

Fiddler on the roof essay sample



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Fiddler on the Roof is a classic musical about Jewish life set in the small Ukraine town of Anatevka during the early 20th century. It reveals Jewish life and the problems the people faced in pre-revolutionary Russia. It is a tumultuous time in Russia with the persecution of Jews and the anti-Tsarist sentiment that would lead to the Revolution. This movie centered on the life of Tevye (Topol), a hard working milkman, his wife, and five daughters. Tevye is constantly torn between his traditional Jewish values and an ever changing world.

Traditions are a large part of Jewish life. Tevye stated in the opening of the movie, " Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof". Tradition provides balance in life. Jews have many traditions that include how to sleep, eat, work, and even wear clothes. One tradition is they keep their head covered and wear a prayer shawl as a symbol of their constant devotion to God.

A major tradition revealed in the film was the celebration of the Sabbath, the most sacred day of the week for Jews. It starts at sunset on Friday and ends at sunset on Saturday. Nearing sunset, after Tevye and his family finished their Sabbath preparation; Golde (Norma Crane) started the Sabbath celebration by lighting candles and giving a blessing. It is a Jewish tradition for the woman of the house to do this with the candle lighting marking the beginning and end of all Sabbaths. After the Sabbath meal, Tevye went to visit Lazar Wolf(Paul Mann). When Lazar came from the back of the house, he was removing his bloody apron indicating he had been working in his butcher shop. This was a bad portrayal of traditional Jewish life in that work is not to be done on the Sabbath.

Another primary tradition shown in this film is that of marriage. It is the most holy of all human institutions and is one of the 613 commandments found in the Torah. For a traditional Jewish wedding to take place, a matchmaker chooses a wife for a man. If the father of the bride-to-be approves, the marriage takes place. Tevye thinks this is how all his daughters should be wed. Yente (Molly Picon), the matchmaker, chooses Tzeitel (Rosalind Harris), Tevye's oldest daughter, as a bride for Lazar, the wealthy butcher. Tevye did not like Lazar very much but decided it would be a good choice for his daughter since she would never go hungry and would be removed from a life of poverty. Tzeitel loathes her father's decision because she wants to marry her childhood sweetheart Motel (Leonard Frey). Tzeitel and Motel had given each other their pledge of marriage over a year prior.

This angered Tevye as it was not the traditional way for a man and woman to be wed. Torn between his traditional Jewish ways and Tzeitel's wishes, Tevye finally agrees to her marriage with Motel. The wedding takes place outdoors under a canopy called a huppah. It is a decorated cloth on four poles symbolic of the couple's first home open on all four sides as their home will be open to friends and family. The ceremony ends with Motel crushing a glass under his foot symbolizing the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem and to keep Jerusalem and Israel in their minds even during times of joy. His next two daughters Hodel (Michele Marsh) and Chava (Neva Small) would exact the same defiance against their father and marry for love rather than having their marriage arranged in the traditional style.

Hodel fell in love with Perchik (Paul Michael Galser), a revolutionist and educated young man. He came to Anatevka and taught Tevye's children

about the new ideas being spread throughout society. One of the new ideas he brought to Anatevka was men and women being able to dance with each other. At Tzeitels and Motels wedding reception, he removed the partition, called a mechitzah, which was nothing more than a rope separating the men from the women, and invited them to dance with one another. In the past, men and women were separated for modesty.

Chava married Fyedka (Raymond Lovelock), a non-Jewish man from a nearby town. This outraged Tevye in that he expected all of his daughters to marry a Jewish man. According to Tevye, some traditions cannot be overlooked. He condemned her decision to marry Fyedka and refused to acknowledge her existence. In his eyes Chava was dead. By the end of the movie Tevye had a change of heart and wished Chava and her husband well.

One of the problems facing Jews at the time was persecution from the Russians in the form of demonstrations and pogroms. Demonstrations consisted of Russian soldiers going through a Jewish community ransacking homes and property and beating anyone who tried to stop them. The Constable (Louis Zorich) of Anatevka considered Tevye a friend and a good man, even though he was a Jew, and would warn Tevye of upcoming demonstrations. The Constable almost lost his job when his superior found out that some demonstrations were not carried out as ordered. A demonstration happened at Tzeitels and Motels wedding reception.

The Constable stops it after a short time because of his respect for Tevye. The Constable fought internally with himself about what was right and what was his job. At the end of the film, an edict from St. Petersburg is issued

ordering all Jews in the area must sell their homes and leave. Some townfolk are ready to fight but some quick guidance from the Rabbi and they realize it would be futile. With Fyedka being Russian, Chava and Fyedka could stay but decided to move because they could not live around people who treated others in that manner. Hodel and Perchik were already in Siberia because Perchick was arrested in Kiev during a freedom rally. Tzietel and Motel moved to another town until they could earn enough money to move to America. Tevye, Golde and their two youngest daughters move to America to live with a relative.

Famed film critic Paulene Kael once wrote “” Fiddler on the Roof” is the most powerful movie musical ever made” and I have a tendency to agree. Norman Jewison did a great job capturing the lives of Jews in early 20th century Russia and delivered it in an entertaining way. It provided a great deal of information about Jewish traditions and the discriminations they faced. The themes depicted by Jewison are clear and easy to pick out but the movie is rather long. His cast of Topol as Tevye was great as he was a Russian Jew adding validity to the part. Overall I enjoyed the movie as with every time I watch it. My wife always gets a kick out of me when I break into my academy award winning song and dance rendition of Tevye performing “ If I were a Rich Man”.