The Benefits of Using Anzia Yezierska’s Immigrant Narratives in The Developmental Writing Classroom
Nina Bannett, Associate Professor and Chairperson, NYC College of Technology

“The ideal of going to college was like the birth of a new religion in my soul. It put new fire in my eyes, and new strength in my tired arms and fingers.”
– Anzia Yezierska, “Soap and Water”1

Students in my developmental writing classes have found reading the immigrant fiction of Jewish-American author Anzia Yezierska exciting and a far cut above the standard short essays in textbooks designed for basic writing. In fact, I’ve found including Yezierska’s immigrant fiction helps these students feel at home and flourish in a college environment. I originally decided to teach Yezierska in my developmental writing class (a class for which students receive no credit but need to pass in order to become eligible for credit-level courses) because I had had success teaching her work in literature courses. Yezierska’s fiction was always a

1All page numbers refer to the Penguin Classics edition of Hungry Hearts (NY, 1997).
favorite in my Women Writers course, and *Bread Givers* had taught extremely well alongside Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, with its focus on the strained relationships between parents and children, and the myth of the American dream. Why not try to incorporate Yezierska into a course with less sophisticated readers and writers? I had not been satisfied with the types of short essays featured in standard developmental writing textbooks like Susan Fawcett’s *Evergreen*, mainly because they didn’t seem to engage the students. Texts more like the ones students would actually encounter in English Composition 1 were more layered, thoughtful, and engaging. Yezierska’s prose, moving and descriptive, might fit the bill.

For the past seven years, I’ve been a full-time faculty member at New York City College of Technology, the senior college of technology in the City University of New York system (CUNY). Our college offers both associate and baccalaureate degrees, with around one half of the students going for a two-year degree. Many of my students are immigrants, and the first in their families to attend college. In order to qualify for credit-level composition, all students within CUNY must pass a writing exam. Students who don’t pass the exam, and who are not exempt on the basis of their New York State Regents Examination score, must take a developmental writing course. Like many of my colleagues, I wound up teaching developmental writing courses without formal training in composition and rhetoric, in my case while working as an adjunct in the late 1990s. In fact, I am an American literature scholar with a specialization in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American women’s fiction. During my time at New York City College of Technology, I’ve developed a course in women writers, now a regular offering each

---

2 The exam itself is in transition, with a new exam, the CUNY Alignment of Assessment of Writing (CAAW) being phased in during October 2010. The exam’s format will change from a sixty-minute exam to a ninety-minute one, with students being asked to write an essay in response to a reading passage of about 300 words.
In addition, I’ve looked for opportunities to integrate women writers into other courses I’ve taught.

I’ve had great success incorporating Anzia Yezierska’s fiction into my developmental writing course. Over a six week period, we examine four stories from Yezierska’s short story collection *Hungry Hearts* (1920), moving from a discussion of basic writing concepts like topic sentences and descriptive details to more sophisticated ones like documentation and literary analysis.

Typically, instructors like myself use a textbook like Susan Fawcett’s *Evergreen* to work on grammar, essay organization, and development. However, through the years, I’ve discovered the limitations of a textbook-only approach. My students need more exposure to complicated texts, and as they move into credit-level composition, they need more experience with critical thinking, more opportunities to read complex material. The short essays found in textbooks like *Evergreen* are fine models for the components of good writing, but they don’t excite students. During the last few years, I’ve also reviewed a number of developmental writing textbooks, but haven’t found one with readings that electrify this student population.

Yezierska’s focus on the transformative power of education and her use of multiple narrative voices (the greenhorn versus the college graduate) and multiple languages (Yiddish and English) help students understand the importance of language’s purpose and audience. With the stories “Soap and Water,” “The Free Vacation House,” “Where Lovers Dream,” and “How I Found America,” my students respond well to low-stakes and high-stakes writing assignments. Students are energized when they encounter Yezierska’s powerful, emotional style. Her idiosyncrasies help my students, some of whom are non-native speakers, understand the dynamic role of a personal narrative voice.

For instance, Sara’s voice of heartbreak as she remembers her former fiancé in “Where Lovers Dream” is unmistakable; from the first
words in the story, Yezierska blurs our sense of time and pulls in her reader: “For years I was saying to myself – Just so you will act when you meet him. Just so will you stand. Just so will you look on him. These words you will say to him” (88).

