

Discussion Questions

Oedipus in Brooklyn and Other Stories by *Blume Lempel*
Translated by **Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub**
(Mandel Vilar Press & Dryad Press, 2016)

1. As a writer, Blume Lempel was drawn to people on the margins of society. How are these “marginal” characters presented in her stories?
2. How are beauty and pain intertwined in Lempel’s work?
3. Lempel’s narratives often switch abruptly between the cosmic and the domestic, big and small, dream and reality, past and present. Cite some examples. How do these juxtapositions serve her?
4. Having left Europe on the eve of World War II, Lempel did not directly experience the roundups, mass executions, and concentration camps of the Holocaust. Yet the Holocaust is a presence in many of her stories. How does Lempel’s work add to our understanding of the Holocaust?
5. Lempel explores subjects considered shocking or untouchable by many other writers of her time, including abortion, prostitution, women’s erotic imaginings, and incest. What is it like to accompany Lempel into this terrain? Does it feel shocking? Why or why not?
6. Lempel did not cite any literary influences on her writing. Can you compare her to other writers?
7. Do you consider Lempel a feminist writer?
8. Lempel’s life story began in the Old World and ended in the New, encompassing almost a century. What do these stories add to our understanding of the 20th Century, and of the Jewish experience during that century?
9. What does Lempel add to the literature of exile and immigration?
10. Lempel was one of only a few writers who continued writing in Yiddish into the 1990’s. What effect do you think this had on her writing and her career?

Questions about Individual Stories

Even the Heavens Tell Lies

What tells us right away that we're in the hands of an unusual writer? What is strange about this story? Where are we? Can you relate an actual plot? How does the narration mirror the character's experience of the world? Would you describe the story as raw, or as carefully crafted, or both?

Images on a Blank Canvas

How are pain and beauty interwoven in the story?

Neighbors over the Fence

A cross-cultural friendship. What do you make of the friendship with a fly?

The Debt

What is shocking about this story of an abortion? What is beautiful?
What idiosyncratic imagery do you find?

Oedipus in Brooklyn

How does Lempel carefully construct the story? Is it believable? Why, why not?
Do we sympathize with Sylvia? Does Lempel want us to?"

A Yiddish Poet in Paris

What do you learn about the immigrant Jewish community of 1930's Paris?
What kind of character is the poet Sumer?

Power of a Melody

In this very unusual narrative, where are we? What is real and what is metaphor? What are the external landscapes and what are the internal ones?

The Bag Lady of Seventh Avenue

The filthy floors of Penn Station, New York, are side by side with imaginings of coral and honey cake. What is the narrator's attitude toward the "bag lady"? What do you make of the abrupt shifts and the abrupt ending? What do the migratory birds in the last sentence do to the story?

En Route to Divorce

Why does the story begin with a picture of blue void outside the plane window? What kind of character is Phyllis? What does she fear? What does she lose, and what does she gain? What do you think her life will be like, now that she has "slammed the door"?

The Little Red Umbrella

What is unusual about this account of the fantasies and dating life of a middle-aged woman?

Waiting for the Ragman

"To this day I capture handfuls of sunbeams and use them to illuminate the shadows." What are the sunbeams and the shadows in this story? What is the meaning of the ragman?

The Invented Brother

This story is based in part on Lempel's early life with her brother, then veers off in other directions. How does this story illustrate how a person might react to trauma?

Yosemite Park

"Sometimes a present-day experience becomes entangled with a long- forgotten event that once affected me. When past and present meet, the flash of the collision lights up the vanished era in full color." Discuss how this happens in this story.

Pastorale

How does Lempel build an autumnal "ending" mood? What creates foreboding?