O Great Beginning: Through the Ashes to the Masses

Louise Julia Cavallo

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O Great Beginning
Through the Ashes to the Masses

by

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Abstract

The theme of death as a catalyst for the protagonist’s political awakening at the end of *Jews Without Money* has never been evaluated as a central idea in Michael Gold’s autobiographical novel. This paper focuses on Gold’s obsession with death through each chapter and how he systematically draws death closer and closer into his own family enclave, until the symbols of death become the symptoms of a decaying society.

Critics through the decades have not recognized the continuity of death as presented in this text. Alfred Kazin, Alan Wald, Marcus Klein, even Michael Folsom, who had a first-hand relationship with Gold, limit their evaluation to individual chapters, all with the intent of dismissing Mikey’s sudden conversion to social revolution in the last few paragraphs because, in their opinion, there is no consistent theme present in the text. Their prejudiced criticism may have been caused by Michael Gold’s commitment to a proletarian literature and a communist agenda that he maintained throughout his life. He was not regarded seriously as a literary artist, and therefore his novel may have not been considered worthy of serious appraisal.

From the stranger in the alley to the crumbled body of his sister, Gold, in each episodic chapter, addresses death and how it affects the community. From ambivalence to heartfelt sorrow, the community has the potential to band together to change the society and create a new culture based on equality for all, but, as Gold reinforces, lack the organization and commitment to change their condition. For the author, death then
becomes a rhetorical devise to rid the world of the current capitalist society and replace it with a new proletarian society – “a garden for the human spirit.” From an alley between the steaming tenements, death removes one of nameless men who prey on each other in the night. Death removes one of many prostitutes who ply their disrespectful trade in full view of the moral members of the community. Death removes two unsupervised children, one at play and one at work as a warning that children are not immune to death’s grasp. Death removes the sick and abused animals that share the space of the ghetto. Death removes religious in the form of a Rabbi. Death removes the menial worker who slaves day in and day out in an airless, lightless room. Gold removes all the icons that represent the helpless poor – those “bound for nowhere” – and replaces them with a vision of hope for a future generation.

Gold’s use of death as a recurrent motif is central to the text and although critics overlook this continuity, Gold did impact the 1930s’ literary community with the book’s success. A recovery of the study of proletarian literature in the twenty-first century has revived interest in proletarian literature of the 1930s – in particular Jews Without Money. New investigation of the text without prejudice reveals that beneath the surface of a simple vibrant, and colorful story, Michael Gold rhetorically buries all the obstacles that stand in the way of a new society for the masses.
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The Theme of Death

Esther is dead and Mikey, her brother, is numb. This numbness is not his alone; it spreads through his family, spills out into the hallways of their tenement, and down into the streets below. Death is the unavoidable consequence of life, and whether it is perpetrated or a result of the natural cycle of life, the survivors live with an emptiness and may question their own mortality. When death takes the life of a child, the survivors must address the anger, pain, and occasional guilt that consume them. In *Jews Without Money*, Michael Gold uses the theme of death as a central motif in depicting the psychological and social disorder that is an ever-present affair on the Lower East Side. Esther’s death is the final insult to those who ask nothing of an unkind and unjust society and becomes for Mikey justification for challenging a capitalist society that chooses not to address the social problems of its lowest denominator, the working poor. Each death that Gold addresses, whether it is a violent death, a suicide, or an act of nature, reinforces his claim that a new social order is necessary to relieve the suffering of the masses. Gold writes, “We cling to the old culture, and fight for it against ourselves. But it must die” (PA Gold 62). This quote is from Gold’s essay “Towards Proletarian Art”, chapter title, “The Apocalypse” written in 1921, in which he already had formulated the idea of an economic destruction many years before *Jews Without Money* was published, and he writes about his visions for beauty arising out of the “ruins of capitalism” – similar to the “garden of the human spirit.” He transfers this destructive idea into *Jews Without Money* through Mikey who sees the old-world culture on a daily basis in his home and as he travels through his neighborhood; they are the mirror of himself, the helpless. There is no place for the past; it is a new future that must replace the decay. Without death, there
cannot be a rebirth, which fulfills Gold’s ultimate goal, and his novel is layered with examples of not only death but the reaction of the observers to support his proposal. He subtly builds upon each death until he sacrifices the last icon of innocence and purity, Esther. With her death, Mikey’s entire family unit splinters and the smallest glimmer of hope for a successful life is shattered. The anger, the bitterness, and frustration that accompanies this final assault is the impetus for Mikey’s transformation. Experienced through the eyes of a child, each death has a significant value in the overall education of Mikey Gold and his ultimate conversion to the proletarian movement. “For out of our death shall arise glories, and out of the final corruption of this old civilization we have loved shall spring the new race – the Supermen (PA Gold 62). For Mikey, revolution is not an instant revelation; it is nurtured until it explodes into a consuming rapture.

The theme of death is incredibly obvious throughout the text, but for some reason generally overlooked because Gold does not intentionally emphasize its existence, but treats it as a part of the cacophony of the streets. My intent it to reveal and analyze how Gold saturates the text with recurrent examples of death and how he labors to turn the cacophony of the streets into a harmonious drone of motion in the community, drawing the reader into a false sense of comfort, without ever suggesting that anything is awry. For instance, in the first chapter, Mikey describes how the boys spend their day. The paragraphs are full of action and he describes the usual games street kids play, such as spinning tops, chasing cars and trucks, stealing apples from pushcarts, throwing a dead cat into a store. Throwing a dead cat usually is not associated with child’s play, but the reader does not even think to question why these children are playing with a dead cat
because Gold’s rhythm does not pause. He moves on quickly to a more entertaining
subject – the prostitutes.

By the end of chapter one, a man is shot in the alley, but again, Gold creates an
atmosphere of joy circumventing this violence as friends and neighbors celebrate
Mikey’s fifth birthday. Each subsequent death follows a similar pattern. Gold dedicates
the first part of chapter 20 “Blood Money” to the joy and excitement of being able to ride
on the funeral coach. “I liked to go on funerals with the Jewish coach drivers. What
glorious summer fun” (270). By the end of the chapter, Esther is dead. The reader
becomes so caught up in the constant motion of the characters and the street activity and
immune to any language that may indicate a change of tone. This is when Gold strikes at
the unassuming reader. Gold shatters and destabilizes the reader’s assumed path of
continuity in the story by turning Mikey’s joyous ride into a prelude of Mikey’s misery.
He repeats this pattern. All the deaths are sudden and unexpected with the exception of
the Rabbi who Gold paralyses, a living death.

The words associated with death are constant throughout the text. References are
evident in every chapter except two. Beside the repetitiveness of words such as dead,
death, dying, murder, suicide, kill which are mentioned more that eighty-five times,
Mikey is fascinated with the word corpse which is repeated more than thirty times in
seven chapters, funerals – thirteen times in eight chapters, and blood more than thirty
times in eleven chapters. While many critics do isolate and attempt to interpret the deaths
two children, Esther and Joey, they all fail to make a connection with not only previous
chapters but the last one as well. This is also true with the death of another child, Joey. I
will discuss these two deaths in depth and the consensus of the critics’ evaluations of
them as they relate to the entire novel further on in this paper.

*Jews Without Money* was published in 1930 when Gold was thirty-six years old.
He had already established himself as a Marxist essayist and a proponent of communism.
His call for a proletarian literature written by the workingman for the workingman would
be his legacy. He coined the phrase “proletarian realism” and established a nine-point
guideline of what would make a good proletarian text. Gold worked diligently in
creating a persona that reflected his ideal of the proletarian author. In doing so, he
sometimes alienated those in the literary field who would question his intellectual and
technical ability as a writer and many considered him to be a man of little literary talent
and one of great theatrical presence. Leslie Fiedler called *Jews Without Money* “typically
bad prose” (5) and Alfred Kazin in the Introduction of *Jews Without Money* says, “*Jews
Without Money* is the work of a man without the slightest literary finesse” and Gold
nothing more than a “primitive” (Gold 3). But James Bloom writing in the 90s claims,
“Even when sympathetic critics discuss Gold’s work as fiction, they often overlook its
textual richness, its verbal density, its complex intellectual ambition” (29). Surveying
different critics who attempted to define Gold work was arduous. Depending on when an
essay was written and the essayist’s association with Gold determined his attitude not
only about *Jews Without Money* but also Gold’s own personal and political convictions.
Some used this platform to attack Gold’s Marxist attitude and his association with
communist groups. Others assessed the book on its proletarian merits and literary
adaptability. Critics writing after Gold’s death depended largely on the comments of
others and spend a considerable amount of time citing other works to confirm a theory
presented.

Michael Folsom was a personal collaborator with Gold on Gold’s anthology, Mike
Gold: A Literary Anthology, and wrote candidly on Gold. He portrays Gold as a man
who was a rebel in the literary community and one not afraid to speak his mind. He
presents a man who molded himself in the image of what he perceived a writer should
look like, talk like, and act like. Daniel Aaron quotes both Max Eastman and Joseph
Freeman as saying that Gold transformed himself into his ideal of the proletarian artist
(Aaron 86). Gold fashioned himself as a bohemian free spirit who saw the world from
his street up to their avenue. He did not have the formal education of many of his peers
but he had the education of the ghetto, which for him was an important ingredient in
designing a literature that would focus on people and places that could never be
envisioned by the privileged.

