



Fiddler on the Roof

Tuition Material for Teachers

1. Synopsis

The year is 1905 and a Jewish community in Tsarist Russia is trying to eke out a living in its shtetl in the village of Anatevka (PROLOGUE: TRADITION). Tevye is a milkman who has a personal relationship with God in whom he confides all. He strives, very hard, to keep up the traditions of his faith, race and culture. He has five daughters, itself a problem but what is more pressing is trying to find husbands for the eldest three children. Yente, the matchmaker, does her best, but with no money, no dowry to offer she finds that her work is very difficult. Even so, the girls dream of the love that they will find one day (MATCHMAKER, MATCHMAKER). Tevye makes his way home, dreaming of an easier life (IF I WERE A RICH MAN). He arrives just in time for the SABBATH PRAYER, which is echoed throughout the Jewish community.

Tevye is called to see the butcher Lazar Wolf, who is interested in marrying his eldest daughter Tzeitel. They make an agreement and celebrate L'CHAIM (TO LIFE). However, Tzeitel rejects the butcher's proposal. She has her heart set on the young, impecunious tailor, Motel. The "new way" is that children shall decide partners for themselves (MIRACLE OF MIRACLES). But will Golde, Tevye's wife accept this change in traditional values? Tevye conjures up a dream the relating of which he attempts to persuade Golde that Lazar Wolf is not a good match and that Grandmother would much prefer her granddaughter to marry the tailor (TEVYE'S DREAM).

Golde is persuaded and that is the first chink in the breakdown of traditional values. At the wedding ceremony between Motel and Tzeitel (SUNRISE SUNSET / WEDDING DANCE), there is a pogrom, an anti-Jewish demonstration, orchestrated by the Chief of Police, which casts into doubt the stability of Jewish life in Tsarist Russia. It is certainly a portent for things to come.

Tevye's second daughter, Hodel, has fallen in love with Perchik, a political student and an activist against the repressive regime (NOW I HAVE EVERYTHING). Tevye refuses to give his permission for Hodel and Perchik to marry but they inform Tevye that they do not wish to seek his permission to marry but merely his blessing. Traditions are obviously changing. Tevye explains this to Golde, comforting her with the thought that love is constant (DO YOU LOVE ME?). Later, Perchik is arrested and is to be sent to Siberia. Hodel intends to join him. She promises her father they will be married, under a canopy, in the traditional Jewish way. Her father accompanies her to the railway station to bid her farewell (FAR FROM THE HOME I LOVE).

Chava, Tevye's third eldest daughter has fallen for Fyedka, a Russian soldier. Not only is he Russian, he is not a Jew and the bending of tradition this far is something that Tevye cannot reconcile himself to (CHAVELEH). From this point on, Chava ceases to be his daughter and is shunned.

Meanwhile, Anatevka itself is under threat (I JUST HEARD/THE RUMOUR). The Jews are being forced to leave their homes and many of them decide to go to live in America where many of them have friends and relations (ANATEVKA). That is to where Tevye and Golde and the two youngest children are to go. Motel and Tzeitel, who now have a child of their own, will join them. Chava and Fyedka, wanted by neither Jew nor Russian, go to live in Poland. The Fiddler on the Roof, the indomitable spirit of the Jewish people, will live on in all of them.

Tell the plot in your own words!

2. Chagall and the Musical

The name Fiddler on the Roof was drawn from a well-known, much loved image by **Marc Chagall**.

Find out more about Chagall, his life in a Jewish Shtetl in Russia, and tell the class about it.

The usual painting connected with the Musical you can see on the left.

For the set of the Frankfurt production the painting on the right was chosen. Interpret the two images in reference to the image of the Fiddler in the play.



TEVYE: "A fiddler on the roof. Sounds crazy, no?"



But in our little village of Anatevka, you might say everyone of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. It isn't easy. You may ask, why do we stay up there if it's so dangerous? We stay because Anatevka is our home... And how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in a word... Tradition.



3. Themes

The book's interpretation of Aleichem's stories is quite liberal and "Americanized." It reminds one of the Jewish Conservative and Reform movements: watered down versions derived from the strict Orthodox religion that made Judaism more popular and easier to practice, so that one could be a Jew and still conform to the American life style. Tevye, like the orthodox or conservative Jews, can go along with some of modern life's conflicts with tradition, but draws the line when it comes to making what he considers a greater compromise. Breaking with tradition, he allows his oldest daughter, Hodel, to marry the man she loves, nullifying her already agreed upon arranged marriage. He not only allows, but blesses the marriage of his second daughter, Tcheitel, who chooses her own husband, and leaves her family and their village to go with him. But he rejects and disowns his third daughter, Chava, who marries outside her faith. In the original Sholom Aleichem story, he pronounces her dead and makes the family sit Shiva. In the conflict between his love for his daughter and his loyalty to his faith and heritage, the latter wins. Tevye embraces tradition and loses his own flesh-and-blood beloved daughter. Here, the majority of American Jews embrace the compromise – better to lose an arm and a leg but save the patient. In order to survive as Jews in American society, they choose to adapt. A certain leniency, allowing some degree of assimilation, has evolved in order to keep the younger generations from leaving the faith.

