The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer Study Guide

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Chapters 1-10

Chapters 1-10 Summary

1) Gimpel the Fool: Gimpel undeservedly becomes the butt of ridicule and abuse in the small village of Frampol, Poland. As a child, his schoolmates tell him all sorts of fantastic lies that he pretends to believe simply because he does not want to fight them. Gimple is dragged to wedding with Elka, the town whore who already has a bastard child. When he comes home at night from working in the bakery, he discovers her in bed with various men but wants to believe that it is only an illusion. During their twenty-year marriage, she bears six children but confesses to Gimpel on her deathbed that none of them are his. He leaves Frampol and travels around the country, stopping here and there and telling stories to children. As death approaches, he is grateful that whatever happens will finally be real.

2) The Gentleman from Cracow: The citizens of Frampol are amazed when a doctor from Cracow, Poland arrives in their shabby town on a carriage pulled by eight horses. Seeing the plight of the impoverished village, the Jewish physician buys flour by the cartload for the bakery, gives gold coins to the villagers, and calls for a huge feast. During the feast, lightning bolts set fire to the synagogue and other buildings, which burn to the ground. The doctor reveals himself as a scale-covered beast with an eye in his chest and a rotating horn on his forehead. Satan takes a local woman named Hodle, long suspected of being a witch. as his bride. In the midst of the frenzy, the evil couple disappear and Frampol is incinerated. Jews from a nearby village help to rebuild a stronger and more vigorous village. Rabbi Ozer, who tried to stop the conflagration, is honored with a special tomb.

3) Joy: Rabbi Bainish, a thoughtful and bookish man, retreats into his study after the death of his daughter, Rebecca. He closes the shutters during her funeral procession so he does not have to witness it. His remaining son and two daughters appear consumptive, and his wife becomes impatient that her husband has no power to bestow health upon his family. His Hassidim congregation gradually fades away. He summons a younger rabbi, Reb Abraham Moshe, to his study and tells him there is no God, "no justice, no judge." Rabbi Bainish concludes there is no substance to the material world. He is visited in his study by the apparition of his dead daughter, Rebecca. The rabbi once again becomes active in working with the community and grows old. As he is dying, he whispers to himself, "So that's the way it is."

4) The Little Shoemakers: Abba is an excellent shoemaker in the Polish town of Frampol, heir to a family trade that had sustained them for generations. Abba makes the best, custom-made shoes in Frampol and becomes rather prosperous. His wife, Pesha, urges him to rebuild the old family home that is literally rotting away. She also bears him seven sons whom Abba hopes will learn the cobbler's trade. When the eldest son becomes of age, he leaves for America and a better life. He is soon followed by the other six sons. Pesha dies but Abba continues his regimen of long work hours and

becomes somewhat delusional as the Nazis tear through his country and village. He escapes to Romania and then goes to the U.S. He is met at the dock in New York by all his sons and their families. He is soon enthroned as the patriarch of the family, and his sons come and work by his side as shoemakers.

5) The Unseen: In this story, the "Evil Spirit" is both narrator and participant. A wealthy man named Nathan Jozefover lives in Rampol, Poland with his wife Roise Temerl. The couple become very lazy and overindulges in food and other pleasures. One day when Nathan lies on his back in the steam bath, his inflated belly protruding upward, ther servant girl Shifra Zirel comes into the steam bath and gives her master a complete massage. She refuses his advances and tells him to first divorce his wife. Perplexed and puzzled, Nathan continues his pursuit in vain and grows ill and haggard. Roise Temerl remarries and Nathan disappears with Shifra into Hungary. One day, Roise encounters Nathan trudging through the forest, a broken and impoverished man. He tells her that Shifra has robbed and deserted him. Roise makes a place for him to live in the ruins of an old building. Nathan sees a coffin coming and is shocked to realize that Roise is dead. In his dreams, he sees Roise and Shifra as one woman with two heads and four breasts who dies that night.

6) The Spinoza of Market Street: Nahum Fischelson, a doctor of philosophy, is a reclusive scholar who spends long periods in isolation studying the works of the philospher Spinoza. He esposes the idea that the emotions only lead people into more suffering. Fischelson lives on a tiny stipend from the Hebrew community in Berlin and when his check is late, he goes to a cafe and reads in a newspaper that World War II is underway. A spinster woman in the next apartment called Black Dobbe brings him a letter from America and asks him to translate. She notices that Fischelson seems weak and ill and brings him soup daily. They fall in love and are married. On their wedding night, Fischelson's chronic illnesses of mind and body disappear and he enjoys a night of lovemaking with his wife. At midnight, he goes to his open window and asks that "divine Sp[inoza" forgive him because he has become "a fool."