Even though Kazin’s introduction is somewhat harsh in assessing Gold’s novel,
he makes a point that ultimately represents the entire body of the text. He writes,
“Everything is a single ‘shot,’ as in the silent moves. And just as the ‘silents’ depended
on one immediate show of extravagant emotion after another, so Gold gives us a
succession of uncomplicated words, uncomplicated feelings, and rudimentary behavior
that reach for what is the most basic in life” (Gold 4). Each shot that Gold takes is a
permanent image in Mikey’s mind and it fulfills one of Gold’s goals as “cinema in
words”. It is the photos of death that never go away – the cat sniffing the dead corpse of
the man in the alley – Mikey’s comments: “But I have never forgotten it, for it burned
into my mind the memory of my fifth birthday” (24); Suzie the prostitute crumpled on the
floor outside of Mikey’s flat, ravaged by her consumption of carbonic acid; the headless body of little Joey Cohen, Ganuf, the horse, whose fly-covered swollen carcass lies in the street; Reb Samuel’s stroke-induced paralysis, a living death; the cancer-ridden tailor sitting cross-legged on a table with a dirty rag around his throat toiling at his profession — Mikey’s comments: “I never forgot that scene” (265); Esther’s broken body in the arms of a grocer who delivered her to her parents; All of these images are a part of Mikey’s childhood and become an album of reflection. But it is the reader who sees the result of his despair when Gold creates a photograph of hell on earth as Mikey becomes one of the boys on the assembly line in a gas mantle factory. Mikey joined the boys who “stood before a series of ovens in which sixty gas jets blazed” (308). Each picture relates an episode and Diane Levenberg suggests, “Like Twain, Gold uses the episodic plot to narrate the story of the development of any American street hero” (237). She also indicates that the construction of the text in this way allows the reader to see the character of Mikey develop his worth within the community one story at a time.

The origin of Jews Without Money comes from sketches Gold began writing a decade earlier, some of which were published in daily publications. Several critics suggest that Jews Without Money is nothing more that a compilation of these sketches without any connecting thread to link the story together. In “Jews Without Money as Art”, Richard Tuerk examines some of Gold’s sketches and identifies the sources from which Gold drew his inspiration. Over the years Gold was able to refine and rewrite these sketches and the outcome is an interesting look at how, perhaps unknowingly, Gold arranged his sketches into a pattern of examples that would ultimately support the continuing theme of death.
Gold begins his narrative by presenting an overall picture of Mikey's world, his neighborhood and its inhabitants. Mikey is born into a vertical neighborhood with tenements placed one next to another and immigrant family upon immigrant family stacked four stories high. He is introduced to a hybrid culture – his parents’ culture based in a pastoral setting, old world values, old world religion, old world language; the culture of the assimilated immigrant who knows the value of Americanization; and Mikey’s native-born American culture, one that is developing through his interaction with parents, teachers, role models, and most impressive, his peers. The child is expected to bridge the differences between each group, especially the parents who depend on the child to tutor them in American behavior and American traditions. As much as the child depends on his parents for stability, the parents too must depend on their children to guide them in understanding American society. These children of immigrants, straddling multiple cultures, naturally reject some of their parents’ old-world values but do learn how to modify their behavior to function within both cultures. The parents strive to pass on to their foreign (American) children, the bond that has held the Jews together for generations. Here in the vertical neighborhood of Chrystie Street, Mikey relives his childhood where he defines his identity, assimilation, and ambivalence through death.

Gold balances each death with a lesson that may not appear immediately, but reveals itself in subsequent chapters. He links events to suggest that every incident is relevant to the whole complex environment of the Lower East Side. The deaths that Mikey experiences are not always human, but he is touched by them nonetheless. Regardless of whether it is a person, a cat, dog, or even a blade of grass, the impact drives Mikey deeper and deeper into a melancholy that can only be reversed by a total rejection
of the society into which he was born. The repetition of death woven throughout the text is vibrant. Gold uses his own recipe of “swift action, clear form, the direct line, cinema in words” (PR Gold 207). Each death isolates an aspect of what is wrong with the society Mikey lives in, and collectively they support Mikey’s proposal of change. From the stranger in the alleyway to Esther being run over by a truck, Gold builds his case one victim at a time.
Death in the Ghetto

Within the first twelve paragraphs of the narrative, Mikey describes his world as a cacophony of sights and sounds. Chaos rules the streets where Mikey lives and the reader is caught up with the noises of the streets, the “hundreds” of prostitutes roaming the sidewalks, Mikey and his street gang, and a lovely party for his fifth birthday. The first encounter with death, the dead cat the boys throw into the Chinese laundry, becomes almost forgotten as the reader’s attention focuses on the activities on the street and no one questions why these children are playing with a dead cat. Mark Schoening in “T.S. Eliot Meets Michael Gold: Modernism and Radicalism in Depression-Era American Literature” find that Jews Without Money is an exercise in exposing the suffering that the children face in trying to straddle two worlds. He comments on “the mindless cruelty of the young boys” and attributes it to their detachment from the heritage and the result of their current environment (3).

Gold challenges the reader’s conception of what the ideal childhood is by creating a likeable five year old whose life in his environment transforms him from an innocent child to an experienced jaded adolescent within the span of five years. Mikey is ten when Esther dies.

Mikey’s first permanent memory of death occurs on his fifth birthday. Friends and neighbors have gathered at his family’s flat to celebrate, and as usual, those gathered reminisce about the old country in ways that reinforce their common heritage regardless of which village in whatever country they hail. They choose to retell memories, myths and legends that would hold them together in solidarity. One of the men describes the horror of the Russian pogrom and describes a rumor of blood libel in the village and the
aftermath. “I myself saw a peasant cut off my uncle’s head with an ax” (22). This is an impressive image to plant within the mind of a child, but initially for Mikey it is only a story, like the others that he is used to hearing from the adults. As the party continues, more stories are told of supernatural events that frighten as well as entertain the guests. “Bang, bang!” Everyone stops and runs to the window. “We saw two men with pistols. Bang, Bang! One man fell. A girl screamed... a cat... sniffed at the corpse” (23). The reaction from the party guests is minimal, a slight disruption to a lovely party. “But I have never forgotten it, for it burned into my mind the memory of my fifth birthday” (24).

From a child’s perspective, he must evaluate the emotions that engulf him from being startled by the gunshot, the scream, and then seeing the corpse. Should it be fear or anger, or will he take his cues from the adults around him? They are his role models and their ambivalence demonstrates to Mikey that safety exists among their families, friends, and neighbors and will accept this incident as part of living in the ghetto. “The American police would take care of it” (24). There is no fear in the group – only distain for the interruption – and the only tragedy for them is that it has disrupted their gathering. Their ambivalence is Mikey’s first lesson because the value of a life is not important if it is a stranger, and as long as it does not impact anyone of them within their circle, it is to be ignored. For Mikey, it is an imprint that will follow him forever, not just because it occurred on his birthday, but because if this is what the world looks like at five years old, what does the future hold for him? He measures his time in days, and each day he becomes more and more ambivalent, just like the adults. At five years old he has recognized death and it is something that consumes his world from this day forward.
This first death is anonymous – just a stranger, a nameless body carted away by
an ambulance. Each subsequent death will impact Mikey in a more personal way. Gold
now will name the victims so as to reposition Mikey’s perspective from ambivalence to
recognition to action. Since the events in each chapter do not appear to be in
chronological order, the reader may assume that the deaths are not sequential, but are
related to the importance Mikey places on each one. Gold develops a pattern of effect
that supports the eventual disillusionment of Mikey Gold. Each subsequent death
becomes closer to his own inner circle of friends and family, and each death becomes
more and more painful, until Mikey is consumed by a rage that is unquenchable. In the
final death scene, Esther, too, will leave her home in an ambulance.

The second death is the suicide of Suzie the prostitute. Gold dedicates this
chapter to the girls on the Lower East Side, who have nothing but their flesh in which to
earn a living. Suzie represents the wasted lives of the unemployed girls who had neither
income nor family to help support them. They are forced by their plight or cajoled by the
numerous pimps into the streets where their talents are welcomed, and where they are
able to sustain a meager existence. “She was the prettiest girl on the street, vivid and
slim, with the dark fanatic beauty of a prophet’s daughter. She should have been popular,
but was the most hated girl on the street” (31). Mikey sees first hand what the life of a
prostitute can amount to. His mother, Katie, who by no means condones their lifestyles,
is always kind to these women, and Suzie becomes a frequent visitor in the Gold home.
Death this time reveals itself not an alleyway, but right at his front door. Suzie drinks
carbonic acid and comes to the Gold home to show Katie she will follow her advise and
leave the streets. As she groans in front of Mikey’s door, Herman opens it and the sight
of her writhing in agony is another imprint on the brain of a small child. “She died the next day in the hospital” (32). Mikey knew his second victim, and death is not as distant as the first. As the first death removes an undesirable menace from the streets, the death of Suzie also removes an undesirable element from the neighborhood.

