

Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904-1991)

Gale Database: Contemporary Literary Criticism

Introduction

An internationally renowned figure, Singer is widely considered the foremost Yiddish writer of the twentieth century. Although he moved to the United States in 1935, Singer wrote almost exclusively in Yiddish in an attempt to preserve what he considered a rapidly disappearing language. Read primarily in translation, Singer's fiction frequently evokes the history and culture of the Polish-Jewish village or *shtetl*. Singer's themes, nonetheless, extend far beyond ethnic or provincial concerns; his work emphasizes faith, doubt, corruption, and sexuality, and expresses a profound, if often sardonic, interest in the irrational and the supernatural. In 1978, Singer was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for his "impassioned narrative art which, with roots in a Polish-Jewish cultural tradition, brings universal human conditions to life." While he has been denounced by some Yiddish writers and members of the Jewish community for refusing to render a sentimental view of a minority culture that has traditionally been the target of persecution, Singer is generally regarded a consummate storyteller, capable of blending traditional modes of plot, characterization, and dialect with a modernist sensibility.



Biographical Information

Singer was born in the Polish *shtetl* of Leoncin, near Warsaw, to parents of devout rabbinical families who intended him to become a religious scholar. Singer's interests lay elsewhere, and early in his life he began reading secular literature. This dual exposure to strict religious training and nonecclesiastical ideas is demonstrated in Singer's fiction, where faith, mysticism, and skepticism regularly conflict. In 1908, Singer and his family moved to Warsaw, where he spent most of his youth. In 1917, he and his mother moved to his grandparents' *shtetl* in Bilgoray, and, upon his return to Warsaw in 1921, Singer enrolled in a rabbinical seminary. Singer left school in 1923, began proofreading for *Literarische Bletter*, a Yiddish literary magazine, and later worked as a translator. In 1927, Singer published his first piece of short fiction in *Literarische Bletter*, and seven years later his first long work, *Shoten an Goray (Satan in Goray)*, an experimental piece drawing upon his experiences in Bilgoray, appeared in serial form in the Yiddish periodical *Globus*. Singer emigrated from Poland in 1935, leaving behind his illegitimate son in order to follow his older brother Israel Joshua, who later achieved prominence as a Yiddish novelist. Singer settled in New York City where he married and became a regular staff member on the *Jewish Daily Forward*. The death of Israel

Joshua in 1944 had a profound, if ambivalent, effect upon Singer. While he has acknowledged his brother as his “spiritual father and master,” Singer often felt overshadowed by Israel’s achievements, which inhibited his own creativity, and he has admitted, in this context, to feelings of both grief and liberation. Throughout the 1940s, Singer’s fiction was serialized in the *Forward*, and his reputation among Yiddish-speaking readers grew steadily. In 1950, *Di Familie Mushkat* (*The Family Moskat*) appeared in translation, the first of Singer’s novels to be published in English, and in 1953 “Gimpel the Fool,” Singer’s classic tale of innocence and faith, appeared in *Partisan Review*, translated by Saul Bellow. Through the efforts of such admirers as Bellow and Irving Howe, through translations of his fiction, and through cinematic and dramatic adaptations of several of his works, Singer was introduced to the American public and in the 1950s garnered an international audience. After winning the Nobel Prize in Literature, Singer continued to publish new material until his death in 1991.

