

# [A study on smolinsky family history essay](https://assignbuster.com/a-study-on-smolinsky-family-history-essay/)

### Plot Overview

The Smolinsky family is on the verge of starvation. The older daughters, Bessie, Mashah, and Fania, can’t find work, and Mashah spends what little money she has to make herself look more beautiful. Their father, Reb Smolinsky, doesn’t work at all, spending his days reading holy books and commandeering his daughters’ wages—his due as a Jewish father. When Mrs. Smolinsky despairs over the situation, the youngest daughter, Sara, promptly goes outside to sell herring and makes the family some money. Later, the older girls find jobs, and Mrs. Smolinsky rents out the second room, improving the family’s financial situation.

Quiet, dutiful Bessie soon falls for a young man named Berel Berenstein and invites him home for dinner one night. The rest of the family is excited for Bessie, but when Reb Smolinsky finds out, he decides he can’t live without the wages Bessie brings in. Though Berel is willing to marry Bessie without a dowry, her father says Berel must also pay for the entire wedding and set him up in business as well. Berel refuses and storms out. When he says Bessie should defy her crazy father and marry him at City Hall, Bessie says she doesn’t dare. Berel promptly gets engaged to someone else, crushing Bessie’s spirit.

Mashah is the next daughter to find a romance that Reb Smolinsky considers inappropriate. She falls in love with Jacob Novak, a piano player from a rich family. Mashah’s father disapproves of the match and blackmails Jacob into staying away for several days, breaking Mashah’s heart. When Jacob comes back to beg for forgiveness, Mashah feels defeated enough to stand by and let her father kick Jacob out for playing piano on the Sabbath. Reb Smolinsky also disapproves of Fania’s sweetheart, a poor poet named Morris Lipkin, and shames him away. He then arranges marriages for all three girls, which leave them all desperately unhappy. Sara is furious with her father for what he’s done to her sisters, but her age and gender leave her powerless.

Despite Mrs. Smolinsky’s warning, Reb Smolinsky takes all of the money he got from Bessie’s marriage and sinks it into a grocery store that the previous owner had filled with fake stock. Sara and Mrs. Smolinsky must again scramble for survival, and each day they endure increasing criticism from Reb Smolinsky. One day, Sara reaches her breaking point. She runs away from home and decides to become a teacher. She plans to live with either Bessie or Mashah, but both have been beaten down by poverty and bad marriages. Instead, she rents a small, dirty, private room of her own. To pay for it, Sara finds a day job in a laundry, using her nights to study and take classes.

The life Sara has chosen is not easy. She faces discrimination for being a woman and living alone; her fellow workers ostracize her; her mother begs her to come home more often; and her unhappy sisters nag her to find a husband of her own. On top of all this, Sara is desperately lonely, and when she is visited by an acquaintance of Fania’s, Max Goldstein, she nearly marries him and gives up her dream of seeking knowledge. When she realizes Max is interested only in possessions, however, she refuses him. When Reb Smolinsky hears of this, he’s so furious with Sara that he promptly disowns her.

College is another struggle against poverty and loneliness, but Sara wants so badly to be like the clean, beautiful people around her that she perseveres and graduates. She gets a job in the New York school system, buys nicer clothing, and rents a cleaner, larger apartment as a celebration of her new financial independence. Her excitement ends quickly, however, when she learns that her mother, whom she hasn’t visited in six years, is dying. Though her mother’s deathbed wish is that Sara take care of her father, Reb Smolinsky quickly gets remarried to Mrs. Feinstein, a widow who lives upstairs. His daughters are deeply offended by this insult to their mother, and after Mrs. Feinstein tries to extort money from her new stepchildren, all of them decide to stop speaking to their father.

Furious at her unexpected poverty, Mrs. Feinstein writes a nasty letter to Hugo Seelig, the principal of Sara’s school. The letter, however, actually draws Hugo and Sara together, and their bond tightens as they talk of their shared heritage in Poland. This new relationship finally marks the end of Sara’s loneliness, and in her new happiness, she decides once again to reach out to her father. Hugo does this as well, and the novel ends with the implication that Reb Smolinsky will soon escape his new wife by moving in with Hugo and Sara. Sara’s life has come full circle.