The question that comes to mind: is it preferable to reject and disown, losing everything in the process, in order to avoid changes and keep one's religion as is?

Discuss in regard to the integration problems of ethnic minorities in our present-day German society.

4. Seeing the story from different perspectives

"A Jewish musical when current atmosphere is not that positive toward Jews?" I wondered? "Isn't it a bit risky? Why now?" - "This is why! The answer is in the question. Even more reason. If this is not the time to be doing stories about Jewish themes and Jewish philosophy – when is? Fiddler on the Roof is an American story. The story of Motel the Tailor is my Grandfather's story. He came here from Russia, a poor tailor who didn't speak English, with his wife and children, set up shop in the Bronx, and put two sons through medical school and two daughters through college – as a tailor. That's the American story." Mr. Lane's attachment to the story is evident. "After the show my daughter said - it's a very sad ending, they're forced to leave their homes – and I said, it's a sad story, but they come to America and become successful. This is actually a happy ending," he continues enthusiastically. He is excited, practically elated, so personally he identifies with the story. "This is the point of the end of the show. The traditions go on, hence the fiddler at this production hands the fiddle – or the traditions – to the young ones, to the young boy who goes off to America with Tevye and his family. The old bittersweet thing."

Can you share the American point of view? Organize a debate on seeing art differently!

5. Dialogue

Principal characters in the play

- Tevye, a poor milkman
- Golde, his wife
- Tzeitel, their oldest daughter, about nineteen. Loves Motel.
- Hodel, their daughter, about seventeen. Falls in love with Perchik.
- Chava, their daughter, about fifteen. Falls in love with Fyedka.
- Shprintze and Bielke, their youngest daughters, about twelve and nine
- Motel Kamzoil, the tailor, who wants to marry Tzeitel
- Perchik, a student and Bolshevik revolutionary, who wants to marry Hodel
- Fyedka, a young Russian man who wants to marry Chava
- Lazar Wolf, the butcher that Tzeitel was supposed to marry
- Yente, the gossipy village matchmaker who matches Tzeitel and Lazar
- Fruma-Sarah, Lazar Wolf's dead wife, who rises from the grave
- Grandma Tzeitel, Golde's dead grandmother
- Mordcha, the innkeeper
- Rabbi, the village rabbi
- Constable, the head of the Russian authority in Anatevka

Continue the following dialogues from the play (Creative writing or drama improvisation) and turn them into a situation. Act them out in class and discuss! Which characters are created?

5.1.

Perchik: In this world it is the rich who are the criminals. Someday their wealth will be ours.

Tevye: That would be nice. If they would agree, I would agree.

5.2.

Tevye: As the good book says, if you spit in the air, it lands in your face.

5.3

Tevye:

[to God] I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can't You choose someone else?

5.4

Constable: You're an honest, decent person. Even though you are a Jewish dog..

Tevye: How often does a man get a compliment like that? Thank you, your honor. You are a good man. If I may say so, it's too bad you're not a Jew.

Constable: [laughs] That's what I like about you, Tevye. You're always joking.

5.5

Tevye: [to Chava] As the good book says 'Each shall seek his own kind'. In other words a bird may love a fish but where would they build a home together?

5.6

Perchik: I'm a very good teacher.

Hodel: I heard that the Rabbi who must praise himself has a congregation of one.

5.7

Motel: [on being evicted] Rabbi, we've been waiting all our lives for the Messiah. Wouldn't now be a good time for Him to come?

Rabbi: We'll have to wait for him someplace else. Meanwhile, let's start packing.

6. How to stage the Musical

A Director`s Point of view

British director **David Leveaux** had to produce a Broadway revival of the show in 2004. It was critically compared with the traditional version of the 1964.