7) The Destruction of Kreshev: Satan Makes another appearance in this story, arranging an unhappy marriage that brings destruction to the village of Kreshev. Lise Bunim is the spoiled daughter of Reb Bunim Shor and his wife Shifrah Tammar. They are the wealthiest family in Kreshev. When his daughter turns fifteen, Reb Bunim offers her for husband a choice of a wealthy young man who is good-looking or a poor scholar from Warsaw called Shloimele who is short and unattractive. She chooses the scholar and loves him at first sight. Instead of returning to his books after the wedding, Shloimele stays home and engages Lise in wild sex games as the pair roar around the house. Shloimele is a member of a secret cult that worships evil and ignores the Torah. Shloimele suggests that Lise sleep with the handsome coachman and gives her permission. Lise's indiscretion becomes public knowledge. A rabbinical court finds Mendel and Lise guilty of adultery and sentences them to public scorn. Lise takes her own life and the town of Kreshev burns to the ground and never has to be rebuilt.

8) Tiabel and Her Demon: Chaim Nossen deserts his wife, Taible, after she bears three children that die in infancy. He leaves the town of Lashnik and goes to Lublin. A tall, thin

man named Alchonon, who bears a resemblance to her departed husband, comes into her darkened bedroom one night and convinces her that he is a demon named Hurmizah, Using threats and blandishments, he seduces her and says he will visit her two nights a week. Soon Taible begins to like her relationship with the devilish man Alchonon. He stops coming to see her and she notices a funeral procession carrying a coffin with an unidentifiable Alchonon inside. She follows the procession to the graveyard and grieves for Alchonon who had lived a life as lonely as her own. She never learns that Alchonon is the mysterious lover who possessed her and vice-versa.

9) Alone: The narrator lives in a large hotel in Miami full of South Americans and Jews. A general uproar ensues when the management announces that the hotel is closing because of bankruptcy. The narrator finds a room in another dilapidated hotel that is vacant. The desk clerk is a hunchback Cuban woman with an ominous dark appearance. A hurricane hits Miami Beach with a vengeance and the hunchback desk clerk asks if she can come to his room because she is afraid. He lets her inside, dresses, and falls asleep. When he awakens, she is sitting on his bead, telling him that although she broke her back as a child, she is still a woman. He tells her he is a faithful husband to his wife in New York City. She spits on him with contempt and it burns his face. The next morning, she kicks him out of the hotel without asking for payment.

10) Yentl the Yeshiva Boy: Yentl is the mannish daughter of Reb Todros of Yanev, who studies scripture with him intensively before his death. She is "tall, thin, bony with small breasts and narrow hips." After her father dies, she sells the house and departs for Lublin dressed as a man in her father's clothes. At an inn, she encounters a yeshiva student named Avigdor who convinces her to come with him to study at Bechev. She agrees, and soon they become close friends although Yentl desires Avigdor as a woman. Avigdor marries Pesche although he truly loves Hadass, who is pressured to marry Anshel. Anshel reveals to Avigdor that he is a man and they both divorce their respective partners. Avigdor marries Hadass. Anshel disappears, but Avigdor and Hadass have a young son whom they name Anshel.

Chapters 1-10 Analysis

With the exception of Alone and The Spinoza of Market Street, the first ten stories in this collection deal to a great extent with the legacy of ancient folklore in the practice of Judaism in Eastern Europe. Most of the characters and settings in these ten stories bear more resemblance to the Brothers Grimm than to John Updike. They are more like moral teachings than modern short stories in many ways. For example, in The Gentleman from Cracow, an entire town is destroyed because its residents allow themselves to be seduced by the devil. The moral is to beware of flashy strangers riding in fine coaches and throwing gold coins around. In The Unseen, a fallen husband who deserts his wife and squanders their money is taken back into the family by a kind and forgiving woman. Behind every rehabilitated man, there is a strong woman.

Chapters 11-20

Chapters 11-20 Summary

11) Zeidlus the Pope: The Evil One relates how he used vanity to claim a righteous soul for hell. Zeidel Cohen is the descendant of a rich and powerful family; his greatest pleasure is books and study. He is a tall, lanky, and insipid man who only wants to be a scholar and he becomes the most learned rabbi iin Poland by age 37. He learns Latin, begins to read the New Testament and decides Judaism does not present a fair picture of Jesus. He then converts to Catholicism but does not speak to other priests. He goes blind and loses his bag of gold coins to a thief. Zeidel then he becomes a street beggar. Satan appears and ushers him to Gehenna, where imps are raking the coals for his arrival.

12) The Last Demon: A demon finds himself in the tiny Polish village of Tishevitz, where the residents hardly know sin. He tries to corrupt the rabbi but fails. The imp tempts Rabbi Tsots with the three foolproof sins. They are lust, pride and avarice. However, the rabbi resists them all when the imp visits him in his study. The rabbi asks him to show his feet, since imps and evil spirits have the feet of geese. The imp runs from the rabbi and having failed in his mission, is ordered by Satan to remain in Tishevits.