Major Works

Singer’s short fiction draws upon elements of Polish-Jewish folklore, fables, and history, and, as Alexandra Johnson observed, his stories “compress intricate dramas into a few single pages.” Frequently torn between their faith in God and earthly temptations, Singer’s characters are tormented by demons, ghosts, and *dybbuks*--wandering souls that inhabit humans and control their actions, according to Jewish folklore. In a review of *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, Michael Levin noted that Singer depicts people as “defenceless, unprotected, and worse still, unable to protect [themselves] before powerful, callous or malevolent forces” that exist inside and outside the individual. The protagonist of the well-known title story from *Gimpel Tam un andere Dertseylungen* (*Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories*) typifies one reaction to this worldly situation. As the victim of the town’s jokes, Gimpel remains a “divine fool” and “the common man.” Gimpel’s naivete, nevertheless, provides humor and also combats evil by conveying a simple goodness for which he is eventually rewarded. Singer has published many short fiction collections, among them *The Spinoza of Market Street, A Crown of Feathers and Other Stories, Short Friday and Other Stories, Passions and Other Stories, and Old Love*. Although accused of repetition, Singer’s stories are generally considered to evidence his exceptional narrative skills. Howe noted that Singer “plays the same tune over and over again” but added that “if [he] moves along predictable lines, they are clearly his own, and no one can accomplish his kind of story so well as he.”

Singer’s later short fiction collections, *The Image and Other Stories* and *The Death of Methusaleh and Other Stories*, continue in the tradition of the fable. *The Image* reinforces Singer’s preeminence as a storyteller, for the tales themselves are often stories told by one character to another. Like his earlier works, these stories, which are primarily set in Eastern Europe and America, relate the dangers of submitting to passion. Critics stress, however, that *The Image* contains fewer literal *dybbuks*; in the title story, newlyweds are unable to consummate their marriage because the ghost of the bride’s former fiance appears. The bride’s mother warns that it was not a ghost but a figment of her daughter’s imagination or, even worse, some manifestation of her conscience. *The Death of Methusaleh* also explores the hazards of yielding to earthly desires for sex, power, and knowledge. The rich details of these compressed dramas are not limited to Eastern European or New York *shtetls*; many also unfold in Florida, ancient Babylon-- which serves as background for a retelling of the Faust legend--and in Methusaleh’s home, where the biblical patriarch dies after allowing himself to be seduced by his slave. In a short preface to this collection, Singer wrote that these stories reflect the corruption that has entered the world through humanity’s preoccupation with desire.

While placing greater emphasis on a realistic, straightforward style than his short stories, Singer's novels similarly explore the themes of community, faith, violence, and identity within the scope of Polish-Jewish history. The novella *Satan in Goray*, widely considered Singer's best long work, is set in Poland after the Cossack raids of 1638 and 1649 and is often described as an expansive parable. This book explores the conflicts of religious law, faith, and skepticism among the Eastern European Jews who considered Sabbatai Zevi their Messiah. Singer's other novella, *Der Knekht (The Slave)*, takes place in Poland in the same era. The book revolves around Joseph's marriage to Wanda, also known as Sarah, whose conversion to Judaism sets her apart from other Jews in the community. Because it was against the law for a Gentile to convert to Judaism in the seventeenth century, Wanda/Sarah's newly acquired religious identity and training jeopardize her life but also enable her to grow spiritually as she follows the spirit of the laws set forth in the Torah. *The Slave* also incorporates several stories from the Old Testament, including that of Joseph's bondage in Egypt, and focuses on the problem of being Jewish in a country where religion denotes social status.

With *The Manor* and *The Estate*, Singer began writing about events and trends of Polish-Jewish history in the 1800s. These books, originally published as one volume in Yiddish, are detailed epic narratives written in the expansive mode of much nineteenth-century fiction. Singer's focus on the absence of spiritual unity that stems from loss of religious identity evolves as the members of the Jacoby, Mendel, and Jampolski families interact and either accept, modify, or reject their parents' theological and political beliefs. Although *The Family Moskat* takes place during the twentieth century and ends with Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland, this book is often studied along with *The Manor* and *The Estate*. Critics have cited that *The Family Moskat* portrays not only the uprooting of one Jewish family but also the collapse of the Polish-Jewish community.