Since the book, the lyrics, the music (with the exception of one song) and the choreography were not changed, the director had a difficult task: to give the musical a fresh new look and interpretation. Leveaux's new concept certainly veered from tradition and has evoked mixed and opposing reactions. "Despite everything, however," **The Hollywood Reporter** asserts, "'Fiddler' remains a magical experience, full of heart, humor and soul, and brimming with songs that one can barely resist joining in. It's still nice to have 'Fiddler' back on Broadway where it belongs." So thinks Richard Zoglin from **Time magazine**: "British director David Leveaux has removed or toned down much of the shtetl shtick that has become identified with the show... but that's no reason to dismiss a striking Broadway revival that manages to shake off the cobwebs and relocate the emotional core of a show too often typecast as your grandmother's favorite musical. This is a Fiddler for everybody."

"Why the new visual concept? Why not stick with tradition". - "We didn't want to do the same old Fiddler. It's been around for so long, people tend to think of it as an antique. David Leveaux gave us a new interpretation with a whole new set design. Unlike the original, as successful as it was, with its, Chagall-like bright colors sets, this one is very Chekhovian – very stark. It looks like a Russian winter. On the first day of rehearsals, in his opening speech, the director said: 'this play comes with a lot of ghosts. Good ghosts, but we want to keep it fresh for a new generation. The 2004-generation is different from the 1964 generation. We experience life in a different way and we experience theater in a different way'. So he made it a Fiddler for our times – a classic story told in a new way."

[Compare Leveaux` artistic point of view with the style and the set of the Frankfurt ET production!](#)



7. Music

7.1 Musical numbers

Act I

- Prologue: Tradition – Tevye and the Company
- Matchmaker – Tzeitel, Hodel and Chava
- [If I Were a Rich Man](#) – Tevye
- Sabbath Prayer – Tevye, Golde and the Company
- To Life – Tevye, Lazar Wolf and the Company
- Tevye's Monologue – Tevye
- Miracle of Miracles – Motel
- Tevye's Dream – Tevye, Golde, Grandma Tzeitel, Fruma-Sarah and the Company
- Sunrise, Sunset – Tevye, Golde, Perchik, Hodel and the Company
- The Bottle Dance – Instrumental

Act II

- Entr'acte – Orchestra
- Now I Have Everything – Perchik and Hodel
- Tevye's Rebuttal – Tevye
- Do You Love Me? – Tevye and Golde
- The Rumor/I Just Heard – Yente and villagers
- Far From the Home I Love – Hodel
- Chaveleh (Little Bird) – Tevye
- Anatevka – The Company
- The Leave Taking – Tevye, Family and Fiddler

7.2 The example: Tevye's Song and modern versions

IF I WERE A RICH MAN

DAIDLE, DEEDLE DAIDLE

DIGGUH DIGGUH DEEDLE DAIDLE DUM

ALL DAY LONG I'D BIDDY BIDDY BUM

IF I WERE A WEALTHY MAN

WOULDN'T HAVE TO WORK HARD

DAIDLE DEEDLE DAIDLE

DIGGUH DIGGUH DEEDLE DAIDLE DUM

IF I WERE A BIDDY BIDDY RICH

DIGGUH DIGGUH DEEDLE DAIDLE MAN

I'D BUILD A BIG TALL HOUSE WITH ROOMS BY THE DOZEN

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE TOWN

A FINE TIN ROOF WITH REAL WOODEN FLOORS BELOW

THERE WOULD BE ONE LONG STAIRCASE JUST GOING UP

AND ONE EVEN LONGER COMING DOWN

AND ONE MORE LEADING NOWHERE JUST FOR SHOW

I'D FILL MY YARD WITH CHICKS AND TURKEYS AND GEESE
AND DUCKS FOR THE TOWN TO SEE AND HEAR
SQUAWKING JUST AS NOISILY AS THEY CAN
AND EACH LOUD QUACK AND CLUCK AND GOBBLE AND HONK
WILL LAND LIKE A TRUMPET ON THE EAR
AS IF TO SAY HERE LIVES A WEALTHY MAN

IF I WERE A RICH MAN, ETC.

I SEE MY WIFE, MY GOLDE, LOOKING LIKE A RICH MAN'S WIFE
WITH A PROPER DOUBE CHIN
SUPERVISING MEALS TO HER HEART'S DELIGHT
I SEE HER PUTTING ON AIRS AND STRUTTING LIKE A PEACOCK
OI! WHAT A HAPPY MOOD SHE'S IN
SCREAMING AT THE SERVANTS DAY AND NIGHT

THE MOST IMPORTANT MEN IN TOWN WILL COME TO FAWN ON ME
THEY WILL ASK ME TO ADVISE THEM LIKE SOLOMON THE WISE
"IF YOU PLEASE, REB TEVYE... PARDON ME; REB TEVYE..."
POSING PROBLEMS THAT WOULD CROSS A RABBI'S EYES.
AND IT WON'T MAKE ONE BIT OF DIFF'RENCE
IF I AUSWER RIGHT OR WRONG
WHEN YOU'RE RICH THEY THINK YOU REALLY KNOW!