Yezierska was born in Poland, one of nine children. Yezierska’s family immigrated to America when she was a young child of eight or nine in 1890, where she was re-named “Hattie Mayer” by Ellis Island authorities, and lived on New York City’s lower East Side. Eventually, she received a full scholarship to Columbia University’s Teachers College, and graduated in 1904. She began writing fiction in the 1910s, and re-claimed her original Russian name. Her short story collection Hungry Hearts, about Jewish immigrant life in America, was published in 1920, and Yezierska was soon offered a movie deal for the book and moved to California to write the screenplay. In addition to Hungry Hearts, Yezierska wrote several novels, most famously Bread Givers, which focuses on three sisters coming of age on the lower East Side.

In selecting stories from Hungry Hearts to use with my developmental students, I deliberately chose works of Yezierska’s that end on a more positive note. This meant overlooking more famous stories of Yezierska’s like “The Lost Beautifulness,” which has wonderful descriptive passages but ends with a horrific image of a family evicted and thrown out on the street. Developmental writing courses are usually taken by students in their first semester: I thought that such negative images might, quite frankly, be too close to situations they might themselves have experienced, and play into a fear of failure that is easily excited by bleak situations or endings. The road students have taken to college is sometimes a perilous one, and Yezierska’s fiction taps into the tenuousness as well as the rapture of the American Dream.

Instead of “The Lost Beautifulness”, I decided to teach four happier stories over six weeks. “Soap and Water” describes a young woman’s experiences working her way through school by working in a laundry; “The
Free Vacation House” introduces a mother of six whose two-week vacation turns out to be anything but. In “Where Lovers Dream,” a young immigrant woman’s romance turns sour when her beloved leaves her to pursue his own education. Finally, “How I Found America” tells the story of a Russian girl’s journey to the United States and her ten-year struggle to abandon factory life for school. Students kept a reading journal for those six weeks, they did in-class writing activities on the stories, and they wrote one formal essay. By asking students to hand in both low-stakes and high-stakes writing assignments, I allowed them to ease into the writing process, and helped them to associate writing with ideas and not just grammatical correctness. As Peter Elbow has said, “Many students have never had the experience of writing with full attention to their thoughts. Because all their writing has been for a grade, much of their attention goes off to questions of whether the language, spelling, or wording is right.” In order to work on developing ideas, I felt it was important for them to write about Yezierska’s stories without worrying about issues of grammar and essay structure. These concepts would come up gradually, through class discussion.

Low-Stakes Writing

For their low-stakes writing assignments, students wrote about broad topics that related to their own lives. For instance, with our opening story, “Soap and Water,” I asked students to write about things that happened to them as new college students, on their first day or their first week on campus. I also asked them to describe their own accomplishments and challenges. Educators of developmental writing agree that while students need to work on their written skills, it’s equally important for them to adjust to the rigors and responsibilities of college life,

---

and writing about their experiences and feelings in this new role helps them recognize the value and fright of what they are going through. For a journal entry on “The Free Vacation House,” I ask students to write about parts of their lives that cause them stress, and specific strategies they use to cope. This writing leads to a lively class discussion of not just Yezierska’s fiction, but of the ways in which stress can erode anyone. Even the act of acknowledging that students experience stress is valuable in itself. For “Where Lovers Dream,” I ask students to write one page about a life lesson they’ve learned. Later, this journal entry will build into their formal essay assignment on Yezierska in which they will be asked to write a narrative essay relating a specific learning experience in Yezierska to one they’ve had themselves.

Class Discussions/In-Class Writing Activities

Yezierska’s short fiction provides a rich foundation for discussions of narrative style and even grammar. For example, we go over levels of education that come up in the stories—the narrator of “Soap and Water” is much more educated than the narrators of either “The Free Vacation House” or “Where Lovers Dream.” My students are quick to recognize that Yezierska doesn’t always use standard English, and are happy to assert that words like “aint” don’t belong in published writing, even if they cannot talk about syntax as a concept by name. Students also understand that some of Yezierska’s sentences don’t rely on standard syntax. For instance, in the story “Where Lovers Dream,” the protagonist, Sara, describes her romantic relationship with David, an aspiring doctor, in the following way:

David was always trying to learn me how to make myself over for an American. Sometimes he would spend out fifteen cents to buy me the ‘Ladies’ Home Journal’ to read about American life, and my whole head was put away on how to look neat and be up-to-date like the American girls” (90).
When we go over this passage in class, students always react strongly to Sara’s voice, recognizing her lack of education as well as her fascination with American fashion. When David breaks Sara’s heart by choosing his own education (and his uncle’s financial support for his medical career over his love for her), students understand her pain, and that the story isn’t only exploring heartbreak, but the nature of education itself. Sara too gets an education in the importance of social class, even in dreamy America.

