Sholem Aleichem
Pseudonym of Sholem Rabinovitz (1859-1916).
Described as the Yiddish Mark Twain.

Yiddish was once, and in some places still is, the common language of Jews all over Eastern Europe and Russia, as well as in some immigrant neighborhoods in America. It is a form of Middle German but written in Hebrew characters with many Hebrew loan words. Many dialects contain large amounts of Hungarian, Russian, Polish and other Eastern European languages. Before the Holocaust, there were estimated to be 11 million speakers.

"Sholem Aleichem" is a Hebrew and Yiddish expression equivalent to "How do you do?" (literally - "Peace be unto you"). Sholem Aleichem became and remains one of the most popular Yiddish/Jewish writers. His contributions to modern Yiddish literature include some of the most famous characters, monologues and places in fiction (Fiddler on the Roof: Tevye the dairyman, Anatevka the Russian shtetl (Jewish name for small town). His unique humorous style is called "laughter through tears" in which through the use of language he captures the essence of spoken Yiddish among a variety of folk characters and to transfers it successfully to the written word.

Sholem Aleichem was born in Pereyaslav, the Ukraine, and moved as a child with his family to Voronkov, a neighboring small town which later served as the model for the fictitious towns described in his works. He received his early education in a traditional heder in Voronkov. The heder, a word meaning "room" in Hebrew, was the name of the traditional Jewish elementary school. The heder was for males only and the male children began attendance at age three or four. According to the Talmud (the word literally means “teachings” and is a compilation of Jewish oral teachings, assembled in written form in the early centuries of the Christian era) and the Halacha (Jewish law, derived from the 613 laws of Moses in the Hebrew Scriptures), females do not need education and are explicitly forbidden from some forms of study. Until modern times, most Jewish women received no formal education and were mostly illiterate. This stood in striking contrast to Jewish males.

Sholem’s father, a wealthy merchant, was interested in modern Hebrew literature. A failed business affair caused the family to move again. Days of poverty and want followed, and in 1872 his mother died of cholera. In 1873, at the age of fourteen, he entered a Russian gymnasium (a secondary school preparing students for the university) from which he graduated in 1876. He became a writer. Though he began writing in Hebrew, his first "serious work" -- a dictionary of the curses employed by stepmothers -- was written in Yiddish. In 1879 he began publishing. For about three years, he wrote reports and articles, mostly about Jewish education, for two Hebrew publications.

In 1883, about the same time he was married, he decided to write in Yiddish rather than in Hebrew. From this time on, Sholem Aleichem became his pen name. He explained the pseudonym as a guise to conceal his identity from his relatives, especially his father, who loved Hebrew. In those days, Yiddish literature was greatly despised by the enlightened Jews who wrote in Hebrew and the Jewish intelligentsia in Russia who spoke Russian. This led many Yiddish authors to write under pseudonyms or to publish their works anonymously.

Following a pogrom (Russian word for "devastation" and refers to organized violence against Jews, often with understood support of authorities) in 1905, Sholem Aleichem decided to emigrate to the U.S. This was the beginning of a period of wandering which continued until shortly before his death. He died in New York City where, through his work, he helped to found the Yiddish Art Theater.

His immense popularity did not decline after his death but rather increased beyond the Yiddish-speaking public. The dramatic version of Tevye's Daughters was performed by the finest Yiddish actors, and in the 1960s these sketches formed the basis of the stage and film musical, Fiddler on the Roof.