IF I WERE RICH I'D HAVE THE TIME THAT I LACK
TO SIT IN THE SYNAGOGUE AND PRAY
AND MAYBE HAVE A SEAT BY THE EASTERN WALL
AND I'D DISCUSS THE HOLY BOOKS WITH THE LEARNED MEN
SEVEN HOURS EVERY DAY
THIS WOULD BE THE SWEETEST THING OF ALL (Sigh)
IF I WERE A RICH MAN
DAIDLE DEEOLE DAIDLE
DIGGUH DIGGUH DEEDLE DAIDLE DUM
ALL DAY LONG I'D BIDDY BIDDY BUM

IF I WERE A WEALTHY MAN
 WOULDN'T HAVE TO WORK HARD
 DAIDLE DEEDLE DAIDLE
 DIGGUH DIGGUH DEEDLE DAIDLE DUH...
 LORD, WHO MADE THE LION AND THE LAMB
 YOU DECREED I SHOULD BE WHAT I AM
 WOULD IT SPOIL SOME VAST, ETERNAL PLAN...
 IF I WERE A WEALTHY MAN?

The song is broken into four verses, with a bridge between the third and fourth and a chorus sung at the beginning of the song, and after the second and fourth verses. Musically, it is written in a Jewish Klezmer style. In fact, the tune is almost identical to the second theme in the third movement of Gustav Mahler's 1st Symphony, "The Titan." Through the first two verses, Tevye dreams of the material comforts that wealth would bring him. Sung boisterously and comedically, Tevye first considers the enormous house he would buy and the needless luxuries he would fill it with, including a third staircase "leading nowhere, just for show," then the poultry he would buy to fill his yard. Tevye switches his attention to the luxuries in which he would shower his wife, Golde, in the third verse. He talks of servants to alleviate her workload, fancy clothes for her pleasure, and mountains of food. The song is sung in the same boisterous, comedic style. The music and vocals intensify during the bridge, when Tevye starts lamenting his place in the community as a lowly milkman, and considers the esteem and importance that wealth would bring him.

In the final verse, Tevye softens as he further considers his devotion to God. He expresses his sorrow that the long working hours he keeps prevents him from spending as much time in the synagogue as he would like, and how wealth would allow him to spend less time working and more time praying and studying Torah. A repeated phrase throughout the song, "all day long I'd bidi-bidi-bum," is often misunderstood to refer to Tevye's desire not to have to work. However, the phrase "bidi-bidi-bum" is a reference to the practice of Jewish prayer, in particular davening.

Discuss and decide how the song should be interpreted and sung.

Listen to a CD-recording or try to sing it yourself with the help of your music teacher.

Listen to modern versions like the one by Gwen Stefani. (Wealthy Girl)

See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoeenJsRXJQ&feature=related> or <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L63ET8UTA8I>

Other song references

- In 1964, jazz saxophonist [Cannonball Adderley](#) recorded the album [Fiddler on the Roof](#), which featured jazz arrangements of eight songs from the musical. The album featured [Nat Adderley](#) (trumpet), [Charles Lloyd](#) (tenor saxophone, flute), [Joe Zawinul](#) (piano), [Samuel Jones](#) (bass), and [Louis Hayes](#) (drums) and was released by [Capitol Records](#).
- In 1999, [Knitting Factory Records](#) released the [Knitting on the Roof](#) compilation CD, featuring covers of [Fiddler](#) songs by alternative bands such as [The Residents](#), [Negativland](#), and [The Magnetic Fields](#).
- In 2005, Melbourne [punk](#) band [Yidcore](#) released a reworking of the entire show called [Fiddling on Ya Roof](#).
- The [Santa Clara Vanguard Drum and Bugle Corps](#) often performs music from [Fiddler on the Roof](#), and the "Bottle Dance" has become one of the songs connected with the corps.
- In 1993, "If I Were a Rich Man" was covered as a [reggae](#) version by the British [Louchie Lou & Michie One](#), as "[Rich Girl](#)". [Lady Saw](#) covered it in 1999, as well as [Gwen Stefani](#) and Eve for Stefani's debut solo album [Love. Angel. Music. Baby.](#) in 2004.

- In 2008, "If I Were A Rich Man" was covered by the [Capitol Steps](#) poking fun at Illinois politics, and especially then-Governor [Rod Blagojevich](#).
- [The Big Bang Theory](#) episode "The Grasshopper Experiment" refers several times to the musical. At the end of the episode Sheldon Cooper sings "To Life".