Yezierska’s unique narrative voice also leads itself nicely into a discussion of the importance of using Modern Language Association format when quoting from a text. Since Yezierska just doesn’t sound like any other writer, it’s easier for developmental students to recognize that her voice isn’t their voice, and to use the proper format for documentation. While knowledge of MLA format is not essential to pass my course, it is a key part of Composition I. Therefore, I do a short in-class activity on quoting with accuracy. First, I provide a brief model:

Incorrect: Student hasn’t used MLA format when quoting:

In “Where Lovers Dream,” David’s uncle tells him not to marry Sara, asking him if two dead people can start a dance together.

Correct: Student has successfully used MLA format when quoting:

In “Where Lovers Dream,” David’s uncle tells him not to marry Sara, asking him if “two dead people can start a dance together” (Yezierska 94).

Then, I ask students to practice MLA format by rewriting a sentence that relies too heavily on Yezierska’s own words. Quoting an author whose voice is so unmistakably not their own, students get the hang of direct
quotation quite quickly. Certainly, this exercise is no substitute for full class sessions on documentation and Works Cited, but it does serve as a small steppingstone for later courses and for an awareness of the distinctiveness of an author’s voice.

Yezierska’s fiction also works well in showing students the value of being descriptive. For “Soap and Water,” I condense Yezierska’s very descriptive and emotional passages into more general and generic sentences, ones very similar to those that might be written by a developmental student. What I ask students to do in class is find the original passages in “Soap and Water” that correspond to these general, undeveloped sentences. I ask them to copy the passage, and pick out descriptive words and phrases. We then discuss how meaningful these words and phrases are, how they give emotion and depth to the story. Below is one example, with the corresponding passage from Yezierska’s story for clarity.

1. **Miss Whiteside told me that I did not look neat.** (my rewording of Yezierska)

“She told me that my skin looked oily, my hair unkempt, and my finger-nails sadly neglected. She told me that I was utterly unmindful of the little niceties of the well-groomed lady. She pointed out that my collar did not set evenly, my belt was awry, and there was a lack of freshness in my dress. And she ended with: ‘Soap and water are cheap. Any one can be clean’” (Yezierska 101).

From the example above, students begin to recognize the value of descriptive writing. In my own non-descript rewording, “Miss Whiteside told me that I did not look neat,” how are we to know what Miss Whiteside’s harsh judgment is based upon? Her skin, hair, nails, collar, belt, dress: all combine to make Miss Whiteside heap scorn upon this young woman. What my students jump on right away is the irony of Miss Whiteside’s judgment, for the narrator of “Soap and Water” spends night
and day cleaning the clothes of the very students who are her classmates. Without Yezierska’s details, the richness of the description, and the emotions it inflicts upon her readers, are both lost. Description has a purpose.

High-Stakes Writing

After about six weeks of analyzing Yezierska’s stories, I assign a more formal essay assignment. In their formal narrative essay on one specific learning experience, students can choose whether they want to write about an educational experience from a classroom, a skill they learned, or about a life lesson. Having students write an essay focusing on a learning experience of their own not only gives them some freedom to shape their topic, but helps them, become aware of their own role in the learning process. An important part of being a college student, as we all know, is developing independence and finding the route to one’s own learning process. This essay assignment has led to a wide variety of topics. Some students choose to write about how they turned things around and graduated high school in spite of poor grades, hostile peers, and complicated family problems. Others write about learning a skill like playing an instrument, mastering a school subject like web design, learning to swim, learning to drive, and even learning the art of skateboarding. This essay assignment engages students in learning by their writing about learning itself. It’s another way of providing positive reinforcement to students who have become accustomed to thinking of themselves as less than capable writers. Writing this essay serves as a reminder that learning isn’t easy, comfortable, or straightforward, but ultimately brings satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment.

