Bending until Broken: An Examination of Tradition Within the *Fiddler on the Roof*

It seems that every family has some sort of tradition they take part in, whether it be as mundane as where they eat dinner on holidays, or as complex as a system of beliefs they follow. Traditions are an important aspect of many families, and following them gives one a great sense of belonging, comfort, and normalcy. In fact, Amy Griswold, a family life educator, states that “traditions give security to people, provide a sense of continuity and routine that they can depend on year after year” ([University of Illinois Extension](https://extension.illinois.edu)). To put it simply, in society, people like things that they can depend on, and traditions have a way of reinforcing that sense of security. However, what if in spite of this one wanted to go against what was considered traditional? Could that also influence the sense of security, causing it to collapse? Perhaps not in every case, or even most, but it certainly does appear to do so in a play by Joseph Stein entitled *Fiddler on the Roof*. In this story, Tevye, a very devout, Jewish man from the onset of the play, begins a descent of allowing himself and his daughters to break tradition, which in turn seems to coincide with events becoming worse and worse for him and his family. In Stein’s play, *Fiddler on the Roof*, a theme is displayed of how breaking tradition can cause one’s life to become unstable, and overall it will lead to great consequences. Excellent movement in this introduction.
The first sign of turmoil is seen when Tevye bends tradition by allowing his daughter Tzeitel to choose her own mate. Now by today's standard, it may be hard to understand why this would cause an upset, but one would have to understand a little about the Jewish culture that plays a large role in the play. In the early 1900’s, Jewish marriages traditionally were arranged in a process called matchmaking, and it was a match not based on notions of love that a young couple, destined to be wed, often share. In fact, according to one source, “marriage was understood as an (economic) alliance between families and was under strict parental control” (Freeze). With this understanding, it is no surprise that Tevye is quite eager to marry his daughter off to a wealthy butcher that has taken interest in her because of the apparent financial security he would provide. It is apparent that Tevye feels he will have also fulfilled his traditional duty of finding his daughter a good match, evident when he proclaims, “with a butcher, my daughter will surely never know hunger” (Stein 45). However, when presented with what seems like the ideal match, Tzeitel rebels, and proclaims she cannot marry him because she is in love with her childhood sweetheart, Motel, and together the young couple beg Tevye for his permission to marry. It becomes evident this is a decision that he deeply struggles with due to it being a deviation from his long-held traditions. Tevye’s worries are clearly expressed to the audience with a continuation of the song “Tradition:”

Tradition-

Marriages must be arranged by the papa.

This should not be changed.

One time you pulled out a prop,

And where does it stop?

Where does it stop? (Stein 60)
His song shows his desire to follow the beliefs, and also his fear that if he doesn’t, it could lead to further problems. Surprisingly, and clearly against his better judgement, Tevye gives in and allows the marriage to proceed. It is a decision he will come to regret, for after this initial act of breaking tradition, the viewer sees life start to become more difficult for Tevye. For starters, Tevye is met with a lot of criticism from the village over his decision to let his daughter marry Motel over the butcher for whom he had made the agreement with. But this was of small consequence compared to what takes place at the actual wedding of Tzeitel and her beau. For what should be a joyous occasion for a young couple, their wedding is stormed by a mob of Russians, who destroy everything in sight: the gifts, the food, the venue, everything. This leaves everyone in the village, especially Tevye, devastated. He cries out to God after the wedding, telling Him, “That was quite a dowry You gave my daughter Tzeitel at her wedding. Was that necessary?” (Stein 89). This shows that Tevye, feeling sorry for himself and his newly married daughter, considers that God is responsible for what happened at the wedding perhaps as a punishment for breaking tradition. After this scene, a darker tone settles over the play, and remains there. Excellent content within this paragraph – nicely illustrated and supported. HL on conclusion sentence just for need to remain on this one topic instead of looking forward.