13) Short Friday: Shmul-Leibele is the simple-minded half-tailor and half-furrier in the Polish village of Lapschitz. Since he is a simpleton, he has never mastered his trade and is poor. His lovely and capable wife Shoshe is devoted to him and helps when he has trouble completing his work. She is tall and beautiful while he is short and clumsy. Both are rigorous in their observance of the sabbath. One one sabbath, the couple eats a large meal then goes to bed for a nap. Shmul-Leibele awakens, filled with desire for his wife. After copulation, they both fall asleep again. hey "awaken" to discover they have died and gone to paradise together.

14) The Seance: Dr. Zorach Kalisher is a philosopher and essayist who flees the Nazis in Poland to go to Paris with his lover, Nella. He leaves behind his wife and children, lives for a time in Paris with Nella, then comes alone to New York in 1939. He befriends Mrs. Kopitzky, the widow of a dentist who lives near Central Park. Mrs. Kopitzky is a medium who summons the spirit of an ancient Hindu sage named Bhaghavar Krishna in seances in her parlor. At one of these seances attended by Dr. Kalisher, Mrs. Kopitzky summons the spirit of his lost lover, Nella. He looks up and sees a female figure in the shadows on the other side of the room. He is so startled that he urinates on himself and rushes to the bathroom. When he opens the door, there is a woman sitting on the toilet who screams. He realizes that Mrs. Kopitzky has hired someone to impersonate his Nella. Mrs. Kopitzky gives him some of her husband's clothes to wear; he falls asleep and dreams he is in a cafeteria eating an egg cookie. When he awakens, he tells Mrs. Kopitzky there is no death, only eternal life and love.

15) The Slaughterer: Yoineh Meir was to become the next rabbi of Kolomir, but due to secret political dealings, the job goes to another person. As a consolation, he is appointed the town's ritual slaughterer. Queasy at first about killing animals, he is encouraged by several rabbis who tell him slaughtering is a holy thing because it releases the souls of saints who have been reincarnated as animals. Gradually, he slips into insanity and throws his butchering knives into the outhouse and rips off his outward signs of Judaism such as his skullcap as a holiday approaches with its demand for even more slaughtering. He runs through the town, chased by dogs and Jews who think he has gone mad. Near the river, he loses control, running and rolling down the slope. The crowd cannot find him. Later, his body is recovered from the river dam. He is given an honorable burial and another slaughterer is appointed.

16) The Dead Fiddler: Liebe Yentl is the daughter of Reb Sheftel Vengrover andfhis wife, Zise Feige. Liebe is engaged to Ozer, who catches a cold and dies. After her mourning, Leibe is infected by a "dybukk" or disembodied spirit, of Getsl the fiddler from Pinchev. When he seizes possession of the body at night, he demands liquor in a man's voice and hurls epithets at everyone.Then Liebe Yentl becomes the host of another dybukk. This time it is the spirit of an earthy woman named Beyle Tslove. Possession by two spirits at the same time becomes unbearable, especially when they demand to be married. Despite great opposition by rabbis, the two are given a wedding. Shortly thereafter, two balls of light fly out of Liebe's nostrils through the window and disappear. Reb Sheftel finds another suitor for his daughter, but she refuses to marry. Both parents die, Liebe grows older, dies, and is buried next to her parents. Sometimes, the villagers of Shidlovtse claim to hear the dead fiddler's music floating through the town.

17) Henne Fire: Hennerly is the emaciated and witch-like wife of Berl Chazkeles, a poor sieve-maker who curses and screams at everyone, including her husband. She is so filled with hatred that the townspeople call her Henne Fire, or "fire from hell." She breaks dishes and windows, hurls insults at her family and everyone in town, until her youngest daughter leaves for America and her husband steals away under cover of night. She is suspected of causing fires with her evil look. Seemingly possessed, she comes to live at the rabbi's house while the town builds her a brick house that cannot burn. She drinks constantly and one day someone finds her charred skeleton sitting in a chair without any evidence of fire anywhere else. Her remains are buried in the cemetery.

18) The Letter Writer: Herman Gombiner is an editor at a New York publisher of books in Hebrew. His meticulous scrutiny and love of the language have made the publisher, Zion, an outstanding and successful firm. Although only fifty years old, he is haunted by memories of his family who have all perished in the Holocaust and hobbled by advancing age. His only form of entertainment is writing letters to women around the world who, like him, are interested in the supernatural. The publishing house goes bankrupt and he lives a Spartan existence in his cheap apartment, giving his affection and food to a resident mouse. He falls desperately ill with pneumonia, just as the granddaughter of one of his pen pals stops to say hello and stays to nurse him back to health.