Regardless of his mother’s tolerance of the prostitutes, Mikey despises them and the boys in his gang find delight in torturing them, just as they torture the stray animals. Being beaten by his mother for teasing a prostitute infuriates Mikey and he says, “It was my world; it was my mother’s world, too. We had to live in it, and learn what it chose to teach us” (19). The death of Suzie teaches Mikey that life without promise, without hope, and without a future is not worth living. Death for Suzie brings her peace. But prostitutes are not the only teachers in Mikey’s neighborhood, he has a large contingent of teachers ready to advise him.

Mikey’s world is filled with a sordid group of role models, one of them is Harry the Pimp, and even though he feeds off the flesh of others, he represents power to Mikey. “Next to Jack Wolf, the saloon keeper, he was our pattern of American success” (29). Harry’s daily presence reinforces that the American dream can come true. He has everything that Mikey would eventually like to have, handsome clothing, powerful political ties, a gambling house, and the most important of all “perfect English”. The English of America – the language that will mask his immigrant and presumed low class status. Total assimilation will reward him with riches that were reserved for only a native-born American. While Harry attributes his wealth to the fact that he struggled, once he learned English he was fully assimilated. He makes a point of telling fellow Jews how they too can reap the rewards of this country as soon as they abandon their
stubborn old world identity and adapt to a new land and a new language. What he does not tell them is that they must also abandon their moral values. Mikey may make the connection that Harry’s profession of recruiting prostitutes for his own profit is not a moral and noble profession, but the idea of wealth supersedes his compassion for the “working” girl. Mikey sees that the girls are a commodity, have no value, and their abundance on the streets ensures that Harry will have a continual supply of product to support his American capitalist lifestyle. What Mikey does see on a continual basis is Harry’s kindness, which endears Mikey to him. He gives him a book of English fairytales which Mikey and his sister, Esther, cherish. It is Mikey’s first book and the beginning of his love of reading. Mikey credits Harry for teaching him a valuable lesson that he must assimilate if he is to succeed and the first step is learning the language perfectly.

The two previous deaths lead up to the day that little Joey Cohen dies. From the death of nameless stranger to Suzie the prostitute, Mikey remains the narrator, removed from any personal relationship with either of them. But with the death of Joey, Gold’s rage is finally revealed and he begins to pour out his feelings through his character. In “Towards Proletarian Art”, Gold speaks from his heart when he describes how delicate life is in the ghetto. “What is Life? Life for us has been the tenement that bore and molded us through years of meaningful pain” (Gold Anthology 65). This pain reaches out and touches all members of the community from the victims to the survivors. Physical violence permeates Mikey’s life. His first encounter with outside authority comes from the public school where the teacher washes his mouth out with soap because Mikey curses at her. He has no respect for authority and feels free to act out his own
aggression on the teacher. In retribution, Nigger punches the teacher in the nose. “The East Side, for children, was a world plunged in eternal war” (Gold 42). Gold employs a visceral rhythmic convention of violent words to describe what injuries Mikey suffers during their turf battles: three holes in his head, black eyes, puffed lips. Nigger: face bloody, eyes puffed, an animal. The cops beat them, curse them, growl, and chase them. A cop slams Nigger with his club across the spine and calls him a bastard (43-45). Mikey describes the “massacre” of the Forsythe Street boys. They carried weapons: tin swords, sticks, blackjacks. “Bottles were thrown, heads cut open”. In the end they won! “The old maid teachers would have been horrified to see us practice their principal teaching: War. War” (48). Mikey wears his armor on the inside.

Gold embraces the violence of the streets, being shaped by it himself, and provides Mikey with a circus of characters and adventures to act out his aggression. Hoffman suggests that “for the child, the war image represents excitement and adventure” (74). Mikey is a street kid. When speaking about the Delancy Street lot the boys play in he says, “It was there I vomited over my first tobacco, and first marveled at the profundities of sex” (46). The cops chase them and take their money while playing craps. Nigger teaches them the “stealing” game where they rob the peddlers of their fruit. His fun is sometimes at the expense of innocent people. His education comes from his peers, and he travels with a gang where he learns life’s cruel lessons. The empty lots full of debris are his playground; the river his swimming pool. Gold relives his life as an urban child, and it is only in retrospect can he look at back with disgust and anger because he was cheated out of an idealistic childhood.
Mikey’s territory expands from the Bowery on the west to the East River and his daily excursions explore all the areas that make up the Lower East Side. Gangs were very prevalent on the Lower East Side where they terrorized each other’s neighborhoods. “Gangs were even an “organized society within a culture” (O’Connor 50). Eric Homberg adds that “Territorial battles between the Forsythe Street Boys and the Chrystie Streeters, ... took place within the territory of the Eastmans, a gang... that commanded more than twelve hundred warriors and ruled the territory between the East River and the Bowery below 14th Street” (174). Mikey was born into this life. At the age of five, Mikey already belonged to a street gang. These gangs were notorious on the Lower East Side. In an interview published in the *New York Tribune*, September 2, 1900, between a sociologist and a boy of the Lower East Side, he asks the boy about the gangs. The boy identifies three types of gangs that roam the streets. The first group he calls the “really tough gang”. They are the fighters and shake down other boys for money. They play craps, smoke and curse. They are in trouble with the police and can usually be found hanging around the docks. The second type of gang is the “flirty gangs”. They would hang on street corners and tease and abuse the people of the street. The third type of gang is the “social gangs”. These are the kids who want playmates and are the kids who play ball and other games to pass the time. (Shoener 124). In a University Settlement Society Report in 1900, the “tough gang” was also known as grafters or pickpockets and their ages ranged from six or eight to twenty years old (Howe 61). For Mikey this is his family away from home. He speaks about the same kind of “tough gang”. “In the East Side school of crime and poverty these were the apt pupils. They never worked, played pool all day, or drank in saloons. Some were cheap pimps, other cheap thieves or
This is the hierarchy of the streets and the little ones learned who actually ruled it. “Gyp the Blood, who burned in the chair for the killing of the gambler Rosenthal, was in my class at public school. Any of us might have ended in the electric chair with him. I am not proud I escaped, it was only my luck” (125). Gold brings reality into the text by using real people as friends of the fictional Mikey. Gyp the Blood (bouncer and gangster) was a real person along with the likes of Kid Twist (gang leader), Yuski Nigger (“king of the horse poisoners”), Big Jack Zelig (gang leader), Dopey Benny (leader of labor union strong-arm gangs), and Kid Dropper (gang leader). Crime and corruption in the ghetto was increasing and the community leaders spoke up against this deterioration of life being caused by the sons of immigrant Russian Jews (Goren 138). It is not that Mikey could really distinguish between right and wrong at this time because this is the neighborhood where he grows up. No one stops these gangs. People continue their daily lives, so in the eyes of a child, if no one challenges these gangsters, they must be an acceptable part of the community. Mikey learns early in life that gang membership means being able to defend oneself against a member of another gang. “Blood poured from my nose. One eye swelled. As last I ran away” (Gold 26). This was not even a fight with an enemy. This was a fight with the leader of his gang, Nigger, who has taken Mikey to discover the reward the men received for fifty cents from the prostitutes. Mikey has little respect for the prostitutes to begin with, but actually witnessing a sexual act and denying that his mother could ever participate in something that the prostitutes do is beyond his comprehension. He is merely defending his mother’s honor and shows bravery by taking on the best fighter around.
Mikey’s generation creates a new American culture, born of violence and poverty, infused with Eastern Europeans, Irish and Italian Catholics, Jews, and Chinese. He understandably cannot relate to his parents’ culture because their history is a collection of stories from a place that he cannot imagine. He has learned from example that the community at large does nothing to stop the violence that occurs regularly. Even the old Jews throw their hands up in disgust over the prostitutes, but still do nothing to remove the prostitutes and derelicts from the street. The adults isolate themselves because of previous persecution in the old country, and any attention they draw to themselves could possibly be harmful to all. They will not risk the little freedom they have accumulated for the sake of one, and protection for them is looking away from the filth and the violence. But Mikey and his friends will defend their little piece of real estate and they all become warriors of the block. The boys learn their place within the hierarchy of their gang. They pick a leader who they trust and each boy has a rank within the group. Mikey calls their leader Nigger, George Washington. He is their president, their general, their idol. As Mikey reminisces about his own gang, he fast-forwards to the present and tells the reader what these little boys have grown up to be, but clearly denotes that “some of the boys are dead” – dead because not everyone makes it out of the war alive. Soldiers die, sometimes in battle, sometimes by friendly fire. Poor Jack Korbin dies when Nigger was teaching the boys to swim in the river. He drowns. Mikey was lucky—he didn’t (39).

