

**SAMPLE LITERARY CONTEXT ESSAY**  
**FOR CREATIVE WRITING THESIS PROJECTS**  
**(CREATIVE NONFICTION)**

*Writing Jewish: Circumcision and Its Discontents in Context*

Jewish Literature, in spite of the seemingly obvious implications of the term itself, proves enormously difficult to define. Literary historian Michael P. Kramer, who traces the genesis of this discussion to Leopold Zunz's watershed program of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, which was among the first efforts to reconceive historical understandings of Jewish culture along European Enlightenment lines, finds early consensus among those scholars attempting to answer the question, "What is Jewish literature?" The answer was quite simple: Jewish literature was literature produced by Jewish people, and no further qualification was necessary. In the nearly 200 intervening years since Zunz's investigation, however, as academic inquiry has crept toward the post-modern paradigm, many scholars have grown increasingly inclined to define Jewish literature in ways that suggest that Jewishness is "a construction and not an essence" (Kramer 289). The potential for pluralism implied by an anti-essentialist stance, Kramer argues, has led to a proliferation of definitions of Jewish literature that reveal much about the orientation of individual critics toward their shared tradition, but do little to clarify the literary boundaries which only seem to grow more convoluted by the moment: for Geoffrey Hartman, Jewish Literature must necessarily be anti-iconic; for Cynthia Ozick, it must draw upon the rhythm and feel of traditional Jewish liturgy; for Saul Bellow, it is marked by "laughter and trembling...so curiously mixed that it is not easy to determine the

relations of the two”; for Hana Wirth-Nesher, the persistence of the question merely indicates the fact it will never be answered satisfactorily (Kramer 288). Kramer ultimately concludes, however, that such ambiguity only distracts from the burning dilemma underlying the question, “What is Jewish Literature?” And that dilemma revolves around the often even more urgent problem of identifying precisely who is Jewish.

In *Who Is a Jew?* Meryl Hyman conducts interviews with a series of both geographically and denominationally disparate rabbis and theologians surrounding their understanding of her Jewish status. The child of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother, she is not considered Jewish by traditional law, which tracks status matrilineally. Hyman, however, claims a Jewish identity by virtue of the 1983 paper published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis’, the rabbinic association of American Reform Judaism, which rules that Jewish status may be transmitted by either parent. The book emerges as part theological exploration, part memoir; Hyman places herself at the center of what is perhaps modern Jewry’s greatest controversy, opening herself to the pity and condescension of orthodox rabbis who at once acknowledge her Jewish-looking face and urge her to convert to Judaism if she wishes to lay rightful religious claim to it. “My Judaism has been tested in rather harsher ways than I believed it would be when I set out to write this book,” Hyman writes. “Yet my father was right when he said, ‘A little bit Jewish is like a little bit pregnant’” (215-216). Hyman’s conclusion about Jewish identity is not at all unlike Kramer’s conclusion about Jewish Literature: though discussions which attempt to define Jewish literature are often “narrowly and obscurely conceived” and confuse “the culture of Jews with the creed of the critic,” they nonetheless betray the

all-the-more important biases of those engaged in the discussion (Kramer 342). The plurality of answers to the question, “What is Jewish literature?” only indicates the necessity of all of them. The question is not unanswerable, as Wirth-Nesher suggests; rather, critics ought to ask a different question: “What is the literature of those people who consider themselves Jews?” While the difference between the two questions may seem unmanageably subtle, the latter is, perhaps, far easier to answer because it requires an act of identification on the part of the author, perceivable in the text, that acknowledges the power and pull of a broader Jewish community. In effect, such literature may be understood as the work of those people, empowered by their own definitions, who wish to assert their unique Jewish identities. It is out of this tradition which “Circumcision and Its Discontents” and “Holocaust Exhibit” emerge.