19) A Friend of Kafka: Jacques Kohn is an aged actor in the moribund Yiddish theater who dresses like royalty and impresses his friends with stories about his encounters with artists such as Franz Kafka, Marc Chagall, Stefan Zweig and the theologian Martin Buber. An apostle of the nihilist Friedrich Nietsche, Kohn imagines life as a chess game in which man can only survive by outwitting fate but fate always wins in the end. The narrator describes having dinner with Kohn in which the old fake asks him for money. The narrator agrees because he has just been paid for a story he has sold. Kohn tells the writer that he will be rewarded by God, if there is one. If God does not exist, he says, "then who is playing all these games with Jacques Kohn?"

20) The Cafeteria: Aaron is a rising writer who lives in New York City and frequents a cafeteria usually filled with older Jewish émigrés from The Nazis. He meets an attractive young woman named Esther who recognizes him and tells Aaron he is her favorite writer, that she read his books in Yiddish while in Poland. They strike up a friendship. He invites her to his apartment for dinner but she never shows up. For years, they lose touch with each other. The cafeteria burns and is rebuilt. Aaron again encounters Esther at the cafeteria who tells him horror stories about the war. Again, he invites her to his apartment. She tells him that she has seen Hitler and his cronies meeting in the cafeteria and asks that he not dismiss her as insane. Aaron tells her it's possible she has had a glimpse into the past. They again separate. When Aaron returns from a trip, he learns from a rabbi that she has committed suicide.

Chapters 11-20 Analysis

Singer goes deeper into the demonology and witchcraft of the Old World in this batch of 10 stories, while introducing the theme of transplanted Jews trying to adapt to their new home in New York. Jews who stray from their religious teachings and wander into sin or atheism risk visitation by the devil or other evil spirits who will punish them endlessly on earth, or dispatch them directly to hell. Singer's disgust with the fake or phony is evident in "The Seance," in which a dead lover is supposedly made to appear, but turns out to be just a woman friend of the spirit medium. Madness is the theme of The Slaughterer, in which a pious Jew who wants to be a rabbi but becomes an animal slaughterer goes insane because of the cruelty he must perform and commits suicide. Another suicide results when a woman who survives the Holocaust, but is deranged, meets a writer at a nearby cafeteria. Before their friendship can ripen, she kills herself.

The author seems once again to be outlining the types of despair and derangement that refugees from the Holocaust experience, in addition to alienation in a large American city without the supports of their own close-knit communities in Europe.

Chapters 21-30

Chapters 21-30 Summary

21) The Joke: A Yiddish publisher in New York, Leibkind Bendel, has tried for years to start a correspondence with Alexander Walden, a Jewish philosopher living in Berlin at the time of the Second World War. He works out a scheme to get a letter from an aged Walden by having his wife write an admiring letter to the scholar posing as a millionairess infatuated with his work. The correspondence goes on for several years. Suddenly Walden announces he is coming to New York to meet the fictitious Eleanor Seligman-Braude. When he arrives, Liebkind informs him that Eleanor has just died in a plane crash. Confused, the old man goes to stay in an apartment provided by his friends. During the night he is taken ill and goes to the hospital where he dies.

22) Powers: A tall stranger drops by the newspaper where the narrator works as a reporter to discuss their mutual interest in the occult and supernatural. The visitor says that as a boy he first recognized that he had telepathic powers. As a young man, the visitor says he had many women and sometimes four or five at the same time. He falls in love with a young woman named Manya, who tries to drown herself. He says he willed her telepathically never to try suicide again and it worked. The visitor says he saw a beautiful woman briefly pass through a drawing room and became enchanted with her. She calls him later and tells him she is married and to leave her alone. The visitor protests that he has done nothing, but she tells him he has been haunting her sleep and driving her to distraction. The reporter asks the old man with the sunken face whether he still thinks about women; with a sad face the visitor says "only dead ones."

23) Something Is There: Rabbi Nechemia of Bechev, Poland becomes skeptical about the existence of God and feels that everything in the universe is mere coincidence. Uprooted in his faith, he leaves the village and goes to Warsaw to visit his brother, Simcha David. When he finds his brother, the rabbi gets a cool reception; he starts to wander around the city to find out how the world of humans operates. He encounters thieves, prostitutes, and drunkards. Disillusioned with the city, Rabbi Nechemia returns to Bechev. He rests on his bed until right before dawn, goes to the window, and sees the moon surrounded by a reddened sky. He says quietly, "Something is there."

24) A Crown of Feathers: Akhsa Holishitzer is the beautiful and overindulged daughter of Reb Naftali Holishitzer of Krasnobrod. Naftali and his wife, Nesha, and their family live on the estate of a Polish prince managed by Reb Naftali. When Akhsa becomes of age, her father arranged several suitors to visit her. Each one she dismisses with insults. In her consternation, she hears her grandmother's voice telling her to open her poillow. There she finds a delicate crown made of down feathers, with a cross on the top. She later marries an old squire named Wladyyslaw Malkowski, who is a gentile. The devil appears to her and says he is the one who made the crown. Akhsa decides to go back to Judaism, finds her rejected suitor Zemach and tells him she wants to marry. Zemach curses and insults her for three years after their marriage. Akhsa becomes ill

and once again hears her grandmother's voice telling her to cut the pillow open. There she finds another crown of feathers with the letters YHVH, for "yahveh" or God on the top. She then dies with a smile on her face.