Sara Smolinsky- The youngest Smolinsky daughter and narrator of Bread Givers. The most fiercely independent of Reb Smolinsky’s daughters, Sara wants more than any of them to create a life of her own. Though she admires her father’s dedication and inner flame, she is also deeply resentful of his hypocrisy and the chances he has denied all his daughters. She develops crushes on men with similar dedication and fire, seeking a more willing and understanding role model than Reb Smolinsky, as well as a companion who will acknowledge and appreciate the identity she’s struggled to build. Sara is willing to work hard to get what she wants, but her ceaseless craving for companionship and tendency to romanticize her situation sometimes distract her from her ultimate goal.

Read anin-depth analysis of Sara Smolinsky.

Reb Smolinsky- The head of the Smolinsky family and Sara’s major antagonist. Extremely dedicated in his religious beliefs, Reb Smolinsky has devoted his entire life to studying the Torah and other Jewish holy books. The spirit he gathers from these studies fills him with a holy light that leaves others in awe but causes family problems when Reb Smolinsky confuses this spiritual knowledge with more worldly wisdom. His innocence often leads him to make foolish decisions that he refuses to acknowledge, insisting that a man as learned as he could never make such mistakes. After his wife dies, he remarries quickly and forces his daughters to remain with him as long as possible because he knows he needs someone to take care of him.

Read anin-depth analysis of Reb Smolinsky.

Shena Smolinsky- Sara’s mother and Reb Smolinsky’s long-suffering wife. Shena is truly in awe of her husband’s holiness, though she complains bitterly about the poverty it forces on her. She also feels protective of her husband—he lives so much in his own world that it’s hard for him to function in the real one. She firmly believes a woman’s highest aspiration is to be a wife and mother, and despite her husband’s manipulations, she genuinely wishes to see her daughters settled into good marriages. Though she doesn’t understand why Sara desires a different route, she loves her enough to support her in the best way she can.

Bessie Smolinsky- The oldest Smolinsky daughter. Bessie is the major financial support for the family, and even at a young age she is worn out from constant stress and work. She despises her father for using up all her good years for himself but is afraid to leave because providing for others is the only life she knows. Resentful of her status as an old maid, Bessie finds joy in her eventual marriage to Zalmon only because of the affection that her youngest stepson, Benny, feels for her. The only reason Bessie agrees to marry Zalmon is that Benny needs her.

Read anin-depth analysis of Bessie Smolinsky.

Mashah Smolinsky- One of the middle Smolinsky daughters. Mashah is extremely beautiful, and the rest of the family thinks she is vain. In fact, Mashah needs beauty to sustain her, and her own looks, as well as the music in the park, are the only resources she has. She falls in love with the music Jacob Novak makes before she even sees Jacob himself, and when he breaks her heart, he destroys her hope of finding any more beauty in the world. She wastes away to a worn, quiet shadow of her former self, and hints of her former spirit show only in her enjoyment of her children and the cleanliness of her small house.

Read anin-depth analysis of Mashah Smolinsky.

Fania Smolinsky- One of the middle Smolinsky daughters. Comfortable with speaking her mind, Fania goes further than either Bessie or Mashah in defending her sweetheart. However, Fania is also more practical than her sisters and attempts to make her father’s choice of husband work for her. Ultimately unsuccessful, she complains bitterly about her marriage at every opportunity and, though she frequently derides Sara’s accomplishments, appears jealous of her sisters, as well. Though she lives across the country, Fania keeps in regular contact with her mother and sisters.

Berel Berenstein- The clothing cutter with whom Bessie falls in love. An ambitious young man who plans to open his own shop, Berel wants to marry Bessie because she’s a sensible, competent girl who would be a great help in running his business. Somewhat sporadic in his religious observance, Berel thinks anyone who clings to the old ways is crazy and has no patience for anyone who attempts to make him follow those ways.