In Appendix A I provide complete essay guidelines, and in Appendix B, an excerpt of one of the best essays I’ve received in response to this assignment. Moreover, I’ve provided two paragraphs instead of just one, to show my student’s writing process as he moved from a general consideration of the concept of a learning experience to the specifics of how he wound up joining the Marines, a branch of the armed forces that, as he says in the last sentence, he knew the least about.
Teaching stories from Anzia Yezierska’s collection *Hungry Hearts* is not a magic bullet. However, during the time in which I’ve explored Yezierska with my developmental writing students, I have found her short stories to be a valuable way of communicating a number of important ideas about strong writing. Yezierska is descriptive and emotive, encouraging students to be aware of their own voice and their own learning process.
Appendix A: High-Stakes Writing Assignment on One Learning Experience

Bring in prewriting on ______________
Bring at least one copy of your essay draft for peer review on ______________
Final version will be given in to me on ______________

Directions: Your essay should be 2-3 pages, double-spaced, using size 12 font and standard 1 inch margins. I will only accept hard copies of this essay. You must bring at least one copy of your essay draft to class in order to have it discussed within a peer review group.

Topic: Because we have been reading short stories by Anzia Yezierska in Hungry Hearts that all involve the theme of education in different ways (formal education and life lessons) and because the ACT Writing exam asks you to consider an essay question involving educational issues, I am asking you to write an essay in which you tell the story of 1 specific memory of a learning experience. Your goal is to write about this memory in a specific way, considering not only the lesson learned, who taught you, how you learned it, short and long-term consequences.

Points to consider:

- **Education** can mean learning done in a classroom (elementary school, high school, college) or life lessons. For instance, in “Soap and Water,” the narrator learns a lesson about learning and appearances. In “The Free Vacation House,” the narrator learns to appreciate the home that she has. In “Where Lovers Dream,” Sara learns that the world does not revolve around romantic love. A learning experience can be powerful and satisfying, or even painful.

- Your essay can be about either a classroom experience or a life lesson.

- If you are writing about a life lesson, remember to describe the specific setting, events, and consequences.

- Look back at the writing you’ve already done about a life lesson to help you get started.
• Use the *past tense consistently* to describe past events.

• Explain where you were, who you were with, and what happened in some detail. Use time order to develop your body paragraphs. Remember, don’t skimp on details. Re-create the scene for your reader. Be specific and vivid!

• Proofread your essay looking for run-ons, fragments, and comma splices.

**Organizing Your Essay:**

**Introduction** - use one of the stories by Anzia Yezierska as a springboard to introducing your thesis: For instance: Unlike the narrator of Anzia Yezierksa’s “How I Found America,” I have been to school in two different countries.

**Body paragraphs** - should be *specific* and *detailed*; aim for paragraphs of 7-12 sentences. If you quote from a Yezierska story, use the MLA format at the end of the sentence that contains a quotation.

**Conclusion** - Consider how you have defined *learning experience* in your essay. Connect your memory back to the Yezierska story you started with. For instance: I see that like the narrator of Anzia Yezierska’s “How I Found America,” it has taken me some time to feel comfortable in a college classroom.

**Appendix B:** Excerpt from student essay entitled “Humbling” by Alex Lozada

I have often asked myself, “What have I learned?” in a given situation. I have learned from my mother love and compassion. I have learned from school to be book smart and have aspirations. I have learned from the streets self-preservation and common sense. I was taught and have learned well in all aspects of life; however, I was not taught balance. The question I neglected to ask myself was, “Where do I find or learn balance?” As my mother watched me go in my own direction (in my teen years), she envisioned me going down the wrong path, and I surely was. When I was younger, my family was always moving around, so I never had friends for an extended period of time. High school was where I settled in the longest, so the friends that I made there were to be my niche. I was hanging out in the streets late at night with my “boys,” smoking and drinking and causing a ruckus. We thought we were cool and we also thought we were invincible. We were in our own little world of delusional grandeur. We thought
that getting harassed by cops from time to time was a war story for our peers. And in my pleasure of regaling them with our escapades, I lost myself.

One summer night I came home after one of my outings and my mother stopped me to have a talk with me. No, not a talk where she was inquiring about my night, but a talk that was asking me where I was going in life: what am I to make of myself? She told me what I learned at home and at school should not be thrown away so easily. She mentioned to me where I could find the balance I didn’t know I needed and should’ve been looking for. “Join the military,” she said. And after much deliberation I did just that, given my other options at that time: going to school (which I was tired of at that stage in my life), bouncing from job to job, running the streets, winding up in jail, or worse yet, winding up dead. With the military branches that the U.S. had to offer, I decided to join the one I knew the least about, the Marines.

(This essay was published in NYC College of Technology’s journal of outstanding student writing in 2008. To read the essay in full, go to www.citytech.cuny.edu/files/academics/ctw v3 2008.pdf.)