

ENGL 207 Assignment 2 Grading Grid:

5 = Excellent, 4 = Good, 3 = Average, 2 = Lacking, 1 = Very Poor

CRITERIA:	5	4	3	2	1	COMMENTS:
Intro Strategy: use introductory material and relevant concepts to set the stage						
Arguable, Focused Thesis: think map and mirror						
Evidence & Analysis: think of each moment you point to in the text as a paragraph-worthy piece of evidence and analysis						
Structure, Org. & Argument Arc: build the argumentative story linking evidence-paragraphs effectively						
Transitions: the engine of your argumentative story						
Conclusion: a place for revelation not repetition						
Quote Integration: set up within narrative; quote; signal phrase; follow through.						
Style & Voice: find your writing voice and tone						
Concision & Clarity: less is sometimes more, and clarity wins the day over abstraction						
Grammar & Mechanics: you know, commas and semicolons and page numbers and stuff						

Additional Comments:

NAME
Rhetorical Analysis
ENGL 207
4/2/2017

The Promise of Life in the Land of Possibilities

The immigrant narrative is one told a thousand times over. Usually, it is a tale of struggle, despair, and hope as one leaves their home country to find solace in the American dream. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, there was a wave of immigration of Russian and Polish Jews fleeing violent and dangerous anti-semitism and persecution in Eastern Europe. These experiences brought about the “immigrant narrative,” one of the many styles of writing that tells the autobiographical story of immigration; and in many cases it captures the plight of Eastern European Jewry before and after WWII. Mary Antin and her family were Russian immigrants fleeing their home in Russia and emigrating to America in 1894 in the hopes of escaping religious persecution and living successfully in this new land of possibilities. From thirteen years old, Antin grew up in the slums of Boston. She eventually became a writer, giving her a platform to tell the story of her childhood in her autobiography *The Promised Land*. Throughout the narrative, Antin holds an optimistic view of her particularly unfortunate tale. In *The Promised Land*, an adult Antin recaps her experiences with the same childlike idealism and wonder that she felt when growing up. Regardless, as an adult, it seems that Antin still believes in the America she crafted as a child. Antin acknowledges the exaggeration of many of her experiences, but she never refutes them or gives a more mature and reflective analysis of her story. For Antin, America stays in the same glowing light because comparatively, her life in Russia would most likely not have existed. Life in America wasn't necessarily better than life in Russia, but it was possible. Some may say that the tone of Antin's story sugar-coats and does not do justice to the very painful immigrant experience. However, it is Antin's commitment to innocence and seeing things through the narrative eye of a child, that adds an undeniable truth to the immigrant narrative; the prospect of a free life in America is much greater than the

prospect of an uncertain life back in Russia. It does not offer a false vision of a promised land, rather a land filled with the unalienable promise of life.

In their home in Russia, the Antin's were used to a lavish lifestyle. They were part of the upper class, thus relatively wealthy and used to a materially higher standard of life. Their new home in America, however, was very different. They went through a complete class reversal, becoming part of the lowest class in America upon arrival, the immigrant class. One would think that the transition from wealth to poverty and the stark differences in the quality of life between Russia and America would be extremely difficult and the cause of much resentment and shame. However, for Mary and her siblings their possessions in America were evermore exciting.

In our days of affluence in Russia we had been accustomed to upholstered parlors, embroidered linen, silver spoons and candlesticks, goblets of gold, kitchen shelves shining of copper and brass ... And yet we were impressed with our new home and its furniture ... [it was] because these wooden chairs and pans were American charis and pans that they shown glorious in our eyes. (1471)

They didn't care that they had so little, and what they did have was raggedy and broken. It was the simple fact that the items were American that brought their value higher than any of the possessions they had in Russia. When people come to America, they come in search of a better life for themselves and their family. Living in squalor doesn't necessarily seem to fulfill that goal. But what Antin expresses in her text is that it was never about the physical for her family. The chair and the pans are not what was important. It was the idea that these chairs and pans represent the real reason they came to America - the very real opportunity for life and its freedoms.

Back in Russia, Mary and her siblings were told that everything in America was free. This was the first promise to be fulfilled when they emigrated. They found freedom in the little things. As Antin remembers "Everything was free ... Light was free; the streets were as bright as a synagogue on a holy day." (1472) This little comment about light being free holds a much

deeper meaning into the freedoms they would not have been able to experience in Russia. Of course, light is free everywhere, but Antin equates light with the joy and celebration of a religious holiday. This connection she draws opens up the conversation about the basic right to religious freedom that her family and many others were denied back in Russia, but granted in America. *The Promised Land* is riddled with small details like chairs, pans, and light, that on the very surface seem to just be a product of childhood excitement. However, it is within these seemingly insignificant details that Antin comments on the heavy topic of the basic human rights they sought out in coming to America.

Once in America, Antin underwent many changes. She had to adapt to a completely new environment by the way of learning a new language, social norms and behavior, making new friends, and even changing or Americanizing her name from Maryashe or Mashke to Mary. Antin recalls that “with our despised immigrant clothing we shed also our impossible Hebrew names.” (1473) Again Antin provides us with a metaphor for her larger point. It became clear to her that in coming to America the promise of life had been recognized, but in order for that promise to be completely fulfilled, she needed to adapt to her new environment as much as possible. Thus, through her name change we not only see the expulsion of her “impossible Hebrew name” but the expulsion of the impossibilities of life in Russia as well. Her name served as a reminder of the dehumanisation and humiliation of her people and her life back in Russia. If she were to keep her Hebrew name, it is almost as if she would never be able to escape the sentiments of her old country that made living impossible and degraded her as a human being.

Mary Antin’s writing style in *The Promised Land* is interesting because even though the piece is very reflective on her experience coming to America, it offers little reflection from her adult, more mature point of view. She tells the story with childlike wonder and excitement for America even though as an adult her perspective of her immigrant narrative should be less idealistic and more realistic. This brings about the thought that *The Promised Land* offers a false view of the characteristically sad, difficult, and discouraging, immigrant narrative. Antin

acknowledges her over enthusiastic perspective as a child, as well as in adulthood. She notes: "I am wearily aware that I am speaking in extreme figures, in superlatives. I wish I knew some other way to render the mental life of the immigrant child of reasoning age." (1475) It is Antin's devotion to innocence and anticipation of the immigrant narrative of a child that helps us understand the severity of the living situation in Russia versus that of America. Antin writes about details. She focusses on the little things that could be disregarded as insignificant to the larger narrative, but rather it is those very details that are the substantive base of the narrative.

It is the details like the chairs, pans, light, and names, that show us the reality of Antin's situation and the tragedy she had to face. The details uncover the simple and unsettling truth that, if the Antin's were to stay in Russia, they would have missed out on the joys of all the little things due to their likely unfortunate and untimely demise. This story doesn't just ring true for the Antin family. It is important and reminiscent for many families that escaped religious persecution and found relief in America, including my own. Mine was one of the families that escaped Russia in the early 1900s before WWII and made the tireless journey to America, settling in New York. With their new name, given to them at Ellis Island, my great great grandmother and her family were able to make a life in the country that they truly believed had streets paved with gold and air thick with possibilities. Through *The Promised Land* Antin crafted a sentiment universal to all people about basic human rights. She allowed people to see the importance of freedom and the very basic right to live without fear or threat, fully proving the truth and substance behind the phrase: "America, the land endless of possibilities."