Hugo Seelig- The school principal with whom Sara falls in love. An intelligent, well-respected man, Hugo is filled with the knowledge that Sara longs for and admires. A kind man who treats everyone with respect, Hugo puts far more value on his personal observations about people than on what others might say about them. Hugo still feels a great bond with the old country and the customs he was raised with, and he holds Reb Smolinsky’s learning in awe.

Morris Lipkin- The poet with whom Fania falls in love. A pale young man with a shabby coat and a desperate need for a haircut, Morris believes strongly in the power of both love and poetry. When Reb Smolinsky forces Fania away from him, however, he becomes bitter enough to crush Sara when she comes to him with her own dreams. Morris earns a living writing for newspapers and spends his free time at the library.

Jacob Novak- The piano player with whom Mashah falls in love. The son of wealthy parents, Jacob has grown up with money but doesn’t share his father’s prejudice against those who haven’t. Though he cares deeply for Mashah, Jacob loves music more than anything else and will temporarily sacrifice even Mashah in order to continue performing it.

Moe Mirsky- The diamond dealer Reb Smolinsky chooses to be Mashah’s husband. A charming and generous man on the surface, Moe is in fact a calculating liar who will say anything to get what he wants. Unable to hold down a regular job, he emotionally abuses Mashah and thinks nothing of dining out and wearing fancy clothes while his wife and children starve.

Zalmon- The fish peddler Reb Smolinsky chooses to be Bessie’s husband. A basically honest man who desperately needs help caring for his children, Zalmon genuinely means to give Bessie everything he promises her during their courtship. However, he is too conservative to bother finding out what might actually win her over—one of many concerns he feels is too “ Americanized.”

Abe Schmukler- The cloaks-and-suits dealer Reb Smolinsky chooses to be Fania’s husband. Abe substitutes expensive presents for genuine affection or attention, both during courtship and after he and Fania return to Los Angeles. A compulsive gambler, Abe uses his wife’s appearance to show the world how affluent he is.

Max Goldstein- Abe’s partner, who comes to New York to court Sara. A self-made businessman who is derisive of the education he never had, Max is completely focused on money, possessions, and potential profit. During his time with Sara, he flaunts his wealth and worldliness instead of showing any interest in her needs.

Mrs. Feinstein- Reb Smolinsky’s second wife. Originally a widow who lived above the Smolinskys’ place, Mrs. Feinstein pretends to be a supportive woman but truthfully cares only about financial gain. She feels life owes her a certain amount of wealth, and when she doesn’t get it, she takes vengeance on everyone around her.

The driving force in Sara’s life is her desire to find her own version of the light she sees radiating from her father. As a child, she yearns for something that will inspire her, such as Morris Lipkin’s poetry briefly does. As a teen, she dreams of becoming a teacher so that all eyes will be on her the way they are on her father when he preaches. Later, she finds books that fuel her from day to day. When she gives up Max Goldstein because he would have stopped her education, she comforts herself with the thought that her sacrifice is like her father’s rejection of worldly success in order to study the Torah more fully. When she begins to understand what it takes to find an inner light, the first thing she wants to do is share it with him, believing he’s the only one who will truly understand. Knowledge, she decides, is what she wants more than anything in the world, and she devotes the same time and energy to obtaining it that her father does to studying his holy books.

During her quest for an internal flame, Sara hones her sense of fury at the injustices committed by others. Though she has no backing, she has the courage to protest at the restaurant when the cook gives her less meat because she is a woman. She is furious with both Berel and Jacob for hurting her sisters, and her hatred for her father begins when she sees the way he denies his daughters any chance to have lives of their own choosing. This need to fight injustice, however, is also what helps her reconcile with her father, and the first steps are inspired by her mother’s promise and the guilt Sara feels at returning home just as she is dying. Later, when Sara sees the way her father’s new wife treats him, she considers the possibility of once again living under one roof with her father, despite the tyranny she fears will re-enter her life. Her father’s light is threatened, and Sara knows better than anyone the importance of keeping it lit.

