

CHARACTERS

HERMAN BRODER, a professional ghostwriter and serial philanderer
YADWIGA, Broder's second wife, a former servant who saved him from death in the Holocaust
MASHA TORTSHINER, Broder's mistress
TAMARA, Broder's first wife
SHIFRAH PUAH BLOCH, Masha's mother

PLOT

On a summer morning, Herman Broder stirs from his troubled dreams, wondering if he is in Nazi-occupied Poland, perhaps in the hayloft where his parents' servant girl, Yadwiga, concealed him in order to save his life. Then, fully awake, he realizes that he is in the apartment in Brooklyn that he shares with Yadwiga, whom he married after learning of the deaths of his wife and his children.

Herman tells Yadwiga that he must make another of his overnight train trips to sell books. Actually, he remains in New York City, spending the day in the office of Rabbi Milton Lamper-- for whom Herman works as a ghostwriter--, and the night at the apartment of his mistress, Masha Tortshiner and her mother, Shifrah Puah Bloch—both Holocaust survivors. Although Masha knows that Herman is married, her mother does not. The mother is determined to have Masha get a divorce from her husband, Leon (so that she can marry Herman).

One day, Shifrah Puah calls Herman's attention to a notice in the newspaper asking him to telephone a certain number. When he makes the call, Herman finds himself speaking to the uncle of his first wife Tamara, who it seems is alive and well in New York. When Herman and Tamara are reunited, he is surprised to find her prettier than ever and considerably easier to get along with than when they lived together as husband and wife (in Poland). Although Herman knows he must choose between his two wives, he admits that he would like to keep them both-- and the volatile Masha too.

Herman's trips to see Tamara arouse Masha's suspicions, even though she does not guess that Herman's first wife has returned. Herman thinks he might be able to reassure Masha about his feelings for her during a vacation in the Adirondack Mountains that they have been planning together. At first, they do relax and enjoy themselves, but then Masha tells Herman that she is pregnant. Taken by surprise, Herman rashly promises to marry Masha.

Blithely ignoring the fact that Herman is already married, Masha works on getting a divorce from her estranged husband Leon Tortshiner. Meanwhile, Herman's other two relationships with women are becoming even more complicated. On an outing in the Catskill Mountains, he and Tamara, who were merely friends, find themselves making love and enjoying it. Then, Yadwiga decides that she can become closer to her husband if she converts to Judaism and gives him a Jewish child. Though he does not want to bring a child into a world so full of cruelty and suffering, Herman cannot refuse her.

Herman is still managing to keep the three women apart. However, he worries constantly about exposure, which he knows will cost him his job with the rabbi and might well lead to his being imprisoned or deported. He has a little time to decide about which of his present wives to keep, since his marriage to Yadwiga occurred when all evidence had pointed to Tamaras death. However, he will have no excuse-- moral or legal-- for acquiring a third wife (Masha).

Quite unexpectedly, Masha's husband Leon Tortshiner offers Herman a way out. He meets with Herman in order to warn him that Masha is a promiscuous, deceitful woman. Leon tells Herman that Masha was consistently unfaithful during their marriage and also that she betrayed Herman by sleeping with Leon as the price of obtaining her divorce. Herman's immediate response is to end the relationship with Masha; however, she manages to convince him that it is Leon who is lying, and the two are married after all.

By the time winter arrives, Herman is in serious financial trouble. Yadwiga is expecting a baby, which means more bills in Brooklyn, and, after Masha's pregnancy turns out to be purely psychological, she is too

Enemies, a Love Story
By Isaac Bashevis Singer

depressed to work, and so Herman has to provide support for her as well. In addition, as a new convert to Judaism, Yadviga is driving Herman crazy with her questions about a faith that he no longer observes.

Finally, the inevitable happens. First, Tamara drops in at the Brooklyn apartment, and Yadviga recognizes her. Then some neighbors bring a gossipy man named Nathan Pesheles to meet Mrs. Broder, and, though Tamara pretends to be Herman's cousin, Pesheles takes a good look at Yadviga. When Rabbi Lampert finds out that Herman has recently married, he visits Masha and invites the newlyweds to a party. One of the rabbi's guests is the observant Pesheles. He promptly informs Masha that he met a Tamara Broder at Herman's apartment in Brooklyn, thus tipping her off to the fact that the "dead" wife is not actually dead. He then goes on to tell everyone else-- including the rabbi-- that, in addition to Masha, Herman also has a pretty, pregnant wife named Yadviga.

Before the evening ends, the kindly rabbi offers Masha a job and both Masha and her mother a place to live. Masha accepts, telling Herman that she never wants to see him again. Tamara comes to Herman's rescue, taking him in, giving him a job in her uncle's bookstore and even helping Yadviga in any way she can.

Then, just when things are going well, Masha comes back into Herman's life. Now she wants him again, and he agrees to run away with her. However, she is delayed, first by finding that her apartment has been burglarized, and second by her mother's death. Herman and Masha consider a double suicide, but finally Herman decides to leave not only Masha but everyone else as well.

Masha kills herself. Yadviga moves in with Tamara, who runs the bookstore while Yadviga takes care of their place and her baby girl (little Masha). No one ever finds out what happens to Herman.

MAJOR THEMATIC CONCERNS

Past vs. Present

- The past determines the future, as nothing is ever truly left behind.
- The past may change our circumstances, but it rarely changes our personalities. We remain the victim not only of fate, but ourselves.
- It is possible to transcend the past, but it requires a faith in the future.

Belief

- The presence of evil in the world calls into question the existence of God.
- People need something larger than themselves in which to believe; they must have a purpose. This could be religion, politics, or a self-destructive fetishism of the past.
- The world is a terrifying place absent human solidarity or faith in the future.

Human Nature

- We are too often trapped by our own self-destructive behavior, pettiness, and stupidity.
- Only generosity of spirit allows for a way forward, allowing for the possibility of human solidarity.
- True fidelity is impossible without this generosity of spirit.

Truth vs. Deceit

- The breakdown of traditional values encourages the worst in people. People are weak and self-destructive absent its protective structures.
- Selfishness and human weakness is the root of all deceit.
- Modern society is more concerned with appearances than substance. It lays bare what has always been present.