Next, life goes from bad to worse for Tevye when he again allows another daughter, Hodel, to marry a man of her choosing. This time however, the man is not a childhood love interest, but rather a man Tevye introduced into his own home to teach his daughters, named Perchik. Also different in this scenario, is that Hodel and Perchik do not ask for her father’s permission to marry, they instead declare to him that they are to be married, and ask for his blessing (Stein 94). The viewer can tell that Tevye is thrown into a deeper despair over his traditions with this second request to betray them proclaiming they may as well “tear out [his] beard and uncover [his] head” (Stein 95). Both of which being long-held customs that are also synonymous with Jewish culture, it seems as if Tevye is telling the couple they are
making him abandon everything that makes him Jewish with their request as well. The further problems that Tevye worried about in his first act of betrayal appear to materialize again by using the song “Tradition:"

They’re not even asking permission

From the papa.

What’s happening to the tradition?

One little time I pulled a thread.

And where has it lead? Where has it lead? (Stein 95)

His song details how at first, he at least felt like he had some say so in the matter, but now his traditions are being slowly unraveled before him. But again, Tevye relents, and gives in to his daughter, and again, only to his further detriment. This time, the bad luck strikes before the wedding can even occur, and finds Perchik imprisoned in Siberia. And because now they are destined to be married, Hodel feels she must leave the village to go be by her future husband’s side, and tells her father, “Papa, God alone knows when we shall see each other again” (Stein 104). It is very apparent it hurts Tevye to have one of his daughters leave the family home, especially with future contact so uncertain. With his family now separated, this is another example of a time that Tevye broke tradition, only to have things turn out worse than they were before. Excellent text support…would like to see some secondary support in here. HL are really just on punctuation change or spelling notes.

Finally, this last occasion in which an attempt is made to break tradition, and Tevye does finally put his foot down, but this time the consequences of his previous actions seem to have sealed his fate. In this situation, his third eldest daughter, Chava, selects a man to marry that is not Jewish, an abomination
that Tevye feels he must draw the line at. This is most likely due to the fact that many of Jewish faith associate intermarriage with having a direct effect on their survival. One source stating that “there is a widespread belief that a high rate of Jewish intermarriage in a given locality leads to the disappearance of the Jewish community there” (Jewish Virtual Library). Meaning that Tevye could have seen his daughter’s marriage to a non-Jewish man as a direct threat to not just the survival of his traditions, but of the survival of his very people. This time Tevye did not give his blessing, or consent, but with tradition so far removed in the past, Chava marries her Russian beau anyway. This hits Tevye especially hard, and due to her actions, Tevye considers her dead to the family. One critic, writing about Tevye from the original stories by Sholem Aleichem, for which the play is based, also confirms the despair caused by Chava’s actions by stating “[it] was too much for Tevye to bear: he sits shiva, the traditional seven days of mourning for his own daughter” (Katz 66). This can be evidence that even though Tevye stuck by his traditions, he is still mourning the loss of his daughter because of it. His life now appearing to be in shambles due to the consequences of his actions, it seems that things could not get much worse for Tevye until an order appears from the Russians stating that he, his family, everyone must leave the village in three days. Somberly, Tevye and his remaining family, pack up their belongings, and leave their long-time home in a final instance of defeat. Excellent combination of text and secondary. Odd wording in topic sentence and two -ing verbs HL create fragments. Citation HL needs 1st part of WC entry in ( )

Overall, the story of tradition in Fiddler on the Roof is quite different from most. Instead of a story about traditions that bring a family closer together, it’s a cautionary tale about a family that is torn apart once they start to let their traditions go by the wayside. And while the breaking of tradition for Tevye started off innocent enough, and always seemed to be because he loved his daughters; the decision to do so never seemed to bring him any solace, in fact, it just made things worse. There is a
great quote early in the play, said by none other than Tevye himself, that seems to explain why maintaining traditions were so important to this story: “Tradition. Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as- as a fiddler on the roof!” (Stein 18). It is clear from this quote, and from the situations faced by Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, that their traditions were in fact directly related to their overall stability, and without them life became so unstable that it crumbled around them. Very nice ending.

Works Cited