25) A Day in Coney Island: The narrator, a Polish Jew in New York to escape the Nazis, is a Yiddish writer who manages to barely survive writing pieces for a Yiddish newspaper. He carries on a secret love affair with Esther who lives just two blocks away in Sea Gate. She is an abandoned and divorced woman. Just as he goes to a cafeteria to scavenge leftovers from the tables, he decides to call his editor to see if his latest piece will be published. The editor says yes, and asks for another piece. When he hangs up the phone a cascade of coins flows out and fills his pockets. Later he stops at a delicatessen where a friend buys him cheesecake. Esther enters and joins their table. The friend tells Esther of the writer's imminent deportation to Poland, unless he marries an American citizen. Esther gives him a querulous look but he says he would not marry for a visa. She gets up and walks out. The writer suddenly realizes he has estranged Esther, "a woman I really loved."

26) The Cabalist of East Broadway: Joel Yabloner is a Yiddish scholar and writer who specializes in the Cabala. He is an awkward and emaciated man who lives in New York City on his puny earnings and refuses to collect either Social Security or a Writers Union pension. He is enamored of a woman but they never get closer than exchanging eyeglasses. His friend, the narrator, urges him to go to Israel and collect his retirement funds. Yabloner disappears and then resurfaces later in New York to give a lecture. He tells his friend that he has moved to Israel and married. His wife is very protective of him. The narrator encounters Yabloner later, sitting alone in a cafeteria just as he used to do, looking emaciated. The narrator speculates that Yabloner had returned to New York to be buried alongside his first sweetheart. When the narrator reads Yabloner's obituary, he remembers his last statement, "Man does not live according to reason."

27) A Quotation from Klopstock: Max Persky is somewhat of a literary lion in Warsaw. Rumors circulate that he squandered his talent in chasing women. Chatting with the narrator over lunch, Persky recalls Theresa Stein, with whom he had an affair when he was in his twenties and she was in her fifties. Theresa falls in love with Max and chases him although she has other affairs. Soon, her age becomes obvious. Max begins an affair with Nina but Therese comes to his apartment and dies during the night. Nina knocks on his door in the morning. They put her clothes on the corpse, drag it to the nearest street corner, and leave it sitting upright with her purse. As World War I approaches, Nina develops tuberculosis and dies. Ending his story, Max flirts with the waitress and arranges to meet her at the end of her shift.

28) A Dance and a Hop: Rachel, Leah and Feigel are spinster daughters of Leizer in the village of Shebrin, Poland. They earn a living for themselves and their father by operating a bakery. Leah, the oldest, is mannish and handles the wood chopping for the oven, kneads the dough, and shapes the loaves. Rachel sells the bread on Thursdays and on Fridays she sells Sabbath cookies. Feigel has been engaged three times but never married. She accuses Leah of being a man because she is not interested in marriage. Feigel marries Leibush Motl from Warsaw but refuses to let him into her bed.

The marriage is quickly dissolved. Feigel becomes ill and dies. Rachel goes insane then dies of breast cancer. Leah stops baking and survives by renting out rooms. In her sixties, Leah dies just before the Nazi invasion of Poland.

29) Grandfather and Grandson: Reb Mordecai Meir is an old man left alone after the deaths of all of his children and his wife, Beyl Teme. He is also a pious and dedicated Hasidim who arises every night at midnight to recite prayers and lament the destruction of the temple. One day his grandson Fulie, whose mother is Zelda Rayzel, Mordecai's deceased daughter, knocks on his door and asks to stay with him for a while. The young man, a socialist, mocks the traditional old ideas of his grandfather and talks idealistically of a better world to come in which the proletariat will run the country. One night, Fulie goes out after midnight with a pistol in his hand to join his comrades. There is gunfire and mayhem throughout the night. Policemen appear at Mordecai's doorstep bearing the bloody corpse of his grandson. They arrest the old man for being a Jew, and he says,"Yes, I am Jew. I pray God."

30) Old Love: Harry Bendiner is an octogenarian millionaire who lives alone in his condominium in Miami Beach. His third wife has died as well as his children. His grandchildren live in Canada. Harry does not realize how lonely he is until the widow next door, Mrs. Ethel Brokeles, knocks on his door and introduces herself. She is an attractive and small woman in her fifties. She invites him to her condo for lunch and tells him her husband has died suddenly, ending an almost-perfect marriage. They begin to fantasize about getting married and traveling around the world. That night, Harry is awakened by a loud commotion and learns that Mrs. Brokeles has leapt to her death. She leaves a letter for him, asking his forgiveness for going to be with her husband.