All the previous violence leads up to the death of Joey Cohen. Joey’s death was the result of restless children with no supervision who were allowed to roam the streets freely, creating their own limitations. In discussing this episode, Marcus Klein says that “there has been nothing in the novel to motivate such grief, and the observation that Joey
had been “sacrificed” is patently absurd (187). I would argue that Joey’s death is a motivating force behind Gold’s story. From the very first death Mikey relates, he is removed from it because it was a stranger. The second, a prostitute, holds no value to him either, and Jack Korbin who drowns in the river is not strong enough to survive gang life. But Joey is brave—Joey is his buddy—Joey is dead. Gold makes Joey an icon of an innocent life, the future American generation, wasted. So Klein’s assessment of this death is absurd; he does not see that this is not a nameless victim in a gunfight in an alley. This is not the suicide of a prostitute. This is the death of innocence. This is the continual ambivalence of his community who does not have the courage to speak up against their enemies who are a society that chooses not to acknowledge their existence and does not value their contribution to this industrial nation. Play for Joey was hitching a ride on a cart. If there was a playground for the children, perhaps Joey would not be dead. Just like the story the guest relates at Mikey’s birthday party of the peasant who beheads a Jew, Joey’s beheading comes back to haunt Mikey. He now has a story that matches the guest’s story, except this Jew does not die at the hands of a foreign enemy; he dies from an invisible enemy that no one chooses to identify. Mikey calls it a “horrible joke” because he cannot understand why it happens. Joey did not die of any childhood disease, unless you consider living in the ghetto a disease. If Joey had grown up in a conducive environment, perhaps he would have had a playground to play in instead of the busy streets. Joey could have been killed in a more heroic fashion, perhaps in battle with other gangs or drowning in the river like Jack Korbin, but Gold uses this tragedy as an example of a preventable accident and to suggest that Joey’s life is dispensable. The pervasive danger of the tenements holds little value to the
neighborhood and the children who swarm in the streets. Joey becomes just another statistic. Nigger is the only one annoyed at his death because now he has to reinforce to the other boys that fear is not an acceptable trait in the ghetto. He is their leader and demonstrates what is expected of each of them by jumping on the next cart to show that fear is not an option. Life continues in the ghetto.

Gold memorializes Joey’s death in the following chapter to impress upon the reader that Joey’s death is not to be dismissed as just another statistic of life on the streets. Mikey eulogizes Joey to illustrate that Joey was a person, a friend, a confidante. Joey’s resurrection begins on a wonderful day when the two boys have some money to spend. This is one of the joys of boyhood, listless days full of adventure. Their adventure turns dangerous when Joey is lured into an alley by a bum offering him five cents. Mikey describes the bum “as a corpse in the first week of decomposition” (58). Unfortunately, for the bum, Joey has no qualms about screaming which brings neighborhood men and women running. Someone knifes the bum and then the mob of spectators that has gathered beats him senseless. Here Gold shows that the community will take action when threatened, but it is a brutal action and a primitive one, and one directed against their own. A child has been saved for another day in the battle of the streets. In this scene, Gold begins with a pleasant adventure, but in effect, he wants to show that there are no pleasantries for the kids of the street. Mikey says of that day, “Never would Joey or I quite trust a stranger again. Never would we walk without fear through the East Side” (60). But the reader knows that Mikey was not there to save Joey from the horse cart, maybe that was Joey’s unlucky fate. He was to be their saint. He was brave and he was innocent. He was one of the kids that would have succeeded if
given the chance, but like so many others, he was struck down for no apparent reason other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Joey was the ultimate role model for Mikey. Joey represented everything that Mikey may have become. It was Joey who "put the notion in my head to becoming a doctor" (49). Mikey’s dreams of a future dies that day with Joey. Of course, Mikey does not realize this at the time, but in retrospect as Mikey remembers the events of his childhood, the death of Joey is the death of Mikey’s ambition to be more than a laborer for a few pennies a day. Mikey lost more than a friend that day, he lost the inspiration to become successful.

Mikey’s deathwatch does not limit itself to humans. He sees suffering all around him. “Often while swimming I had to push dead swollen dogs and vegetables from my face” (39). The cats are always around; they share the ghetto with the people; their pitiful emaciated bodies are a constant reminder of poverty. He is very sympathetic to them but at the same time, tortures them just like all the other kids. These cats are their toys. “Kittens died quietly in every corner, rheumy-eyed, feeble and old before they had even begun to learn to play. There were too many kittens” (64). Cats are even used as weapons in this neighborhood. “A gang of kids chased it [sightseeing bus], and pelted rocks, garbage, dead cats, and stale vegetables at the frightened sightseers” (55).

Gold goes beyond generalizing the existence of the awfully cruel and intolerable conditions that the animals share with their human inhabitants and focuses on the effect one animal in particular has on Mikey. Gold attempts to show a compassionate Mikey who in his everyday actions on the streets could be just as heartless as his peers. Gold emphasizes in this chapter a general attitude of disregard for life that is prevalent in the community, but Mikey still displays a small amount of kindness. The suffering of the
working animals in the city is enhanced by the cruelty of not only nature, but man. For Mikey, the death of Ganuf the horse shows an intimate relationship that he has developed with this animal based on its helplessness. Upon Ganuf’s death, Mikey’s grief is compounded because he has always shown the horse uncompromising compassion even though it is tortured by its owners. He hopes his kindness toward Ganuf will ease its pain. He was “always neglected, and dirty, fly-bitten, gall ridden” (68). Mikey says, “I used to feel sorry for my poor horse, and imagine there were tears in his eyes” (70). Although he was not able to protect him from those who beat him, but he could be a friend. When Ganuf dies, the flies make a feast of him. The children “leaped on his swollen body, poked sticks in the vents. They pried open the eyelids, and speculated on those sad, glazed big eyes. They plucked hair from the tail with which to weave good-luck rings.” Again Mikey laments on his death and says, “I stood there helplessly. I wanted to cry for my poor old Ganuf. Had God made Ganuf? Then why had He let Ganuf die?” (70). This begins Mikey’s search for a god that could relieve him of a growing pain in his soul. First Joey and now Ganuf – Death is now taking Mikey’s friends from him.

Mikey’s faith in the god of his parents is questionable. Katie keeps telling him that God made everything. If God makes everything including Ganuf, how could God let him die? There is too much pain in this little boy’s life to justify that his existence is dictated by an unseen force that tortures the helpless. Mikey’s mother is a devout religious woman who puts her faith in an unseen god and always has an answer for him. But Mikey is not satisfied with her responses and begins to question who is God, where is God, and why does he allow all this pain and suffering. He is taught that God will send a
Messiah to save the world, but for an impatient child, the wait is unbearable. It is Herman, Mikey’s father, who believes that it is time for Mikey to learn the true meaning of God from a professional Hebrew teacher. He wants his son to become initiated in the rites of his religion.

Reb Moisha represents God? Mikey is astonished! “He was a foul smelling, emaciated beggar.” His black coat was stained with grease, snuff, old food stains and mucus from his constant nose blowing. The smell of onions was a constant aroma from his beard. He beat the boys. “He maintained no real discipline in his hell-hole of Jewish piety” (65). Mikey goes on further to describe the behavior of the boys and in general what the Chaider was like. He says, “There was a smell like dead-dog from the broken toilet in the hall” (66). Death in the form of “dead-dog” whether intentional or not filters into the text. It seems that while he is trying to concentrate on his narrative, Gold never forgets the sites and smells that assaulted him every day as a child. Even in religious school, a place of God, he smells death. Who is responsible for all this death? God is.

Now Mikey has a dilemma. He must thank God in a special language for making everything in the world and then contemplate why God would make everything only to have it tortured and killed. This is a very difficult idea for a child to understand, but Mikey has been taught that God and religion are an important part of his family and community’s life, so by default it must be right. If his parents and Harry the Pimp and Jack the salon keeper are interested in God, then he must exist because these are the Mikey’s role models. But in the mind of a child, God has failed so Mikey must recreate him into an icon that he can believe in, someone who will avenge the wrongs of society
as he sees it. Gold leaves the reader to contemplate Mikey’s dilemma and moves to a more sociable narrative.

Gold assaults the reader’s senses for the first five chapters by describing a place that parallels a hellish existence. There is no escaping the throngs of people, the gangs, the prostitutes, the drunks and perverts, the bugs, the vermin, and the sewage-filled river. Mikey is so confused with life in the outside world, but he does get some relief on the inside one. During the next five chapters, Gold relieves the reader from the constant turmoil of the streets. Unlike the streets, Mikey’s home life is full of love and affection. Mikey’s battlefield is in the streets and his home is his sanctuary. Mikey introduces his father, Herman, and for the first time, Mikey’s words become soothing as he spins a tale of his father’s life from the time he is engaged to be married in Romania until he meets and marries Mikey’s mother. Herman’s dreams for success are never realized because of his own foolishness and misfortune, so he puts his faith in his children, Esther and Mikey. “Promise me one thing, my sweet son. Yes, poppa. Promise that you will become a doctor. Yes, poppa. Your momma and I will work our fingers off to make you a something. You will not be a pauper and worker like your unfortunate father. You must not play hookey from school, or go around with that Nigger! He is a bad boy and will come to a bad end” (122-3).

