbolically represent wine and luxury, the wealthy, who do not see what is happening around them and stare at an equally blind source of media, a television set; in effect, the beautiful image of the grapes on the vines is turned into an ugly image. Another example of this is found in the last stanza:

*However sweetly they sing  
one hears only  
the low wailing of cattle-cars  
moving invisibly across the land. (Fortunate Exile 113)*

In the first line, the reader hears the beautiful auditory image of the sweet singing of the mythological Lorelei (a rock on the bank of the Rhine, held by legend to be the home of a siren whose song lures boatmen to destruction). Unfortunately, even this enchanting sound is drowned out, in contrast, by the horrible “wailing of the cattle-cars.” The Lorelei, like the Greek Sirens, sing so beautifully that sailors, unable to draw themselves away from the sound, are shipwrecked. It is unthinkable that anything could be heard above this, but Layton suggests that the violent past of the Rhine is so powerful that nothing, not even the magical Lorelei, can diminish its horror.

Irving Layton uses the structure of the poem to emphasize on the fact that this is written as a boat trip. The images are organized in a spatial sequence; Layton writes about what he will see first. As he is taking this boat trip, he sees the castles first; the first stanza depicts the impression made by these castles. Following this, in the second stanza, he sees the vineyards. The third stanza is about the Lorelei who live in the cliffs overlooking the

Rhine; therefore, it is the cliffs he will see next. Finally, Layton discusses the cattle-cars that move invisibly across the land, which gives the impression of train tracks running over a vast amount of land.

This structure is effective because it gives those who have never taken a boat on the Rhine River, a chance to experience it vicariously through Layton’s eyes. The reader is, therefore, more open to his view that the horror of Holocaust still affects the beauty of the river. Reading this poem shows how powerfully an event can affect a place. Through the allusion to the Holocaust, the reader is able to associate his own horror at this event with the scenes described in the poem. The beautiful images of the river when associated with contrasting darker images give the effect that Layton intends. These beautiful images are marred by these darker images. The reader, through the structure of the poem, feels as if he himself were on a boat ride with these images laid out before him. Irving Layton gets his point across extremely well, making the effect of the poem extremely powerful. The beauty of the Rhine River is forever overshadowed by the horrors of the Holocaust. This poem “For my Sons, Max and David” speaks of the conditions of the Jews. This poem starts with some adjectives such as wandering Jew/ suffering Jew/ despoiled Jew/ and beaten Jew in order to bring to light the real situation of Jews in this gentile world.

The history has record that Jewish people have been shattered all the nook and corners of this word for more than eighty times, and the poets identically point out as ‘wandering Jew’. Jews have been persecuted throughout their history. He is plundered and beaten. If he is a Jew he is to be burnt, gassed and humiliated.

*The wandering Jew: the suffering Jew*  
*The despoiled Jew: the beaten Jew*  
*The Jew to burn: the Jew to gas*  
*The Jew to humiliate (Fortunate Exile 145)*

The aim of the gentiles is to make Jew cultivate his alienation himself like a rare flower hibiscus and no non Jewish people's garden will be complete without these bleeding flowers (Jews). The poet angrily says,

Gentiles with literary ambitions aspire to be  
*The alienated Jew cultivating his alienation*  
*Like a rare flower: no gentile garden is complete*  
*One of these bleeding hibiscus (Fortunate Exile 145)*

He describes the Jew and his goodness, his integrity, his wisdom and his accomplishments towards Christians and Muslims and educated gentiles. Among these the poet also provides the situation in which the Jew is considered as scapegoat and he can be killed for no reason. As the poet rightly says in this poem,

*The Jew who can be justifiably murdered because he is rich*  
*The Jew who can be justifiably murdered because he is poor*  
*The Jew whose plight engenders profound self-searchings*  
*in certain philosophical gentlemen who cherish him*  
*to the degree he inspires their shattering apercus*  
*into the quality of modern civilization, their noble*  
*and eloquent thoughts on scapegoatism and unmerited*  
*agony (Fortunate Exile 145)*

The poet personifies Jew as a scapegoat, a person who is blamed for the wrongdoings, mistakes, or faults of others , especially for reasons of expediency (in the Bible a goat sent into the wilderness after the Jewish chief priest had symbolically laid the sins of the people upon it. Leviticus:16).

Jews are hated for being lazy and inferior race and also for dominating the economy of the world. And they are hated for their adamant nature. One of the plays of Shakespeare "The Merchant of Venice" portrays a Jewish character 'Shylock' hated by Christian. And further the poet briefly describes the some incidents happened to Jews and by Jews. The cause for Jew's doubts as every Christian hates, and everyone searches him to destroy as the following lines depict, The Jew everyone seeks to destroy, having instilled "Self-division/ in the heathen" (Fortunate Exile 146). Thus the poem concludes with a piece of advice of the poet to his sons. It seems that he not only advises his sons but also the Jews.

*Be none of these, my sons*  
*My sons, be none of these*  
*Be gunners in the Israeli Air Force. (Fortunate Exile 146)*

He advises his sons not to be like these Jews who are humiliated, tortured and murdered but be the gunners in Israeli air force so that people “who hate you, seek to destroy you will be afraid of you.”

Thus both the poets A.M. Klein and Irving Layton vividly picture the different aspects of Jewish Diaspora in their poems. Their poems clearly depict the experience of Jews in their host lands. Their poems depict the agony, the experience of anti-Semitism and the memory of the past of the diaspora Jews. Both of them identify themselves with their Jewish community and consider themselves as spokesmen for their community. This bitter experience of being diasporans made Jews to have their own land. The creation of Israel gave them a solution to the diasporic problems faced by Jews. Klein believes the birth of Israel as the promise of God whereas Layton sees as the power of the nation Israel. However, the poems discussed have revealed the experience of the Jews in diaspora.

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