Chapters 21-30 Analysis

A fine sense of absurdity and alienation on the part of the author is evident in these stories, perhaps reflecting the shift in focus from the Old World to the New World with the immigration of Jews to America. There are stories of disappointment and deceit, as in The Joke in which a publisher schemes to bring a Yiddish writer to New Yor but dies before he can meet him and in Powers where an old womanizer confesses that he can only dream now of dead women that he has known. An atheist rabbi comes to believe when he sees a beautiful sunrise in Something Is There. Seeking his own welfare, a writer facing deportation scorns his woman friend and alienates her. He then realizes how short-sighted he is and grieves the loss of someone he truly loves.

The tenuous nature of existence and human love is highlighted in Old Love, in which a retired millionaire in his eighties is courted by his widowed next-door neighbor in a Florida condominium. Just as their relationship starts to form, she jumps to her death. Singer stresses the themes of human loneliness and isolation, the spiritual deformities that can result, and the madness that can overtake the psychically wounded and lead to death.

Chapters 31-40

Chapters 31-40 Summary

31) The Admirer: A fan of the narrator's writing, Elizabeth Abigail de Sollar, writes him long letters then appears on his doorstep. The woman's husband calls to say that their child is having an asthma attack and he needs to know where the medicine is. Eloizabeth dismisses the call as "hysteria" and does not call her husband. Elizabeth says she is still a virgin despite her marriage to a man she doesn't like, and their step-daughter is a burden to her. Elizabeth makes a pass, but the narrator pulls away. Phone calls from Elizabeth's mother and lawyer cause the narrator to become alarmed. Elizabeth foams at the mouth and falls into a seizure. He runs to get help from someone in the apartment building; when he returns she is speaking on the telephone. She leaves and promises to cause him no more trouble.

32) The Yearning Heifer: A columnist for a Yiddish newspaper inNew York City responds to a classified ad in his own paper that offers "a room on a farm with food, $10 weekly." He takes a bus to the Catskills, then hires a cab to the farm. The cab driver keeps getting lost, but he finally arrives to a chilly reception by Bessie, the farmer's sixty-year-oldwife, and Sylvia, their thirty-year-old daughter. They tell him Sam, the patriarch, is crazy and there is no room for rent. Sam realizes that the visitor writes the column he reads every day, and says he is completely welcome to stay as long as he wants. Meanwhile a heifer screams in the distance. Bessie says that the cow needs a bull. When the parents go to bed, the columnist and Sylvia go for a walk in the dark. They kiss passionately and the writer realizes why the heifer wails.

33) A Tale of Two Sisters: As they sip coffee in Buenos Aires, the narrator and his old friend Leon Bardeles discuss old times in Europe. Bardeles tells his friend that he met a woman in Poland toward the end of World War II named Dora and they fell in love. Dora enlists Bardeles' help in finding her missing sister, Ytta. They find Ytrta living in dire poverty with an old shoemaker in a Polish village. The three repair to Paris, live together and practice polygmany. The two sisters periodically attack each other like rabid dogs. Bardeles loses interest in the two women. One night, as he goes to the bathroom he is confronted by a spongy phantom who pushes his penis into its socket. Frightened, Bardeles takes a plane to London, works on a Yiddish newspaper, and moves to Argentina where he marries Lena. He never hears from the two sisters again. Bardeles tells his friend that if he meets a woman in Stettin who asks him to look for her sister, he should not go. However, the friend says that fate will probably compel him to go. If that happens, Baredeles says, "you'll know how I felt."

34) Three Encounters: The narrator leaves the small village in Poland where he grew up and goes to Warsaw for an education and to learn a profession. He comes back home when he turns twenty, sick and without a profession. He receives a letter from his brother, offering him a job on his literary publication in Warsaw. Before he can leave, he meets Rivkele, a charming and beautiful young woman who is engaged to a local boy.

He tells her that she should move to the city before she becomes beaten down by life in Old-Stikov. Two years later, Rivkele knocks on his door in Warsaw and tells him a sad tale of bad marriage, abandonment, and poverty. They discuss fleeing somewhere together but he tells her that he must report for military conscription. Their paths cross nine years later when she visits him again in New York City. She is pasty-faced, middle-aged, and a convert to Christianity. She says that she wants to become a Jewish daughter again. "Not through me," he tells her as a woman in a nearby apartment loudly wails a blues song.

35) Passions: Jonathan the tailor is a simple-minded resident of Krasnystaw, Poland who burns with a passion for Judaism. He challenges Reb Zekele, a learned man and builder, to a bet that he will become a better scholar than him within one year of spend the rest of his life sedwing for Zekele's wife. If Jonathan is declared a better scholar, then Zekele must build him a house. A panel of rabbis and educated Jews determines that Jonathan is a better scholar than Zekele; in a demonstration of piety, Jonathan asks that Zekele build a study center for yeshiva students and travelers instead of a home for himself.