Sentimentality is gone. Within a few sentences, Gold manipulates his reader through his words by using “sweet” when addressing his son to “bad” when describing Nigger. Up to this point, Mikey’s street life is separate from his home life and his adventures are contained within his peer group. This is the first time that Herman acknowledges he is aware of his son’s activities and he warns him that he is destined for
trouble if he continues his relationship with Nigger. Mikey wastes no time in returning the reader to the thugs on the street: a grocery storekeeper was shot by cheap young thieves; a child was raped in a cellar, a poor little screaming girl; a bomb in an Italian's house" (135-136). He describes a community under siege – lawlessness rules. Just as Gold, in the first chapter, ends with someone being shot, he reinforces that guns are readily available and are used against local residents in addition to strangers in alleyways.

In previous chapters Gold has outlined the general demeanor of the way in which gangs operate on the Lower East Side. But when he returns the reader to his lament on death, his first choice reveals how: “Louis One Eye seized this roof and held it for his own, like a despot” (125). Louis is power and power rules with fear. As long as he maintains that fear among the neighbors, he will control his tenement. The neighborhood blames him for the havoc in the streets, but Mikey knows that he could not be responsible for all this destruction. He says, “He killed men. The State had turned a moody unhappy boy into this evil rattlesnake, that struck a deathblow at the slightest touch of man” (128-9). Gold reverses his position of victim death and comments now on one who initiates it. The death of Louis One Eye is important because it is the first time that Gold uses the cause and effect method to describe the cycle of death that revolves around him, from society's neglect to individual oblivion. Gold describes Louis as a child from a dysfunctional family. The frequent beatings of his mother by his father causes Louis to end the violence that is not ended by either his mother or the authorities. He is accused of throwing his father out the window. He kills for the first time, but for him it is justified. The authorities who choose to ignore the cause of the incident respond with swift action and incarcerate Louis in a reformatory. The effect delivers a child who
continues to be abused now by the system and his physical maiming by their hands creates a hardened child who will grow into a hardened criminal. In the end, his death by Nigger, who avenges his sister’s death, creates another criminal. Will Nigger be the next victim of retribution? The cycle continues.

Gold is thorough in his explanation of these thugs who under the threat of physical harm are able to control their tenements and terrorize the neighborhood. Many of them are enforcers for Tammany Hall and therefore have the protection of the politicians. These thugs are their strong-arms when needed so the police would not challenge them for fear of retribution. The power of this one person to control so many lives and to take away a community retreat, such as the roof, demonstrates the helplessness of the community to direct their lives reducing them to prisoners, similar to the control over them in the old country. Their presence is a powerful example of how people can rebel when pushed to the brink of frustration. When Mikey describes sleeping on the roof to escape the heat, he says, “We slept in pants and undershirt, heaped like corpses” – bodies upon bodies crammed onto the roof to escape the sweltering heat of their flats that choke them with the putrid odors of garbage and sewage – the stagnant air never moving. These are the images Gold wants us to feel as well as see. The description of bodies “heaped like corpses” envisions a lifeless, broken existence, one that should be filled with life, now lies still and empty.

A dangerous person who holds the roof hostage, just as his freedom was taken from him by the system, takes this last refuge from them. While Mikey hates Louis for the havoc that he creates within the tenement, he hates the system that created him even more (140). Louis is the product of the government’s attempt to reform these poor
abused children. Unfortunately the correction system provides little reform for the inmates, and when these youths are released, they return to the same environment from which they had come. The neighborhood is victimized again. In an article from the Forward (Yiddish socialist newspaper) published on April 18, 1904, the question of how to reform children is raised, “Should bad children be sent away or kept at home?” The article very simply explains to the readers that “hundreds of boys under 21” are sent away from home because they will not work and/or conform to what American society views as moral and social. It stresses the fact that the courts are crowded with cases involving children under 15 years old. The Forward’s advice to their readers is to monitor their children at home because if they are allowed to wander, there is a greater chance that they will perform some criminal act. “It is preferable that parents should suffer from their bad child” (Howe 62). Once again the community is encouraged to be complacent. But complacency will only last as long as the people believe the results will benefit themselves as well as their community.

Gold illustrates the faith he has in the masses and describes what happens when the complacent community becomes enraged to the point of rebellion. One day Louis tries to assault Mikey’s aunt on the roof and all looks bleak, but the neighbors rally to Mikey’s call and confront Louis on the roof. Louis pulls a gun of the congregation in an attempt to intimidate them, but to his surprise the neighbors find strength in each other’s support and stand united against Louis. There is a brief moment of solidarity knowing that each one of the roof-top mob could be Louis’ next victim. Mikey learns for the second time that there is hope in organizing the people as one, but it is only when there is a threat of physical violence that the community will rise to action. His first
remembrance was Joey’s encounter with a pedophile when the community rallied by a
cry for help. Mikey sees the power of the masses’ response twice, each for one
individual, but eventually Gold knows this power could evolve into a union of members
fighting collectively for the benefit of all. Until that time comes, vigilantes will eliminate
the offenders and remove them from the streets.

When Nigger’s sister Lily rebels at fifteen against her meager life and falls victim
to Louis One Eye’s prosperous way of life, Nigger is crushed. He along with his
avengers slash the throats of Louis’s pigeons up on “his” roof. “They fluttered their
wings as we murdered them, then lay silent and gory” (267). Mikey shows no remorse
about killing the pigeons because his loyalty to his comrade supersedes his compassion
for any living creature. There is a sense of satisfaction and pride in the retelling of this
incident which indicates that Mikey has a detached, remote side that will reveal itself
when Esther dies. Within five years Lily is dead of “the black syphilis”. “Seven years
later, when Nigger grew up, one of his first deeds as a gangster was to kill Louis One
Eye” (268). He is becoming hardened by life in the ghetto.

Gold makes it quite clear that death is a continual event not to be forgotten for a
moment throughout the text. There are more than eighty-five references to death
throughout the novel and Gold never ceases to reinforce its impact. Summer in the city is
cruel to everyone. The roof provides some relief but for the most part, there is no escape
from the oppressive heat. “The Jewish babies whimpered and died” (141). Just as Mikey
talks about the deaths taken in the heat of the summer, just as many are taken in the
winter. “Thousands of tuberculars and paralytics; a vast anemia and hunger; a world of
feebleness and of stomachs, livers, and lungs rotting away. Babies groaning and dying in
thousands. The funeral coaches rolled through the streets as frequently as the garbage wagons” (225). “Building a snow fort one morning, we boys dug out a litter of frozen kittens, and their mother. Other dogs and cats were frozen. Men and women too were found dead in hallways and on the docks. Mary Sugar Bum...was found half-naked, clutching a whiskey bottle in her blue claw. Horses...with broken legs, until a policeman arrived to shoot them” (242). These are the visions that Mikey remembers most vividly. “In an Irish home a dead baby lies wrapped in a towel on the kitchen table. There are too many bodies to be buried in Potter’s field. The city is forced to plant them in layers of three” (259-260). Again and again, Gold places these death scenes in between the dialogue sometimes forcefully and other times just matter-of-factly. The death of babies and the death of kittens are repeated several times. Death comes to the innocent unprovoked.

Gold uses the death of “seventeen innocent people” in a train wreck to open a discussion about race, nationality, and religion. Mikey is confused about his relationship with all three and this perplexity is never relieved to his satisfaction. His mother preaches hatred for Christians to her son. “May eight and eighty black years fall on these goys! They live like pigs; they have ruined the world” (163). Katie’s feelings of injustice from the old country are never far from her lips, but Mikey is disgusted with the ambiguity of his mother’s rants. She preaches hatred but does not practice her presumed conviction. In the ghetto it is obvious that there are many immigrants of different backgrounds within blocks with each other and life for Mikey’s parents is very different from their life in the old country where they lived in a segregated community. Katie recalls a time when some Christian girls had thrown rocks at her in her village.
When Mikey’s father, Herman, reading a Yiddish newspaper, relates the story of the seventeen innocent people killed in a railroad accident in New Jersey, Katie is horrified until she is told that none of them were Jews. Then she is relieved. “They were the great enemy, to be hated, feared and cursed” (164). If Mikey’s only impression of Christians is formed from Katie’s words, it would be acceptable for Mikey also to carry the same prejudice against Christians as his mother, but Mikey knows that his Jewish neighborhood has borders and crossing them into Christian territory could be dangerous, so his mother’s comments have merit. This might be a logical explanation to Mikey’s inherited views on Christians, but Katie does not hate Christians. Her words that lash out on the repression of the European Shtetel are just words and it is obvious throughout the text that Katie has martyr qualities and takes on the entire human condition as her own, regardless of religion.

