Drama Analysis Essay

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Breaking Traditions

The word tradition, according to Merriam Webster dictionary, is defined as “the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on this way”. Tradition is more than just a group of customs; in today’s world it can define a person. When a person breaks those traditions it changes and sometimes predetermines who that person will become in the future. Few links here to give background on play before thesis…In Joseph Stein’s *Fiddler on the Roof*, the idea of perfect tradition is broken and leads to characters finding a sense of self by bending the rules of arranged marriages, defying the rules of physical contact between unmarried men and women, and finally breaking away from tradition completely and choosing to marry outside of religion without any parental approval. Very nice thesis.

One long established Jewish tradition that many characters, particularly Tevye and Tzeitel, strayed away from was the idea of arranged marriages. In Jewish culture, it is believed that the mother and father are to choose whom their child or children will marry. It is misconceived that said child is required to marry the person that their parents have chose for them. In actuality, the child has somewhat of a say-so on who they can marry. If they are not fond of the person that their parents have chosen for them, then that person has the option of rejecting them. However, rejecting the chosen patrons may be considered disrespectful towards the parents and thus make it more difficult for the parents to find someone to marry their daughter or son. A similar situation happens in Joseph Stein’s *Fiddler on the Roof*, when Tevye, the father of five daughters, makes arrangements and promises his oldest daughter, Tzeitel, to the butcher, Lazar Wolf, to be married. At the beginning of the proposal, Tevye has negative feelings towards Lazar, but reconsiders the relationship from a financial standpoint. He decides that for his daughter’s well-being and that she may never know what hunger is, Tevye agrees to the arranged marriage. However, when Tevye goes to deliver the news to his daughter, he does not receive the reaction he had hoped for.
She begs and pleads and tells her father “...I’ll do anything. I’ll hire myself out as a servant. I’ll dig ditches, I’ll haul rocks, only don’t make me marry him, Papa, please” (Fiddler on the Roof 62). At this point, Tevye is faced with the debate of what is right and wrong according to Jewish religion and culture or to go against tradition in order to make his daughter happy so that she may not resent him for the rest of her life. According to Chadwick, personality and attitude comes from ones self-esteem, which is linked to our actions in our daily lives (Chadwick). The idea of understanding who you are and where you come from can help determine where a person wants to go in life. Chadwick also explains that religion is one factor that can help shape and form self-concept. Religion is related to tradition, and when tradition is broken, a person’s self-identity can be paralleled to that concept. Tradition was very important to Tevye because it gave him a sense of self-worth and made him apart of the community. However, when the tradition of arranged marriages were broken, new traditions were formed and Tevye’s sense of self, pertaining to his identity to the Jewish community and his family, changed greatly. Very nice use of explanation to link your outside source with the purpose of the paragraph. Citation HL needs “Stein” instead of play name – citation should be the first part of the WC entry.

Another tradition Jews follow, but is pushed to the side in this play, is not allowing unmarried men and women to have physical contact that could possibly encourage promiscuity. Jewish people believe that sex itself is not a sinful act, but only to be condoned by married individuals. According to Tracey Rich, because of this belief, unmarried patrons practice the avoidance of physical contact that could possibly lead to sexual desire, which comes from evil impulse that Jewish people refer to as “vetzer ra” (Rich). The physical contact that the characters make during the wedding such as dancing with one another was greatly frowned upon in the Jewish community. In the story, it all starts with Perchik who turns to Hodel, another daughter of Tevye, and asks her to dance with him. All of the guests are appalled and consider this a sin. However, the rabbi clarifies the technicality and explains that it is not a sin and not technically forbidden either, which encourages Perchik and Hodel to dance together. All the guests at the wedding have their full attention on them. Tevye, begins to walk over to stop them, stops in his tracks, and instead says, “I can see she’s dancing. And I’m going to dance with my wife?” (Fiddler on the Roof 100). So, they begin dancing as well and all of the guests are speechless and confused. Tevye’s decision
to join Perchik and dance at the wedding shows another change in tradition that was broken. By breaking this tradition, Tevye sense of self grows into a person that is unbothered by what the community considers a sinful act and decides to make the wedding occasion a happy memory for him and his family. Again, very nice use of source and play to explain your point.

