
as he could lay his hands on, with little concern, by modern biographical standards, for verifying their authenticity." Often, Boswell sought to "improve" Johnson's remarks. One of Johnson's best-known "sayings," as reported by Boswell in the *Life*, is, "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life, for there is everything in London that life can afford." But according to Boswell's own journal, all that Johnson actually said was, "You find no man wishes to leave it."

Boswell did not trouble himself to indicate the sources of many of his assertions. "Were I to detail the books which I have consulted and the inquiries which I have found it necessary to make by various channels," Boswell proclaimed, "I should probably be thought ridiculously ostentatious. Let me only observe, as a specimen of my troubles, that I have sometimes been obliged to run over half London, in order to fix a date correctly." Such proclamations have persuaded many readers of what Virginia Woolf called Boswell's "obstinate veracity." But skepticism is warranted, Greene maintains. Boswell, for example, did not bother to "run over" to Oxford University to check the enrollment records, and so he wrote that Johnson left Pembroke College in 1731, when he actually left in 1729.

Boswell, in short, was no Boswell. His *Life* may not be the world's worst biography—it is certainly beautifully written—Greene concludes, but it is "[the] worst among major biographies still used as serious guides to their subjects' lives and works."

Two Unnaturalists

"Farrell's Ethnic Neighborhood and Wright's Urban Ghetto: Two Visions of Chicago's South Side" by Robert Butler, in *Melus* (Spring 1993), 272 Bartlett Hall, Dept. of English, Univ. of Mass. at Amherst, Amherst, Mass. 01003.

Critics have often pigeonholed novelists James T. Farrell (1904–79) and Richard Wright (1908–60) as "naturalistic" writers, who employ documentary techniques in the service of grimly deterministic visions. Examining their best-known works—Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy (1932–34–35), and Wright's *Native Son* (1940), both set in Chicago—Butler, a professor of English at

Canisius College, Buffalo, New York, concludes that the label does not fit.

In *Native Son*, Butler points out, Chicago appears as "a gothic mindscape reflecting the fear and horror that dominate [the] life" of Wright's black protagonist, Bigger Thomas. Because Wright wanted to filter "external experience through Bigger's radically alienated consciousness," he substituted grotesque imagery for naturalistic description of the city's streets, houses, stores, schools, and other landmarks. On his way to draft a ransom note, Bigger perceives street lamps as "hazy balls of light frozen into motionlessness"; after a brutal murder, deserted buildings look like "empty skulls," their windows "gap[ing] blackly like . . . eye sockets." Wright's Chicago, Butler writes, "is a place defined by absences, dark nights, empty streets and abandoned buildings that become a powerful symbol of 'a world whose metaphysical meanings had vanished.'"

The South Side of Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, which is about an Irish-American youth's tragically wasted life, is very different, "an ethnic neighborhood presented in a complexly ambivalent way," Butler notes. "While it can indeed be a dead end to those who succumb to what Farrell . . . called 'spiritual poverty,' it can also be the setting for human liberation." Farrell uses standard realistic techniques that present the city, in all of its harshness, in concrete detail, and also uses poetic techniques that "lyrically suggest the surprisingly rich human possibilities contained in such a world." At the end of *Young Lonigan*, the first novel in the trilogy, Studs Lonigan looks out his bedroom window, "watching the night strangeness, listening. The darkness was over everything like a warm bed-cover, and all the little sounds of night seemed to him as if they belonged to some great mystery." The better angels of Studs's nature still find encouragement in the city. "Thus," Butler writes, "the street corners, pool rooms, and bars that threaten to trap Studs Lonigan are consistently contrasted with the parks that allow him to relax, free his mind, and envision a better life for himself."

As Studs's prospects narrow, Butler observes, Farrell's "realistic descriptions of the city become more prevalent to dramatize Studs's plight." Yet lyrical images persist "to suggest

that Studs is not a simple victim of a hostile environment." Farrell's Chicago, Butler says, "drew more from Sherwood Anderson's lyrical stories than it did from [Theodore] Dreiser's naturalistic novels."

Unraveling Shylock

"Who Is Shylock?" by Robert Alter, in *Commentary* (July 1993), American Jewish Committee, 165 East 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

The Merchant of Venice may not be Shakespeare's best comedy, but historically it has been his most popular. Not only has it been produced thousands of times on both sides of the Atlantic, it was the first of Shakespeare's plays to be performed in Armenian, the first entirely in Chinese, and the first by a Japanese Kabuki troupe. Why all this should be is a bit of a puzzle. There are livelier (*The Taming of the Shrew*), funnier (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*), and lyrically richer (*Twelfth Night*) plays, yet *Merchant* seems to have a special appeal. Its source, suggests Alter, a Berkeley professor of comparative literature, lies in the play's most famous—or infamous—character, Shylock.

Although Shylock is neither the merchant of the title nor the romantic lead, he is usually regarded as the play's central character. There are really two Shylocks, says Alter, who draws extensively from John Gross's recently published *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy*. The first, dominant in productions until the 19th century, feeds on the worst anti-Semitic fantasies: the greedy, cold-hearted, and unmerciful Jew—"the very devil incarnation," as his servant Launcelot Gobbo says. In

the early 19th century, however, a sympathetic Shylock emerged. Victorian actor Henry Irving called Shylock "the type of a persecuted race; almost the only gentleman in the play, and the most ill-used." Since the 1920s, however, both Shylocks have been presented on stage. But while Shylock's position in the plot relies on one of these two readings, Alter suggests, the ultimate power of the play has always resided in the "explosively unstable" character of Shylock, in the interplay between his two roles. There is "something about the transgression of boundaries," he writes, "that gives the play its peculiar fascination."

Shakespeare the 16th-century Englishman may have cast Shylock as a stereotypical Jew of his day—"the archetypal alien in the mind of Christian Europe"—but Shakespeare the dramatist could not help giving Shylock a considerable degree of humanity. As the audience tries to define itself against the Jew, then, it meets with an undeniably sympathetic figure—a man betrayed by a heartless daughter and persecuted by a merciless society. The most famous testament to this perspective is, of course, the "Hath not a Jew eyes" soliloquy.

Yet Shylock's negative characteristics are inescapable, and if an audience connects with his human anguish, it may just as well connect with his human cruelty; "Hath not a Jew eyes," after all, ends with a promise of revenge. Christian audiences, Alter says, are invited to "a kind of out-of-self experience. If the looming, sinister other embodies all the hateful qualities that Christian culture would like to think are alien to it, there are also brief but powerful intimations . . . that the self may harbor the fearsome attributes it habitually projects on the other."



Shakespeare's Shylock, here depicted in 1785, prepares to extract his "pound of flesh."