“Negroes, Chinese, Gypsies, Turks, Germans, Irish, Jews—and there was even an American on our street” (178). It was impossible not to interact with them and Katie learns that they, like her, are enduring the same poverty. Mikey, though, is getting mixed signals. Does his Jewish God fit in any of these various groups? Where do religion and nationality divide? Can you be a Jew without religion? Mikey, who imagines himself a martyr against the Christians, is crushed when Katie shows just as much concern and compassion to non-Jews as she does to Jews. “These impressions sank into my heart, and in my bad dreams…dark Christian ogres the size of tenements moved around me…shrieking, ‘Jew, Jew! Jew!’” (165). Mikey needs to find an answer to his questions about religion because his mother through her words teaches him her hate for Christians; but her Christians are not Mikey’s Christians. Katie’s Christians are the oppressive
Christians from the old country that caused so much pain and suffering for her people. This is the history she wants Mikey never to forget. Mikey only knows this from the stories that the neighbors tell and cannot fully understand Katie’s position. He is well aware of the differences between Jews and Christians. Mrs. O’Brien says, “Don’t fight boys,” she said kindly in her clean Christian speech” (171). Mikey cannot distinguish the difference between Christian and Irish. Everyone who is not Jewish is Christian to Mikey and a possible enemy. If he were to describe the voices of the Italian boys who called him Christ killer, would he have said Christian speech? Nationality/religion is a major problem for Mikey to sort out. Irish/Christian or Italian/Christian indicate a separation of nationality from religion, but for Mikey, he cannot separate his Jewish nationality from his Jewish religion. Mikey has been taught to fear Christians, and he has concocted through his own imagination an evil race. He is afraid of them and wonders if Mrs. O’Brien would “burn a cross on my face with a hot poker?” (172). But once he is exposed to a little crippled Christian boy, he says, “I was grieved for him” (173). He develops the same ambiguity that his mother practices.

What does it mean to be a Jew? Harry the Pimp is a Jew, but he sells flesh for a living, not a godly profession. Mendel the Bum says of himself, “I’m a Jew, a firm Jew, a good Jew”, but he indulges in non-kosher food, allows himself to be baptized, and has a tattoo which is forbidden by Jewish law (79). Even though Mendal disobeys God’s law, Mikey accepts Mendel because he speaks Yiddish and “was loyal to his race” (80). Mendel tells Mikey’s father, Mikey, and friends, “You others may believe in the Talmud but I don’t! It is all grandmother stories” (119). Mendel represents the new hybrid Jew who lives comfortably in two worlds and is able to combine his religion and his
nationality. Herman does not attend synagogue regularly, but again, Mikey says, "My father was a loyal Jew. Twice Mikey uses the word loyal to describe the men's dedication but where does their loyalty lie? That is Mikey's dilemma. Katie's firm religious beliefs are challenged because she puts her husband's wishes before her faith when she refuses to shave her head in the Orthodox fashion, yet maintains a kosher and religious household. It appears that Americanization is slipping into their way of life and altering their devotion.

With the introduction of a black African Jew, Mikey is exposed to a man who is able to trace his Abyssinian heritage back to King Solomon. He proves to the family and neighbors gathered that he represents the true faith. Mikey says, "By his manner one could see he despised us all as backsliders, as mere pretenders to the proud title of Jew" (175). This encounter with a Jew unlike he has ever known causes Mikey to question not only his own ideas about religion, but what he has been taught up to this point in his short life. This is a tremendous issue for Mikey to sort out. Katie in her simplicity tells Mikey that a Jewish messiah will come to save all of them from poverty. He will change the world and bring peace and prosperity to all. This is reinforced by Barney the porter who tells the children he is waiting for the messiah.

Gold explores the idea of a messiah. Mikey needs a commitment from someone or something to put hope back into his poverty-stricken community and an entity to purge his world of cruelty and death. He images Buffalo Bill as his ideal messiah. Just like the fairy-tales and stories that are a part of his childhood that he has heard over and over again, the stories he reads of Buffalo Bill is a way to escape his present condition and dream of a better life. This American icon represents a fearless hero that forges into
unknown territory and protects and defends its people with swift action. He slays his
enemies for the good of the community – a little boy’s fantasy. “I walked down Hester
Street toward Mulberry. Yes, it was like the Wild West” (187). Up to this point in the
narrative, Gold has given many examples of what the streets of the Lower East Side are
like, so the reader is fully aware of the danger that lurks in his neighborhood. Mikey
wants a messiah who will seek revenge on his enemies just the way that Buffalo Bill
slays the Indians. Buffalo Bill is strong and Mikey believes that only a strong leader will
be able to conquer the world into which Mikey was born. Mark Schoening suggests that
Mikey respects Buffalo Bill’s “independence and resourcefulness in the face of perceived
difficulty” thereby creating an imaginary similarity between the two and elevating
Mikey’s sense of worth (6). Mikey has learned early on that kindness and complacency
brings nothing but death and destruction. Only a strong person will succeed, but his
mother and Reb Samuel both tell him that the true messiah will not kill anyone but rather
bring only peace to the world. Is it any wonder that Mikey would rather have a messiah
like Buffalo Bill rather than the one described by Reb Samuel? “He will not look like
Buffalo Bill, nor will He kill any one” (193). Reb Samuel becomes Mikey’s idol because
unlike the stories of Buffalo Bill who treats violence with violence in the untamed west,
Reb Samuel is a visible hero within Mikey’s reach. He has the inner peace and wisdom
that Mikey can substitute until the true promised messiah appears. Mikey’s world is full
of violence and the promise of a savior is more than Mikey can hope for to rid the world
of the horrible memories that he has stored up in his short life. His mother also promises
him a messiah. She says, “Look at the world; liars and thieves everywhere, wars,
murders, and children killed with street cars! When the true Messiah comes he will change all this" (189). These are their promises to this small boy.

Religious school has not had a positive effect on Mikey, but his search for a caring and loving God is one that drives him to seek knowledge from one person that Mikey initially has great respect for because he is a holy man of God, Reb Samuel.

Before I discuss the impact that Reb Samuel had on Mikey, it is important to return to a previous scene that Gold uses to reinforce Mikey’s search for answers to all of life’s tragedies. Of course, Mikey’s encounter with Reb Moisha is a disaster and supports Mikey’s continued disillusionment with religion. The chapter “Mushrooms in Bronx Park” is a favorite among critics who choose to analyze Katie’s bonds to the old country, but there a section in this chapter that Gold uses to return the reader to the question of God and initiates a discussion on the mysteries of faith. On one Fourth of July, a firecracker thrown out a window explodes next to Mikey and injures him. He wakes up every evening screaming. When Dr. Solow cannot cure him, Katie enlists the services of Baba Sima. She says, “He will be sound in a few weeks, with God’s help.” Mikey says, “This foreign hocus-pocus did not appeal to me, an American boy” (144). He calls her the Magic-Maker and marvels at her ability to cure him so much so that at the end of this section, Mikey addresses the reader and asks, “They had not heard of the greater magic: Suggestion” (147). Is Gold begging for an explanation of the mystery of faith or is he suggesting that like life, there are no answers to the spiritual side of humanity. It is the individual who must decide what to believe and for this particular moment, Mikey has faith. Baba Sima was taught her skills by a famous Zaddik. We learn later on in the novel that the Zaddiks were descended from the thirty-six Wise Men of Israel, and it is
from these descendants that a new Rabbi will arrive to lead the group of Chassidim that Reb Samuel now leads. Katie’s father was Chassidim, so Mikey quite naturally belongs to this sect. Gold suggests that hope can been revived through intervention and the incident with Baba Sima allows Mikey to investigate his desire for a living god to avenge his current condition of living.