For generic purists, these essays are works of Jewish Memoir. This label, however, both oversimplifies their relationship with a far broader canon of Jewish writing, fiction and nonfiction, and underestimates the complexity of the term Jewish Memoir, itself. Ever since the early 1960s, when the self-imposed silence of Holocaust survivors began to dissipate, the Jewish memoir *par excellence* has remained the Holocaust narrative; and while many of these works are of unfathomable value to both the Jewish people and the world community, they have nonetheless propelled Jewish literary expectations into a “‘high’ drama paradigm,” leaving little room in the category of personal nonfiction for works of lighter tone or varying subject matter (Schulte-Sasse 470). Compared with the Holocaust, Linda Schulte-Sasse argues, any other topic appears “ordinary,” and “the ordinary has no business in ‘high drama’” (472). Consequently,

contemporary Jewish memoirists have had to contend with a nearly sacrosanct status quo and, as a result, look largely outside their own genre for guidance.

Perhaps the most sublime example of resistance to the paradigm of high drama which has dominated Jewish memoir for the past, nearly fifty years is *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, completed in 1991, in which Art Spiegelman recasts the Jews as anthropomorphic mice pursued by German cats in conflict with American dogs, Russian bears, and British fish. The Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel skillfully reconciles Spiegelman's father's "high drama" memories of surviving the Holocaust and the "ordinary" but complex relationship between father and son within the conventions of a medium often dismissed as something less than literature. Part narrative and part meta-narrative, *Maus* both offers space to question the legacy of Holocaust narratives as they have traditionally been presented, as well as the challenges facing authors who attempt to set such stories to paper. In a scene with his therapist, a Czech concentration camp survivor, Spiegelman self-indulgently insists on steering the conversation back to the composition of *Maus* itself, ironically arousing the wrath of the man paid to listen to him. "I'm not talking about YOUR book now," the therapist barks. "But look at how many books have already been written about the Holocaust. What's the point? People haven't changed. [...] Maybe they need a newer, bigger Holocaust" (45). *Maus* routinely gestures toward the futility of status quo representations of the Holocaust, a theme only amplified by its author's innovative juxtaposition of subject matters and form.

What *Maus* accomplishes formally, however, Alan Kaufman's 2000 memoir, *Jew Boy*, accomplishes stylistically, simultaneously paying tribute to the high drama paradigm and suggesting a formula for those memoirists wishing to transcend it. While the book

examines the legacy of growing up the child of Holocaust survivors, it is also very funny, and the subject acts as a backdrop against which Kaufman may address such “ordinary” issues as alcoholism, drug addiction, and homelessness. His eventual reunion with a broader Jewish community and its narratives, however, is where Kaufman finds his sanction to write. In the book’s epilogue Kaufman reflects on his visit to a concentration camp and the Holocaust’s legacy for those too young to have experienced it: “This is what has been given to my generation to do. To arrive at this site in Dachau, Germany, and to stand before it, incapable. This is the highest plateau of truth that my generation can attain. Imagination is unnecessary here. Arms can be laid down here. Art is only art here” (397-8). *Jew Boy* suggests that the antidotes to so somber a prospect are humor and a self-deprecating tone, which communicate humility on the part of an author brazen enough to try and comprehend the incomprehensible. Ironically, the genre of Jewish memoir, which once so vigorously resisted humor from those within historical proximity of the Holocaust, now seems to demand it of those too young to have any firsthand knowledge of the tragedy.

It is Kaufman’s model which “Holocaust Exhibit” strives to employ in suggesting that Jews’ overemphasis of their victimhood vis-à-vis the Holocaust has had destructive psychological, political, and theological consequences. “Hitler is no more. But we still suffer his evil legacy, and refuse to be comforted,” writes Israeli politician Avraham Burg in his 2008 politico-theological tract cum memoir *The Holocaust is Over; We Must Rise From Its Ashes*. “It was easy for Hitler to take our lives away from us, and it is difficult for us to get Hitler out of our lives” (44). “Holocaust Exhibit” attempts to join *Jew Boy* in suggesting that the first step toward purging Hitler from our lives, is acknowledging that

any effort to comprehend the tragedies of the Holocaust is doomed to failure, and in this admission of ignorance is the possibility of new beginnings. In the fourth and final segment of “Holocaust Exhibit,” the narrator is confronted with an offensive, poorly written chain-email which exalts the martyrdom of Holocaust victims by spreading mistruths about Islam. Trying to make sense of the email’s logic, he conjures an imaginary author who is Jewish, young, ignorant, and very enthusiastic. The narrator, however, quickly begins to identify with the author’s enthusiasm, and realizes that any effort to gain wisdom is contingent upon understanding the dynamics of ignorance. Like *Jew Boy*, “Holocaust Exhibit” ends on a very serious note, but its seriousness is sanctioned by a humility achieved through the narrator’s refusal to take himself too seriously.