### Reb Smolinsky

Having spent his entire life wrapped up in the study of the Torah and other holy books, Reb Smolinsky lives in his own private world of religious study, a world that is sometimes highly incompatible with the one in which the rest of his family lives. His days and nights are focused on the promise of heaven and offering charitable contributions to others, making him unable to see that on Earth, a man needs to make sure his own children are fed before he gives to strangers. In the holy works, men are good and kind, and they value the importance of study; he attempts to translate this awareness to a world where people don’t care what your excuses are for not paying them and try to cheat you on business deals. Even more damaging to himself and those around him is the fact that in his world of words, Reb Smolinsky is incredibly knowledgeable. He mistakenly believes this means that he is equally knowledgeable in the outside world, and he makes potentially foolish decisions without feeling the need to consult his much more sensible wife. If his decisions prove to have been poorly made, Reb Smolinsky refuses to admit this to himself and will allow the decision to degrade further rather than to confess that he might have been wrong.

### Bessie Smolinsky

Bessie has been crushed for so long by the weight of responsibility and family duty that it is hard to determine any personality she might have had beyond that. She has no time for outside interests because she’s forced to work all hours of the day to keep her family fed and clothed. She also has no hope of a future escape because her father needs the money she brings in too badly to ever really let her go. Though it often seems, especially to Sarah, that this treatment has crushed Bessie’s spirit enough that all she’s capable of is mute acceptance, Bessie does in fact plan to run away rather than marry Zalmon, the fish peddler. However, that would leave Bessie on her own, trying to create a life for herself without ever having the opportunity even to discover what she might want to be a part of that life. Being left alone with so few internal resources very reasonably terrifies her, so she resigns herself to what little light can be reflected off of the people she serves. First it was her father with his holy light, then little Benny, the fish peddler’s son, whose eyes shone with something fresh and beautiful. Better to cling to the little light you have, she feels, than to risk seeking more and find you have nothing at all.

### Mashah Smolinsky

Though her family suspects she is shallow and empty-headed, Mashah is instead simply a lover of beauty. She buys paper flowers, makes a special trip to listen to the free music in the park, and lavishes attention on her face and figure simply because they are some of the few reliable sources of beauty available to her in her impoverished life. Sara says early in the book that Mashah seems to feed off her beauty the way other people feed off food, and the time she puts into keeping herself attractive is simply a way of keeping her food supply strong. She is first drawn to her great love, Jacob Novak, through the beautiful music he produces. She responds to that love by spreading beauty as far as she can: the house becomes cleaner and more organized, the table has fresh flowers, and the joy on her face brings light to all who know her. She puts so much effort into creating beauty for Jacob’s sake that when he leaves, her belief in beauty itself is crushed. Her spirit slowly drains away. She still keeps herself looking nice, but there is no longer any heart behind it.

### The Hazards of Dependence

In Bread Givers, those who make someone else an integral part of realizing their dreams inevitably wind up being failed by the other person. Mrs. Smolinsky hopes that the grocery store will finally mean a steady income for her family, but her husband, who insists on making the purchase, allows the previous owner to scam him. Sara puts all of her young, romantic hopes into Morris Lipkin and the beautiful words he writes, only to have him crush her dreams with a curt rejection. Mashah puts all of her dreams of beauty and love into Jacob Novak, only to find that he is willing to sacrifice her for the sake of his music. Sara hopes to share her new dedication to knowledge with her father, but he disowns her for failing to get married. Reb Smolinsky marries Mrs. Feinstein with the hope that she’ll be as wonderful and dedicated a wife as Mrs. Smolinsky had been, but he finds himself trapped with a demanding, money-grubbing shrew who wants him to die. Only Sara’s dream of becoming a teacher, which depends only on Sara herself, is ever fulfilled.

In Bread Givers, familial duty is what most often holds characters back from getting what they really want. Bessie’s sense of duty to her father keeps her from accepting Berel’s proposal and running away with him, and Jacob Novak’s obligation to his father keeps him away from Mashah and makes him break her heart. Because of their obligations to family, both Bessie and Mashah lose the people they want to be with forever. After enduring years of her father’s mistreatment, Bessie nearly works up the courage to escape, only to be held back by the feeling that she is the only person truly willing to take care of young Benny. Sara, for her part, is nearly able to escape hazardous obligations by refusing to see her family while she goes to school, lest they say or do something that will divert her from her education. However, guilt over not being there for her sick mother leads Sara to feel that she has an obligation to care for her father, and with Hugo’s invitation for Reb Smolinsky to live with them, Sara will soon be living under her father’s command once again.