6) Brother Beetle: Living in Tel Aviv, the narrator encounters a flame from his youth named Dosha when she passes his table in a restaurant. They sit for a while, drink some wine, and talk. Dosha says she has a lover who is unpredictable and crazy. Dosha leads him back to her apartment and after they make love, he goes to the bathroom in the nude. While in the darkness of the bathroom, he notices a large beetle. Crashing and slamming sounds let him know that Dosha's lover has returned. Eventually Dosha runs to the bathroom and drops off his clothes. He dresses and gets to the street, where he notices the beetle in the cuff of his pants and reflects that both he and the beetle have been given a second chance.

37) The Betrayer of Israel: Koppel Mitzner, a peddler of old clothing, is arrested by the police and brought before the rabbi for practicing polygamy. He claims that three other women, after his legal wife, entrapped him into marriage and that if King Solomon could have a thousand wives, so could he. A tremendous controversy erupts in the rabbi's house between the women of the village and the men. The rabbi orders Mitzner, the father of four daughters and nine children, to divorce his three wives, honor his first wife, and provide support for his children. The news spreads quickly that Koppel Mitzner has vanished with his youngest wife, perhaps to Paris or New York.

38) The Psychic Journey: A writer named Morris encounters a woman named Margaret feeding pigeons in New York City. This is also his habit. His woman friend, Dorsa, has gone to Israel to assist in the birth of her first child. They strike up an acquaintance and he learns that she is psychic involved with mental telepathy, astral bodies, and seances. When she learns of Morris' interest in the Cabala, she proposes that he accompany her and a friend in leading a combined historical and psychic tour of Israel. Morris resists but relents. While they are in Israel, war breaks out between Israel and the Arab states. Morris slips away and takes a plane back to New York. He tells Dora about his misadventure with the psychic and she thinks that she is kidding her. She tells him to get on the subway with her and go home.

39) The Manuscript: Two old Jewish friends from Warsaw, a writer called Loshikl and an actress called Shibtah, have brunch at a sidewalk café in Tel Aviv. They tell each other how they survived World War II. Shibtah says she married a scholar who writes a novel that she thinks is great. As the Nazis approach, they throw some things, including his novel manuscript into two bags and flee to the Russian side. When they stop, they realize that the writer, Menashe Linder, has left his manuscript in their Warsaw apartment. Shibtah takes a train to Warsaw, retrieves the manuscript, and returns to Bialystock. When she enters her apartment, she finds that Menashe in bed with another woman. In a rage, she throws his novel into the fire. She tells her friend that when she burned his manuscript, she also burned her capacity to love.

40) The Power of Darkness: Jealousy drives Henia Dvosha to her sickbed in a case of "nerves," although Henia believes that it is heart disease. Rumors fly that Henia wants to die so that her husband, Issur Godel, can marry her sister Dunia. On her sickbed, Henia makes a beautiful wedding dress for her sister. Despite rosy predictions of a recovery for Henia, she dies and soon Issur and Dunia are married. Just as World War I begins, the couple divorces because Henia Dvosha comes each night between them in bed and is jealous even in death.

Chapters 31-40 Analysis

Unpredictability runs like a current through these stories in which human desire is thwarted or suddenly satisfied by the moods of fate. The lover of a fleeing Yiddish writer returns to Warsaw as the Nazis advance to retrieve a copy of his novel left behind. She returns and finds him in bed with another woman and throws the novel into the fireplace. Nobody gets what they really want. A woman wails the blues in a New York apartment building as two Jews discuss a possible return to Judaism for one who has converted to Christianity. A man sleeps with a woman in Tel Aviv who was an old flame and her boyfriend returns as they lie in the dark. The lover escapes to the street. He could just as easily have been shot. A writer agrees to help a New York psychic organize a combined psychic and historical tour of Israel. He flees back to New York just as another Arab-Israeli war begins. What happens to the psychic woman left behind with her madness and tour group? Singer does not give answers to these existential dilemmas, but portrays them vividly so that the reader will want to figure out the answers.

Chapters 41-47

Chapters 41-47 Summary

41) The Bus: The narrator suffers physically and spiritually on a twelve-day bus tour of Spain, when he becomes embroiled in a four-wheel soap opera. Mrs. Weyerhofer sits next to him and tells him that her husband hates her. Another tourist, Annette Metalon, is a widow traveling with her son Mark, who tries to promote a romance between his mother and the narrator. Mrs. Weyerhofer, obviously interested in the narrator, tells him that Mrs. Metalon is crazy and that Markis is her lover and not her son. She also says that he should avoid Mrs. Metalon. At one point, the narrator sits next to Mrs, Weyerehofer's husband and discusses who is a Jew and what Judaism means. After eating dinner one night with Mrs. Weyerhofer, the narrator tells her that he is finished with her and with women.