If humor is one of the chief signifiers of the humility demanded of post-high drama paradigm authors, emerging Jewish memoirists are arguably as much indebted to the tradition of such writers and performers as Neil Simon, Woody Allen, Jack Benny, Jerry Seinfeld, and Sid Caesar as they are to the tradition of Jewish Memoir itself. In his essay, “Why Jews Laugh at Themselves,” Hillel Halken traces the emergence of modern Jewish humor to the nineteenth century German-Jewish writer and convert to Christianity, Heinrich Heine, whose witticisms helped him navigate two disparate religious worlds and allowed him to retain a distinctly Jewish character in spite of his Lutheran baptism. Heine once quipped that “the day Christians take to eating *tsholent*, the beloved Jewish Sabbath stew, every Jew will convert to Christianity” (qtd. in Halken 49). Therefore, Halken suggests, modern Jewish humor is born of the clash between traditional Jewish culture and modernity and is a means by which Jews may redefine

Jewishness itself in light of their experiences with secularism. The tradition begun by Heine, Halken writes, was inherited by Sholom Aleichem, whose Yiddish stories examined the impact of the European Enlightenment on *shtetl* society; eventually it was passed to the Borscht Belt comedians, whose comedy often lay in the juxtaposition of “old country” customs, accents, and mannerisms with American expectations. Most recently, the same themes have surfaced in the comedy of such performers as Jon Stewart and Sarah Silverman. In her 2005 film *Jesus Is Magic*, Silverman, via her blissfully ignorant, racist, vulgar, and insensitive persona invites viewers to laugh at the absurdity of ignorance, racism, vulgarity, and insensitivity themselves. Regarding raising Jewish children in a mixed faith marriage Silverman announces, “We'd just be honest [with the children], and say ‘Mommy is one of the chosen people, and Daddy believes that Jesus is magic’” (*Jesus*). While the construction and tone are decidedly Post-Modern, the joke engages the same tension between Judaism and modernity which Heine addressed over 150 years earlier.

In literary circles, however, this tension has largely been inherited by writers of Jewish fiction, writes Sylvia Barack Fishman, who have adopted the practice of “quilting together dissonant experiences, revealing the seams and fault lines, and sometimes shining a spotlight on them” (149). “Circumcision and Its Discontents” and “Holocaust Exhibit,” therefore, are arguably more indebted to the tradition of Jewish fiction, particularly the short story, with its successful marriage of serious subject matter, humor, and frequent employment of a first person narrator, than that of memoir. Rather than explicitly identifying themselves as characters, many Jewish authors have constructed fictitious alter egos to represent them on the page and transmit their realities. In her

collection of short stories, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, Grace Paley introduces the aptly named, semi-autobiographical Faith Darwin to explore the complexities that arise when a Jewish upbringing meets an evolving political consciousness. In “Faith in a Tree,” Darwin announces her understanding of humanity’s relationship to the Divine, nurtured in a Jewish-Socialist milieu:

I don’t believe civilization can do a lot more than educate a person’s senses. If it’s truth and honor you want to refine, I think the Jews have some insight. Make no images, imitate no God. After all, in His field, the graphic arts, He is pre-eminent. Then let that One who made the tan deserts and the blue Van Allen belt and the green mountains of New England be in charge of Beauty, which He obviously understands, and let man, who was full of forgiveness at Jerusalem, and full of survival at Troy, let man be in charge of Good. (89)

While Faith’s theology is far from traditional, ascribing a force for redemption typically associated with God to humanity, it is no less a consequence of Jewish consciousness. Rather than deconstructing traditional Judaism, Paley realigns its imperatives from satisfying an intangible being to bettering the human condition; through Faith Darwin, feminism, pacifism, and humanism emerge as unquestionably Jewish values.