### The Elusiveness of Happiness

Though several of the characters in Bread Givers have a goal or dream of some kind, achieving that goal isn’t necessarily the magic solution they hoped it would be. Bessie desperately longs to get married, but when she does, she finds that her life is filled with more unappreciated drudgery than it was when she was alone. Fania marries Abe with the hope that she can escape her father to the dream city of Los Angeles, only to find a life full of pointlessly expensive showpieces and incredible loneliness. When Sara rents her own room, she fantasizes about how wonderful and enriching it will be finally to have some space to herself, only to find herself desperately longing for someone to talk to. When her hard work finally pays off and she gets a teaching job, Sara is surprised to find that it doesn’t make her feel as complete as she hoped it would. Hugo Seelig seems to fill this hole, but his insistence that they would love to have Sara’s father live with them leaves her with a nagging fear that her independent identity will suffer.

### Motifs

### Inadequate Providers

Nearly all of the men in the novel fail to provide sufficiently for the women in their lives. Reb Smolinsky denies his family sufficient finances and wisdom, refusing to contribute any money to the household and either giving away or making foolish choices with the money his children bring in. According to Jewish faith, only men are allowed to study the Torah. Women are destined only to ease the lives of the men in their families, keeping them fed and clothed so they need to do nothing more than focus on the holy word. This service should be a woman’s highest aspiration, because the Torah teaches that it is only through a man that a woman can enter heaven. The men in a woman’s life define her very existence. The title of the novel, Bread Givers, refers to the inadequacy of the men in the Smolinsky women’s lives: though the women refer to men as “ bread givers,” they themselves must do the largest share of the providing.

Reb Smolinsky’s wisdom also fails his daughters in another way, as his authority to choose their husbands traps his three oldest into unhappy and sometimes abusive marriages. Mashah’s husband fails her and his children in every way possible, denying them basic necessities while he can afford to eat out and buy himself fancy new clothing. Though Fania’s husband keeps her well fed and draped in fancy clothing, he holds so much back from her emotionally that she feels more alone with him than she did when she was single. Sara’s teachers at the college fail her academically, not willing to take any extra time to help her satisfy her voracious need for knowledge. None of these men give the women in the novel what they need to survive, leaving them either to perish or, as Sara did, to learn how to fulfill their own needs.

### The Oppression of Women

Bread Givers is full of men and even women oppressing other women, so much so that many women consider oppression an acceptable way of life. Reb Smolinsky constantly berates his far-wiser wife for attempting to make decisions and demands all of his daughters’ wages for his own use. He denies his older daughters a chance at happiness, pushing their sweethearts away because he resents not having chosen them himself. Mashah’s husband emotionally abuses her and doesn’t allow her to defend herself or her children against his injustice. Max Goldstein oppresses Sara in a more subtle manner, constantly attempting to deny her the right to have her own thoughts and opinions. Women even oppress other women. One refuses to rent Sara a single room because of her gender, and the female servers at the cafeteria consider her less worthy of meat than the man standing behind her in line. Sara must fight against this oppression nearly every moment of her life, which emphasizes her struggle to gain acceptance on the strength of her own identity.

### The Yearning for Pleasure

At several points in Bread Givers, people express a desire to get out and enjoy life, though none of them ever seem able to fulfill that wish. After Bessie meets Berel, she tells her mother that they should save less and enjoy life more—but her ability to enjoy life is crushed when Berel leaves. Sara complains that instead of geometry she wants to learn subjects that will help her truly live her life, but she is taunted for that desire for the rest of her time in school. Fania berates Sara for studying by telling her she should get out and enjoy life, but Fania herself has admitted on several occasions that her own life gives her no pleasure at all. Sara nearly rejects her studying for Max’s sake because he makes her feel more fun and full of life, but she later discovers that Max’s pleasure is hollow and not dependent on any interest in Sara herself. The characters’ desire to live life is truly a desire to escape into a new life, a process that takes far more work than a simple wish.

