



AMERICAN LITERATURE READING 17

Immigrant Life

About the Selection

In *A Walker in the City*, Alfred Kazin (born in 1915) fondly reflects on his experiences growing up in the tenements of Brooklyn, New York. The following selection, “The Kitchen,” focuses on the author’s impressions of his mother, a Polish immigrant. In this moving account, Kazin reveals his mother’s strength of spirit as she works to keep her family together despite poverty and her own intense loneliness.

Guided Reading

As you read, try to picture the author’s kitchen in your mind.



Reader’s Dictionary

annexed: added on

stippled: speckled

tuft: mound

“The Kitchen” from *A Walker in the City*

by Alfred Kazin

In Brownsville tenements the kitchen is always the largest room and the center of the household. As a child I felt that we lived in a kitchen to which four other rooms were annexed. My mother, a “home” dressmaker, had her workshop in the kitchen. . . . For three or four dollars she would study the fashion magazines with a customer, go with the customer to the remnants store on Belmont Avenue to pick out the material, argue the owner down . . . and then for days would patiently fit and baste and sew and fit again. . . .

The kitchen held our lives together. My mother worked in it all day long, we ate in it almost all meals except the Passover *seder*, I did my homework and first writing at the kitchen table, and in winter I often had a bed made up for me on three kitchen chairs near the stove. . . . The walls were a fiercely stippled whitewash, . . . A large electric bulb hung down the center of the kitchen at the end of a chain that had been hooked into the ceiling; . . .

The kitchen gave a special character to our lives; my mother’s character. All my memories of that kitchen are dominated by the nearness of my mother sitting all day long at her sewing machine, by the clacking of the treadle against the linoleum floor, by the patient twist of her right shoulder as she automatically pushed at the wheel with one hand or lifted the foot to free the needle where it had got stuck in a thick piece of

AMERICAN LITERATURE READING 17 (continued)**Immigrant Life**

material. The kitchen was her life. Year by year, as I began to take in her fantastic capacity for labor and her anxious zeal, I realized it was ourselves she kept stitched together. . . .

When I went to bed at night, often she was still there, pounding away at the treadle, hunched over the wheel, her hands steering a piece of gauze under the needle with a finesse that always contrasted sharply with her swollen hands and broken nails. Her left hand had been pierced through when as a girl she had worked in the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist Factory on the East Side. A needle had gone straight through the palm, severing a large vein. They had sewn it up for her so clumsily that a tuft of flesh always lay folded over the palm. . . .

Twice a year, on the anniversaries of her parents' deaths, my mother placed on top of the ice-box an ordinary kitchen glass packed with wax, the yortsayt, and lit the candle in it. Sitting at the kitchen table over my homework, I would look across the threshold to that mourning-glass, and sense that for my mother the distance from our kitchen to *der heym*, from life to death, was only a flame's length away. Poor as we were, it was not poverty that drove my mother so hard, it was loneliness—some endless bitter brooding over all those left behind, dead or dying or soon to die; a loneliness locked up in her kitchen that dwelt every day on the hazardousness of life and the nearness of death, but still kept struggling in the lock, trying to get us through by endless labor.

Source: "The Kitchen" from *A Walker in the City*. New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951.

Literary Response and Analysis

Directions: On a separate sheet of paper, answer the following questions.

1. What does the narrator's mother do for her clients before making the dresses?
2. What happened to his mother's hand?
3. **Evaluating** What does the author mean by the statement, ". . . I realized it was ourselves she kept stitched together."
4. **Visualizing** What do you think is the most powerful image in this selection? Explain your answer.
5. **Forming and Supporting Opinions** How do you think you would feel about visiting the Kazins' kitchen? Explain your answer.

Answer Key
American Literature Reading 17:
Immigrant Life

1. She studies fashion magazines with her customer, goes with the customer to pick out material at the remnants store, and bargains with the store owners. She then tailors the dress to fit the customer.

2. Her left hand was pierced through by a needle when she was working at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. The wound had been sewn so clumsily that a tuft of flesh lay folded over the palm.

3. Answers will vary. Some students will say that his mother's work—as a dressmaker and a mother—deeply affected the family. Her desire to keep the family together keeps them unified in their cause to “make good.”

4. Answers will vary, but students might choose the image of the candle burning on top of the icebox because of its meaning for the author.

5. Answers will vary, but students should cite details from the selection to support their statements.