Similarly, in David Bezmozgis’ short story collection *Natasha*, character Mark Berman reenacts many of the author’s experiences as a Russian-Jewish immigrant in Toronto, and explores the intricacies of Jewish existence with both true reverence and a keen eye for irony. In “Minyan,” the final story of the collection, Bezmozgis encapsulates his protagonist’s relationship with Judaism. Berman, who, ironically enough, accompanies his grandfather to Sabbath services at a retirement home populated exclusively by Jews to make the *minyan*, the quorum of ten Jewish men necessary for public worship, reflects on the meager Saturday morning gathering: “Most of the old Jews came because they were drawn by the nostalgia for ancient cadences, I came



because I was drawn by nostalgia for old Jews. In each case, the motivation was not tradition but history” (134). For Bezmozgis, Judaism is something that demands preservation, but an integral part of that effort is an honest assessment of the ways in which Jews’ attachments to Judaism have changed. History, in the world of *Natasha*, is a far more powerful and palpable source of inspiration than any supernatural force—a fact which, as Bezmozgis powerfully suggests, ought to be celebrated rather than maligned.

Works such as *Natasha* and *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, characterized by a sense of unrepentant individuality and a willingness to diffuse the tension surrounding sometimes sensitive subjects with humor, are arguably greater indicators of the future of Jewish memoir than Jewish memoir itself. Significantly, memoirists have been forced to find inspiration outside of the genre because it has largely failed—albeit with notable exceptions—to remain at the cutting edge of “secular progress.” An issue such as homosexuality, which plays prominently in “Circumcision and Its Discontents,” has suffered from gay Jews’ insistence on contextualizing their experiences within the stratum of Jewish Law. In *Wrestling with God & Men*, orthodox rabbi Steven Greenberg writes of attempting to navigate the contradictions of being gay and wishing to live as an observant Jew, but his experiences emerge as highly qualified; his memoirs are ultimately only permitted resonance because they are a springboard for an interpretation of Jewish Law that condones their telling. Similarly, *Twice Blessed*, an anthology of narratives detailing the experiences of lesbian and gay Jews repeatedly mixes memoir with religious conundrums in a way that reads like more like an appeal for legitimacy than an exploration of inner truths. Neither work, though admirable for its taboo-breaking, understands gay Jews as given; rather, they see gay Jews as people who require

explanation. Consequently, much contemporary Jewish writing confronting homosexuality reads more like self-help or theology than literature. Even Lev Raphael's collection of short memoirs, *Writing a Jewish Life*, which is radical in comparison to *Twice Blessed* and *Wrestling With God & Men* for its unapologetic embrace of the ordinary lives of gay Jews, is infused with a far too self-conscious sense of catharsis to be taken entirely seriously. Though, quite interestingly, the author discusses his experiences growing up the child of Holocaust survivors, coming to terms with his homosexuality, settling down with a Jewish doctor with two children, and reintegrating himself into the Jewish community, he becomes bogged down by his own sense of purpose. In the collection's opening essay, Raphael writes that writing is his "laboratory" in which he hopes to concoct pieces of literature that will "in one way or another" say "what Jews say after someone has had an honor during a torah service, *yasher koach*, may your strength be multiplied" (21). Raphael's repeated emphasis on the act of writing as therapy ultimately undercuts the potential potency of the stories he wishes to tell. This sort of overt purposefulness, be it therapeutic or theological, is a quality "Circumcision and Its Discontents" seeks to resist, instead looking toward the theatrical tradition established by such plays as Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy*, William Finn and James Lapine's *Falsettos*, and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, whose gay, Jewish characters' realities are not consumed by protests asserting their right to be heard; their lives, rather, legitimize themselves. Crucially, in the second-to-last segment of "Circumcision and Its Discontents," the narrator does not wait for a religious authority to permit him reentry to Judaism; instead, the narrator permits Judaism reentry to him.