### Symbols

### Internal Light

The internal light that several characters in Bread Givers either have or are seeking symbolizes their self-chosen purpose for living. Reb Smolinsky spends all hours of his day devoting himself to understanding the Torah and other holy works, and many people talk about the light that shines constantly from his face. This is especially true whenever he’s expounding on a scripture or holy principle. Love for Jacob Novak is what finally brings light to Mashah’s face, as she turns her time and energy from maintaining her own appearance to tending to Jacob’s every need. Yezierska talks about the innocent light that shines from young Benny’s face, and Bessie decides that caring for him will be the purpose that makes her marriage to an old fish peddler tolerable. Sara spends most of the novel struggling to get an education, hoping to find a purpose that will define her life the way religion defines her father’s. She admires Hugo Seelig so much because he is lit by that purpose. The light of knowledge shines from him and touches everyone he knows.

### Solitude

For Sara, the chance to be alone represents the achievement of her own identity. When she was growing up, her father was always allowed time and space to be alone with his books while he forced the women to crowd together in the remaining available space. After finally defying her father and running away back to New York, the first thing Sara does is eat a meal with just herself for company, reveling in her independence. She believes that a room where she can be by herself, her next goal, will give her the chance to focus on studying and be free from the pressures of her family. She prefers solitude to being with Max because, though he is fun to be with, he tries to make her into a perfect little possession instead of the teacher she wants to become. When she does become a teacher, she buys another little room of her own to celebrate the experience. It is larger and much cleaner than the first, but more important, it’s even quieter and more isolated, as safe from dirt and shouting as she wants her life to be from poverty and her past.

### A “ Real” Person

Sara spends most of the book wanting to become a “ real” person, an unreachable state of being that symbolizes everything she believes a successful and happy person should be and have. Early in her life, a major qualification for being successful and happy is money. According to Sara, real people also sit down for dinner at a table and go out and earn their own money. This idea urges her at a young age to sell herring on the street. Later, being real means living on her own, where she has the space and the quiet to figure out who she’s supposed to be. When she finally becomes a teacher, she believes she is real for a while. However, Mr. Seelig shines with a greater internal light than she does, and she decides this light is what it takes to be real. In Sara’s mind, it’s impossible for her to become a real person: no matter what she does with her life, there will always be some better and more perfect thing to be.

1. This door was life. It was air. The bottom starting-point of becoming a person. I simply must have this room with the shut door.

Explanation for Quotation 1 >>

2. It says in the Torah: What’s a woman without a man? Less than nothing—a blotted out existence. No life on earth and no hope in heaven.

Explanation for Quotation 2 >>

3. I know I’m a fool. But I cannot help it. I haven’t the courage to live for myself. My own life is knocked out of me. No wonder Father called me the burden bearer.

Explanation for Quotation 3 >>

4. I felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn’t just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me.

Explanation for Quotation 4 >>

5. There was one in the school who was what I dreamed a teacher to be—the principal, Mr. Hugo Seelig. He kept that living thing, that flame, that I used to worship as a child. And yet he had none of that aloof dignity of a superior. He was just plain human. When he entered a classroom sunlight filled the place.

full title· Bread Givers

author·Anzia Yezierska

type of work·Novel

genre·Coming-of-age; family drama

language·English

time and place written·New York City in the early 1920s

date of first publication·1925

publisher·Doubleday

narrator·Sara Smolinsky

point of view·The narrator speaks in first person, focusing only on Sara’s thoughts, feelings, and perspective. Though the motivations of the other characters are occasionally discussed, the narrator usually gives only an objective view of their appearance and actions as they would appear to an outside observer.

tone·The narrator’s tone is passionate as she discusses her feelings, life, and family.

tense·Past tense

setting (time)·1910s to early 1920s

setting (place)·New York City

protagonist·Sara Smolinsky