The promise of a Jewish messiah for Mikey dies with the death of Reb Samuel. Mikey builds Reb Samuel’s history slowly and destroys it the same way. The faith that Mikey puts in Reb Samuel is unparalleled. If anyone can put into perspective Mikey’s understanding of life’s mysteries, it is Reb Samuel. His kindness is Mikey’s initial savior and Reb Samuel becomes a mentor to him because Reb Samuel dedicates his life to his congregation and his congregation supports him. He is the one constant in Mikey’s life because of his uncompromising faith. When the men in the congregation decide that they will interpret the word of God for themselves, it is time to call on a rabbi from an ancient order of Zaddik who will keep the members true to their faith in this new world. The poor members of the religious community save and sacrifice for years to be able to bring a new spiritual leader to the people. The arrival of the Rabbi Schmarya from the old country was anticipated for five years and when he finally arrives, “Hope had arrived to the East Side. God was looking down on Chrystie Street!” (199). Mikey sees, for the first time, the ecstasy of the people as they dance in the street to celebrate his arrival. The holy man that Mikey expects is nothing like the one that arrives. “He pushed the children away. He slapped the face of one boy bolder than the rest. The Rabbi did not seem to like children” (200). Mikey is crushed and he seeks out Reb Samuel in the reception hall where a feast has been prepared for the new Rabbi when he sees that the new Rabbi is
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eating like a glutton. When Mikey comments to Reb Samuel about this, he scolds Mikey and sends him home. The new rabbi is not what the congregation anticipated. Herein lies the mystery of faith the congregation embraces and Mikey finally realizes he cannot adopt. The stories of the great family of Zaddik have perpetuated through the centuries and the people place their entire faith in one man who will represent their god. He is a selfish man who demands more and more from the poor and eventually he deserts his flock for greener pastures in the Bronx. “Alas for Reb Samuel. He should have been warned by a child’s truthful impressions. I was right about the new Rabbi, and he was wrong.” (202). His comment is satisfaction that he sees the world more clearly than an adult and sees it from a realistic perspective and not an idealistic one. Gold reinforces the idea that religion in the new world is manipulated in the same fashion as politics and the rights of the poor are manipulated. Unfortunately for Reb Samuel the strain of the years and his faithful devotion to his people leaves him paralyzed and for ten years he watches the world from a window in his room. His death brings sadness to the community, and for Mikey, disillusionment about a god who could be so cruel to one so good and faithful. “It finally defeated him, this America, it broke the old man because he could not bend” (191). He wanted to bring the values of the old country into the new one, but everyone was preoccupied by their own struggle to prosper. And for Mikey, his disillusionment with religion is complete and he abandons his quest for a messiah. All the preaching of Reb Samuel and his mother about a Jewish messiah is lost on this young boy. They have told him lies, but he does learn from watching the ecstasy of the people at the Rabbi’s arrival in the streets that poor people need to believe in a spiritual entity to justify their existence in the ghetto. He still has the magic of Baba Sima.
Death repeated again and again, but the most profound description of the effect of death is the scene when Mikey brings eggs to Nigger’s family from his mother. While death has not visited this family yet, it lingers in the room. Gold’s description of Nigger’s flat is vivid with the presence of death in its look, smell, and attitude. The mother is mentally unstable, and Mikey is shocked at the horror of the flat. He has never been to Nigger’s flat and he describes the dark dismal room. It was like entering a cave where the father sat bent over his work. “God had given him a cancer. Its faint sickly violet smell mingled in the room with the stink of dirt, old lumber, chamber pot, bed linen, greasy dishes, and despair” (263). Gold combines an assault of the senses, a physical description of the room, and a psychological analysis to deliver the impact of what poverty creates. Death in this instance is disguised with the smell of something sweet. Even the sweetest smells can harbor death. “I left Nigger’s home shaken to the soul. I never forgot that scene” (265). Mikey has always respected Nigger as the leader and he is devoted to him as mentor and protector, and now Mikey only has pity for him and his family. While the previous deaths were impressive to Mikey, the odor of human deterioration in this case will always be associated with the sweet fragrance of violets. Beauty and death so closely linked can turn a beautiful thing sour and jolt Mikey’s memory. This encounter with Nigger’s family precedes the final death and is significantly important because it validates the hopelessness of not only Nigger’s family but many families just like his who are warehoused and conditioned to work until they are carted out to the funeral wagon. Nigger is forced to endure a living death.

When Mikey begins his last “death” chapter (Blood Money), he does so in his usual overall assessment of the surroundings. In this instance he begins with: “The livery
stable was a busy scene of life and death. It was a depot for wedding and funeral coaches and headquarters for the Callahan Transfer Express” (269). While the stable represents a transport center for the celebrants and bereaved, Mikey instigates that it harbors disease caused by flies that feed off the manure, and then in turn infect the community. Mikey steps out of his childhood character to explain how flies in South America are drawn to the fragrance of manure that giant orchids expel. This causes the orchid to break because of the weight of the flies, and he seen a man crushed to death by a orchid. This strange connection of flies gives a glimpse of the adult Mikey who would in fact escape the ghetto. Mikey’s sorrow continues as the same flies that kill in urban areas kill in rural ones as well. There is no escaping death.

After establishing a location, Mikey prepares his audience for the final shocking death. He begins by reminiscing about sitting up on the funeral carriage, collecting the corpse, transporting it to the cemetery, and returning for a meal of black bread and pot cheese. It is a procession that he enjoys and it breaks the monotony of his day. It is on the return one day from his adventure that he recalls teasing his sister about how lucky he is that he can experience this event and not her. Then he says, “My poor dear little sister! So soon to go on that funeral ride, and not return and boast like me!” (273) This is a very melodramatic and theatrical statement to make since the reader has no indication that the next death will be Esther’s, and throughout the narrative, Esther stands at the perimeter, mentioned only sporadically in scenes that include a family gathering or outing. Mikey precedes the event by creating remorsefulness and sorrow prior to her death.

Esther’s death is the pity death. Since Gold has a motive for this narrative and that is the rebirth of society, he must prove implicitly that his cause is worthy, and the
death of an angel is a heartfelt medium to prove his point. All the previous deaths build upon each other to bring the reader to the final insult of the ghetto. This chapter shows how the character and author overlap. The author says of Jews Without Money that it is 85% autobiographical, but Gold did not have a sister and therefore can create this death without injuring any member of his own family. He is therefore able to create the perfect child that elicits pity from the reader and for his revolution. Gold even picks the perfect name for his sister, Esther. The biblical Esther saved her race from certain destruction and is celebrated during the festival of Purim. The story of biblical Esther is known to both Jews and Christians alike, and therefore, would most likely be known to the reader. So the name Esther is automatically associated with goodness and loyalty.

Before Mikey relates the tale of how Esther dies, he makes sure that his audience knows that a “saint” has been killed. Line by line Mikey imparts accolades on his sister’s life. She tends their sick father; she cooks; she cleans; she gathers wood for the stove; she takes care of their little brother. All without complaint. Mikey is oblivious to this, and in retrospect he relives the incidents that impact him the most. Mikey is very mean to Esther and teases and abuses her on a regular basis. Esther is not like Mikey, she is protected from the horrors of the street and for her it is a blessing. While Mikey is cursed by his knowledge, she is blessed by her ignorance. Mikey loves to make Esther cry and he relates four times how he accomplishes this. He says, “I despised her weakness” (274). He “beat her until her nose bled.” “I wanted to torture her” (276). Gold spends paragraph after paragraph eulogizing her and raising her to sainthood. Mikey’s confession on his violent, brutal treatment of Esther produces a great amount of pity from the reader and shows how the streets have hardened Mikey that he could not realize his
actions against his sister until death took her like so many other before her. Gold’s painstaking words strengthen his position of the repercussions suffered by the survivors. He shares his sorrow with his family, and as Katie sits Shiva and rocks back and forth, Mikey begins to realize the true impact of this death. “Esther was dead” (284).

“Esther was dead” is repeated again as the last words in “Blood Money.” (287).

Death’s final stop is at Mikey’s house. The family is destroyed and Katie, who throughout the novel is the strong, reality-based member of the family, one who is always available to help another in need, is unable to help herself. She has finally been beaten into submission and regardless of the fact that she has two other children, she cannot recover from the loss of her only daughter. America has defeated Katie and she suffers a psychological death. Herman is willing to accept the insurance money, or blood money as Katie calls it, from Esther’s death to start his suspender business, but Katie will not accept this money and Herman’s dream of ever owning a business is gone. His last chance is gone and the American dream is gone. Mikey has not only lost his only sister, but his parents have become victims of death’s residue. He is a witness to the devastation to his family and no longer an observer of someone else’s disaster.

Gold will not release the reader from the clutch of death as he ends one chapter with “Esther was dead” and then repeats it as the first sentence in the next chapter “Bananas”. To reinforce the tragedy, he repeats it once again at the end of the same paragraph (288). Esther’s death represents every child that is killed on the streets of the city and every parent who suffers the nightmare of losing a child. There are no words to console a grieving family. “Esther was dead” (289). More than Esther dies that day; with her death, the Gold family was incomplete.
Five times Mikey chants Esther is dead, one chant for each of the deaths that influences his life – the man in the alleyway, Sara the prostitute, little Joey Cohen, Reb Samuel, and now Esther.

Her death is the destruction of the family unit. The family cannot recover from the tragedy and Mikey has to make a life of his own. With the loss of his mother’s income and his father’s illness, Mikey must leave his childhood behind and now earn a living to help support his mother, father, and little brother.

The last chapter “The Job Hunt” reveals the depth of despair and hopelessness that has enveloped Mikey. At the end of the previous chapter, Gold begins to unravel his character’s descent into a severe state of depression. “I was eleven years old, but poisoned with a morbid proletarian sense of responsibility” (299). The vision of his father selling bananas on a street corner reflects the same fate for Mikey. He begins to adopt his parents’ melancholy, which through no fault of their own, have thrust upon their oldest and most conscientious child. Gold continues to reinforce this morose behavior throughout the last chapter. On the first page of this final chapter, Mikey recounts his obligation to his family, “I carried in my mind a morbid load of responsibility.” His dedication to the survival of his family is, in fact, the reason he will never escape the cycle of poverty. He is uneducated and can only qualify for the most basic jobs. Three paragraphs later he says, “But I was morbid enough to be wiser than my parents” (303). Herman always believed that he would be successful and when his success never materialized, he continued to believe in his son’s ability. Unfortunately, Mikey is already defeated. Several pages later when Mikey is describing his boss he says, “His face was morbid and hard” (307). Gold emphasizes that the sense of
hopelessness and despair is not limited to Mikey, but to all the people who work at menial jobs for pennies a day. The continued use of morbid indicates that Mikey sees, through the expressions on the faces of the masses, that he is not alone in his struggle to survive and prosper. This coupled with his description of where he was working, “a dark loft, a spectral place, a chamber of hell, hot and poisoned by hundreds of gas flames” and the physical attributes of his fellow workers: “Their faces were death masks, fixed and white” (306-307), denotes that he has now descended to the lowest point of his life, a living hell, and there is no one or no thing that can rescue him from his ultimate death.