In spite of the fact that, at the moment, Jewish memoir may not be living entirely up to its potential, “Circumcision and Its Discontents” and “Holocaust Exhibit” nevertheless emerge as a part of a broader memoir boom which has wrestled autobiography away from figures that seem to either embody ivory tower greatness or extraordinary peculiarity. Rather, Tristine Rainer writes in *Your Life as Story*, the contemporary memoir movement recognizes that “although each of us gets a different life story—a different piece of the puzzle—our tribe needs the wisdom of us all for truth to emerge” (36). The key to writing successful memoir, the book contends, is not in grandiosity of topic but in presentation; the mundane is only mundane insofar as it is told that way. Therefore, the initial challenge in composing this project’s essays was arriving at a structure that maximizes the usual. The relatively new form of the segmented essay, writes Robert L. Root, Jr. is particularly suited to transmitting internal realities because it mirrors the fact that “the connections and associations that come so readily in the memory and in the imagination often defy simple linearity” (405). While the anecdotes which comprise “Circumcision and Its Discontents” and “Holocaust Exhibit” are not usual in the sense that they may be shared by any random sampling of Americans, they are free of overdramatic epiphanies and unexpected turns. Instead, their poignancy is (hopefully) derived from the cumulative effect of series of well-chosen details, meaningful by virtue of their juxtaposition to each other.

Because of its nonlinearity, however, the segmented essay poses particular challenges in terms of dramatic structure because it often lacks an overt “desire line” on which cause and effect may be easily demarcated (Rainer 68). In the segmented essay, the climax must work in many directions: not only must it unite the essay’s disparate

segments as a whole, it must also act within the dramatic structure of the individual segment. In “Holocaust Exhibit,” for example, each of the four segments attempts its own miniature, but complete, dramatic structure. If, as Rainer writes, climax is “the scene in the conclusion where something dies so something can live,” four things die so four things can live in “Holocaust Exhibit” (74). In the first segment, perceived liberty dies in favor of perceived oppression; in the second, religiosity cedes to secularism; in the third, self-esteem takes a dive, but a way with words flourishes; in the fourth segment, the narrator sees himself as helping defeat a “black and white” understanding of the Holocaust in favor of one which insists that grappling with the Holocaust means navigating often contradictory ideas. What the first three climaxes have in common is that they produce unsatisfactory results: emotional claustrophobia, self-righteousness, and embarrassment, respectively. The fourth acts as the climax for the entire piece largely because it is the only one which produces results worth holding onto, and those results—namely, the narrator’s decision to save the email but not send it on—counteract the minor tragedies of the first three segments.

In attempting to create a cohesive whole out of many different parts, voice, perhaps, is the chief signifier of unity. In *The Situation and the Story*, Vivian Gornick writes that the many authors whose work she analyzes “might not ‘know’ themselves—that is, have no more self-knowledge than the rest of us—but in each case—and this is crucial—they know who they are *at the moment of writing*” (30). In composing the essays for this project, it was no small challenge making certain that the various segments were narrated by the same persona. In early drafts of “Circumcision and Its Discontents,” the dry, self-effacing voice established early in the first segment often slipped into an

uncharacteristic, pseudo-philosophic tone. In a draft of the seventh segment, for example, as the narrator ponders the modern structure of the temple he passes every, he explains that it “was designed to make people think that Jews were enthusiastic participants in modernity, but *I* was modernity, and I felt certain the synagogue had no space for me,” when such a statement is entirely too lacking in subtlety for a voice which seems to pride itself on its eye for irony. “Most essayists,” writes Scott Russell Sanders, “cannot draw on any source of authority from beyond the page to lend force to the page itself. They can only use language to put themselves on display and to gesture at the world” (422). If the narrative persona is not consistent, then, the stories it attempts to tell are necessarily unreliable.

Finally, and most obviously, memoir is inescapably linked with memory—and memory, as many have found to their chagrin, is inescapably linked with fiction. Anyone writing memoir is confronted with the tremendous responsibility of accurately portraying their stories, in spite of the fact that many details may be lost to time. While gathering the facts is absolutely crucial, Mimi Schwartz writes, memoir distinguishes itself from other genres of nonfiction in that it privileges “emotional truth” over literal truth: “If we stick only to facts, our past is as skeletal as black-and-white line drawings in a coloring book. We must color it in” (426). One should not worry when faced with uncertainty about particular details, she believes, because the mind will deliver reality as it perceives it. In “Circumcision and Its Discontents,” for example, it would be impossible to recapture the precise conversation the narrator and David share in the beat-up Mercedes Benz on the way to his conversion; but what memoir offers an author is the possibility of reconstructing a constituent inner truth that is no less legitimate than indisputable fact. It

is this movement toward valuing the truth of the individual in which “Circumcision and Its Discontents” and “Holocaust Exhibit” hope to participate.

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