Although *Sonim, di Geschichte fun a Liebe (Enemies: A Love Story)*, *Der Bal-tshuve (The Penitent)*, and *Shosha* are all set in the twentieth century, Singer still emphasizes humanity's search for spirituality in a corrupt, violent, and passion-driven world. In *Enemies*, which was adapted for film in 1990, Herman Broder, a survivor of the Holocaust who lost his wife in the war, has left his homeland, remarried, and is now working as a ghostwriter for a rabbi in New York. He knowingly commits bigamy by marrying Masha, who was also the target of Nazi persecution during World War II. More complications arise when Herman discovers that his first wife also survived the war and has since emigrated to New York. Unable and unwilling to resolve his predicament, yet driven by lust, Herman maintains relations with all three wives. Eventually Herman flees New York, realizing that the Holocaust has robbed him of his religion, philosophy, and faith in humanity.

The moralistic tone of Singer's work appears again in *The Penitent*, in which Joseph Shapiro, a Jew who also settled in New York after World War II, travels to Israel in search of a pure life. Critics noted that Joseph's strongest belief is, paradoxically, his inability to believe. More didactic than most of Singer's work, this novel has been faulted for lacking the ironic perspective and multidimensional depth of his earlier fiction. *Shosha*, often considered a novelized version of his memoir *A Young Man in Search of Love*, takes place in Warsaw during the 1930s. The title character, a young woman whose intellectual development has been arrested, is one of Singer's innocents who symbolize a return to the uncomplicated world of childhood, while the narrator, who succumbs to material pleasures, represents the moral disintegration of modern life.

The novels published in the years shortly before Singer's death also address Jewish themes but predominately reflect his belief that the history of the Jews is the history of humankind. Despite occasional historical discrepancies *The King of the Fields* describes Poland as it might have been when cave and forest dwellers, or *lesniks*, were beginning to make the transition to an agrarian lifestyle. An educated Jew, Ben Dosa, enters this community and becomes its spiritual advisor until a Christian missionary arrives preaching anti-Semitism. Critics have contended that the novel explores that moment when Polish-Jewish anthropology became Polish-Jewish history; Singer, however, touted the volume as an attempt to prove that humanity's corruption and predilection for violence are universal and have always existed. In his last novel, *Scum*, Singer returned to the *shtetl* of his childhood. In *Scum*, Max Barabander, an Argentinian businessman, leaves his wife, travels around Europe, and settles in his hometown, Warsaw, in 1906. Max surrounds himself with the thieves and con artists of Krochmalna Street, attempts to marry the rabbi's daughter, and, allowing what Singer intimates are base impulses to rule his conscience, engages in numerous sexual encounters. Before the rabbi will bless the marriage, the unrepentant Max is ordered to follow the traditions and rituals of orthodox Judaism but fails. Faulted for combatting Jewish stereotypes with such a morally depraved protagonist, Singer countered that since Max is not a devout Jew nor even a real member of the Warsaw *shtetl*, his moral deficiencies are not those of the Jewish community but those shared by the entire world.

Critical Reception

Singer's evocative fiction is consistently praised for its uncanny simplicity and philosophical depth. While *Satan in Goray* and "Gimpel the Fool" are considered his most effective creative works, *The Magician of Lublin*, *Enemies*, *Shosha*, and many short stories contained in collections such as *The Spinoza of Market Street* and *Short Fridays and Other Stories* reveal Singer's narrative talent and metaphysical concerns. Though reproached by some members of the Jewish community for refusing to elevate the Jewish people as a persecuted ethnic minority, Singer's loyalty to Yiddish literature is credited with reaffirming the credibility of the near-extinct language. Other critics accuse Singer of repeating himself in subsequent stories and some cite erotic elements in his fiction as either provocative or irreverent, especially Singer's depiction of libertine characters and unabashed sexual affairs. Despite the unconcealed religious significance of his fiction, Singer's sardonic modernist sensibility and abiding interest in the debilitating effects of spiritual isolation draws frequent comparison to the existentialist writings of Albert Camus. Without resorting to didacticism or dogmatic moral judgment, Singer attempts to reconcile the mystical and absurd in both the Old and New Worlds with compassion, irony, and gentle humor.