Tevye’s sense of self also grows through broken tradition when he allows his daughter to choose a spouse outside of the Jewish religion. In Jewish religion, people are forbidden to marry outside of religion. According to Eliezer Shamton, the primary source of this is based to be found in the Bible, Deuteronomy 7:3, which says, “You shall not marry them.” referring ‘them’ to non-Jews, “you shall not give your daughter to their son and you shall not take his daughter for your son”. Another reason for this prohibition related to the Bible is explained in the following verse: “Because he will lead your son astray from Me and they will serve strange gods…” According to the same site, the term strange god can be defined as “other ideals or gods in which one bows his head and dedicates his heart and soul” (Shantov). Tevye had a very difficult time in making the decision to let Tzeitell marry Motel. However, if he allowed one daughter to marry whom they choose, then what’s to say that his other daughters can not do the same? At first thought he is completely against the idea of Chava, his daughter, to run away and marry Fyedka, who is not Jewish. He turns to his daughter and says, “A bird may love a fish but where would they build a home together?” (Fiddler on the Roof 131). Chava argues and tries to convince her father that the world they are living in is changing. Yet, he continues to argue that, “No. Some things do not change for us. Some things will never change.” (Fiddler on the Roof 132). Chava ends up going against her father’s wishes and commands and runs away with Fyedka. Tevye is furious and as a result he entirely disowns her. If anyone from the community respectably mentioned her name to him, he became very angry and would remind them that figuratively his daughter is dead to him. This experience would be considered very emotionally traumatizing. For Tevye, this heartbreaking experience caused his sense of sense to grow in a traumatic way, in which he decided that he did not want to stray far away from his traditions ever again. He says to himself, “How can I accept them. Can I deny everything I believe in? On the other hand, can I deny my own child? On the other hand, how can I turn my back on my faith, my people? If I try to bend that far, I will break.” (Fiddler on the Roof 135). This
experience of losing his daughter made him question himself and how far he was willing to stretch himself from breaking tradition. As mentioned earlier, religion is related to tradition, and when tradition is broken, a person’s self-identity can be paralleled to that concept. In this situation, Tevye would basically be giving up everything he believed in and would therefore change who he is as a person. *When he says, “If I try to bend that far, I will break”, he shows readers that he believes as a person, without his religion, traditions, and beliefs, he would not be the same individual that he defines himself as.* Very nice, once again. Since this last sentence is more of a comment on that one quote…might be a better conclusion to look at the overall effect of his selfhood.

In Joseph Stein’s *Fiddler on the Roof*, the idea of perfect tradition is broken and leads to characters, especially Tevye, finding a sense of self in the best of ways and also in the worst of ways. Tradition is the main guide of Tevye’s life; however, it soon becomes a conflict of interest when it comes to his family’s life choices and happiness as well to his own. Tradition was very important to Tevye because it gave him a sense of identity in the Jewish community as well as in his family. When these traditions were broken, Tevye’s sense of self began to grow and change. One good experience of breaking tradition included bending the rules of arranged marriages and letting Tzeitell choose her spouse out of love rather than someone that is financially inclined and of her father’s choosing. Another tradition Jews follow, but is pushed to the side in this play, is not allowing unmarried men and women to have physical contact, for example, dancing at Motel and Tzeitell’s wedding, that could possibly encourage promiscuity. The last and most important broken tradition that influenced Tevye’s sense of self was excommunicating his daughter for running away and marrying a non-Jew, the most highly forbidden act a Jew can commit. Overall, these experiences made Tevye realize just how far he was willing to stretch himself to balance the Jewish tradition and religious views verses keeping his daughters and family happy all at the same time. Excellent.

Works Cited


Chadwick, Bruce A. “Religious Studies Center.” *Spirituality and Self-Worth: The Role of Religion in Shaping*