His second job is no better and he describes it as “a dark Second Avenue rat-hole” (308). While Mikey knows that his monetary contribution is important to his family, the endless menial blue-collar jobs are the only ones for which he is qualified. His melancholy will grow through the years as he goes from one job to another. He says, “I was caught like my father in poverty’s trap. I was nothing, bound for nowhere” (308). Gold explicitly shows through Mikey’s words in this last chapter that his exposure to the capitalist workforce makes him a prime candidate as a convert to the needs of the working-class poor. This is an additional example of where author and character overlap.

In a September 1932 essay entitled “Why I am a Communist”, Gold recounts his meeting in Union Square with not one but several activists including Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, and Leonard Abbot, and writes that it was his introduction to the revolutionary cause (Gold Anthology 210). He actually experienced what he imparts on his character and critics comment about this and debate over where or not the incident was actual, what his actual age was, or how involved he was in the movement. In this case, they cannot separate the character from the author, which makes the case for Gold’s autobiographical
claim. Nevertheless, the impact of this incidental meeting with pro-communist sympathizers gives Mikey back the hope that has drained from him during the past several years of toil.

God deserts him, his messiah never materializes, and the one strong figure in his life, his mother, is destroyed. He suffers horribly through a childhood of death, always there, always on his mind. He, himself, laments, “O workers’ Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely, suicidal boy” (309). He is ready for a new messiah to worship. For Mikey that messiah is himself and the millions like him who can no longer stand by and watch the abuse of the helpless. He will be one soldier in the army that he has prepared for himself growing up in the battle zone of ghetto life.
The Lower East Side is only a very small neighborhood of the working poor across America. What makes *Jews Without Money* so eventful is that it celebrates a small segment of immigrants who did not fall victim to the nightmare of the ghetto. Gold wants the reader to identify with their plight. He emphasizes their condition by showing page after page that they are surrounded by death on a daily basis. He juxtaposes a stranger shot in an alleyway and a grocer shot by thieves, a prostitute who poisons herself and a prostitute that freezes to death in a stable, a little boy, having fun, killed under the wheels of a cart and a little girl, collecting firewood, killed the same way, one father dies of cancer and another one of a stroke, helpless babies and kittens as victims of a cruel environment. Gold covers all the maladies that are everyday occurrences in the ghetto and through his raw description of death makes his case strongly for reform.

While some critics have a difficult time with Gold's political motivation in the call to revolution in this book, some do offer their interpretations based upon which characters they feel are important parts of Mikey's story. Alan Wald suggests that Mikey is reconnecting with his mother's proletarian presence throughout his life and finally realizes that he can continue her devotion to the working class (47). Mikey is devastated by Katie's breakdown after Esther's death and offers only the comment that she "seems" unable to work. Katie's physical appearance is good, but what Mikey cannot penetrate is her emotional state. Katie has given her life to her family and community and with the death of Esther, life has no meaning. Gold says, "Life's meaning was to be found only in the great or mean days between each man's birth and death, and in the mystery and terror hovering over every human head" (PA Gold 63). Mikey's vision of what lies beneath the
exterior of each person is evolving, and in the case of his mother, he is only beginning to understand the scope of her enduring pain. Gold uses this confusion and the loss of Katie’s strength to actually create a stronger, more determined character, one that is working toward a goal.

Regardless of whether the critics support Gold or Mikey’s conversion or find it ridiculous and unfounded; the entire text, chapter by chapter, supports some kind of revolution. Mikey is exploring his world and throughout the episodes questions the society he has been born into. Gold stresses that the children suffer the most because they take their cues from the environment in which they live. From the very beginning of the novel when the boys throw a dead cat into the Chinese laundry to their defiant act of throwing one at a sightseeing bus, these children, unknown to them, are rebelling against the conditions they live with on a daily basis. Dead animals become their toys and the sight of a dead dog in the feces-contaminated river where they swim for recreation is nothing more than an annoyance. They live among prostitutes who flaunt their wares on the same streets where they play. They are exposed to the drunks being thrown out of bars. There is little civility in their neighborhood. Gold forces the reader to acknowledge that the most important people in Mikey’s life are pimps and saloonkeepers, based on their kindness to the community on which they feed. Gold constantly reminds his reader page after page that death is there always and it touches every living creation. Mikey, by the time he is twelve years, has accumulated enough examples of despair to understand that life is nothing more than a series of calamities and that death will eventually claim him on the streets of the Lower East Side. He is ready for an alternative.
He revolts against his parents’ weakness and their old-world culture that Gold says must die. He revolts against the holy Rabbi who is nothing more than a lecherous drain on the poor people who do without their own needs to support him. He revolts against the social system that made Louis-One Eye the way he was and the victims that had fallen under his thumb. He revolts against his own community for their submission to a system that could be changed, but is not. He gathers together all the ingredients for the people to rise up, but they only gather to share their woeful lives and not change it. His call for revolution was the culmination of a life of pain and suffering.

Critics vary on their assessment of the merits of the ending of the novel and Mikey’s call to revolution. In “Jews Without Money as a Work of Art”, Richard Tuerk says, “Most critics point to the ending as the book’s greatest structural flaw” (Tuerk 67). He quotes Michael Folsom, Marcus Klein and Walter Rideout as confirming that the text does not justify the rapid conclusion to enlightenment, but Klein says, “the novel does properly, logically, culminate in an idea of revolution in behalf not of progress but of redemption” (Klein Foreigners 188). In “The Roots of Radicals”, Klein says “Jews Without Money certainly is not the political statement that it pretends to be. The young hero eventually is converted by a man on a soapbox, but that is a matter of a last few exhortatory sentences tacked on to the end of the book” (134). In “The Education of Michael Gold”, Folsom calls the passage “cryptic” and his rhetoric unsatisfying to the reader. “But the real tough nut, which more critics spit out than crack, is Gold’s characterization of the Revolution as ‘the true Messiah’” (Folsom 239). Other critics of analyze the ending in a more positive light. In Radical Representations, Barbara Foley suggests that each episode demonstrates the oppressive state of the inhabitants, so that by
the end of the novel, it is the most logical outcome that a call to revolution is exercised. She says, “The message continually stressed by the text’s many episodes is that the great mass of East Siders are indeed ‘bound for nowhere’ as long as the current system remains” (296). Diane Levenberg calls the ending an epiphany and although she does agree that it is abrupt, she feels that Gold intentionally was making a point that “communism is an automatic attraction for a member of the working class who has been raised with Gold’s traditional virtues and passionate ideals” (237). Therefore the man on the soapbox was calling his flock, a flock that had been initiated not by him, but by a society of the working poor. James Bloom refers back to chapter 15, “the Saint of the Umbrella Store” and suggests that Mikey’s assertion that America defeated Reb Samuel and thereby defeating his religious faith, was the epiphany for adopting Communism as his new religion (22). By far the most interesting comments come from Bettina Hoffmann. Her essay, “War Metaphors in Michael Gold’s Jews Without Money” comes closest in the discussion of death. She focuses on the theme of war and the many victims that it claims, both living and dead. It is this continual war that prompts Mikey to respond to the call for revolution. She says, “The last words of the novel, ‘O Revolution, that forced me to think, to struggle and to live. O great Beginning’ affirms war now as a positive principle which is identical with life” (77). Mikey is given a purpose for a life that holds little hope and while Hoffman treats all the characters as victims, Mikey is a survivor.

From the first to the last death, Gold delivers his intended message that views the working poor as a nameless commodity and the devastating effect it has on individuals, families, and communities. Through Gold’s own words in “Towards Proletarian Art” he
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says, “Life for us has been the tenement that bore and molded us through years of meaningful pain” (Gold Anthology 65). Only through one’s own efforts in conjunction with those who share his philosophy can change come about. Mikey’s “garden for the human spirit” was a rebirth, a second chance to correct the wrongs perpetrated against the helpless. Just as Mikey describes the passion of Chassidim at the joy of welcoming a new rabbi, Mikey too, filled with the same passion, has climbed to the pinnacle and sees a new world built on those who would join together to worship a new messiah of communism and become one spirit in the fight for human appreciation. “It is the religion of the masses, articulate at last” (67). This is the legacy Mikey will pass down to future generations.
WORKS CITED