42) A Night in the Poorhouse: Two old men, Zeinvel the thief and Mottke, the con artist, discuss their lives in the poorhouse. Mottke tells Zeinvel of a time when the spirit of a butchered bull inhabited the wife of the slaughterer almost driving her man. Zeinvel counters with a story about making love to a slut in the graveyard one night, a woman who admitted one man was never enough for her. Intrertwined with their conversation is a debate about the existence of God. Zeinvel says the woman had two children and died but that if she is in "Gehenna" or hell he would gladly lie next to her on a bed of nails.

43) Escape from Civilization: A Polish emigré writer names Warshawsky, seeking an escape from the summer heat in New York City, packs his bags and goes to Sea Gate in search of a roo rental. Sea Gate, on the Atlantic coast, offers a respite from his hay fever and is considerably cooler than the city. In a fierce wind, he enters a large mansion and finds an immediate attraction to the landlady, who knows about his Yiddish "ghost stories." She shows him around the house, including a portrait of the widow who once owned it. Warshawsky observes that her spirit probably haunts the house and the landlady tells him that the room will not be available for a few weeks, adding that he has spooked her with his reference to ghosts. They leave together and return to the city.

44) Vanvild Kava: The narrator, who identifies himself as the brother of I. J. Singer, becomes associate editor of a periodical whose managing editor wants a sizable essay on Yiddish literature. He offers the job to Vanvild Kava, an oddball and threadbare literary figure whose output is minuscule and whose criticism of other writers infinite. His essay is delivered late and too long. It starts with scholarly observations on literature and then becomes a treatise on the many varieties of horses. Baffled, the editor rejects the article wondering whether it is some kind of joke. The narrator notes that whatever the motivation of the piece, its strangeness, like that of its author, went to the grave with him.

45) The Re-encounter: Max Greitzer gets a phone call that an old lover, Liza Nestling, has died. He goes to the funeral parlor to pay his respects and discovers that he also is dead, that the two are now disembodied souls. They greet each other cheerfully and decide they do not want to attend each others' funerals. "What then do you want," Max asks Liza. "Nothing," she replies. They float up into the heavens, watching the earth recede below. Max tells Liza that immortality is the greatest disappointment of his life.

46) Neighbors: The narrator has two neighbors, Morris Terkeltoyb, a careless and mediocre writer, and Margit Levy. He tells stories about his great conquests of women. Margit claims to be descended from Hungarian aristocracy. The narrator thinks that he is a pathological liar and she is delusional. The two neighbors meet for the first time by accident in the narrator's apartment. "An uneducated idiot, a ruffin" is how Margit describes Morris. Both tend to confuse names, dates, and situations.The narrator returns from a trip to a snowy New York and finds the two old folks, Margit and Morris, making their way to the grocery store together. When Morris dies, he finds tons of old love letters from various women. When Margit dies, he discovers a photo album confirming her rank as a socialite.

47) Moon and Madness: During a snowy winter night, a motley bunch of men sit around the stove and tell each other stories about pity. Zalman the glazier relates the story of Count Malecki who serves as judge and hands out lenient sentences, if any at all. The businessmen who are robbed resent Malecki and some of them leave the town. The eunuch Meir tells the story of Rabbi Joseph who is duped by a witch because he pities her. He dies and is reincarnated as a dog.

Chapters 41-47 Analysis

In The Bus and Escape from Civilization, Singer elaborates on the theme of absurdity as a busload of tourists turn a bus tour in Spain into a microcosm of the confusion and conflict among people in the modern world. Escape from Civilization shows how tenuous a friendly meeting of the minds between man and woman can be where two former lovers reunite as disembodied spirits after death. Confronted with these unlikely situations, the reader is apt to say, "Why not?" Singer's craftsmanship is evident in the smooth way that he blends the real with the surreal. The reader realizes with a jolt that he or she has just been transported from the physical world into another dimension where none of the earthly laws and conditions apply. Sometimes this detachment from physical reality carries the reader back into Old World demonology, as in Moon and Madness. Sometimes, it projects the reader into spiritualism and the occult, as in The Re-encounter.

Characters

dybbukappears in The Dead Fiddler

According to Jewish folklore, a dybbuk is a disembodied human spirit in search of a living human to possess. In Singer's stories, dybbuks, like ghosts, can be mischievous, evil, or benevolent. The figure of the dybbuk appears in many of these stories. Often, the living characters ascribe events in their life to an unseen and unknown dybbuk. In actual Judaism, special rabbis were once called to perform exorcisms on dybbuks which are similar to the exorcisms to remove demonic possessions practiced by the Catholic Church.

Satanappears in The Unseen, and others

Also known as The Evil One, Satan appears in numerous stories, sometimes as both narrator and character at the same time. The nearly universal presence of evil as objectified in Satan attests to its importance in both Yiddish language and folklore. He is both narrator and participant in Zeidlus the Pope, The Destruction of Kreshev, The Unseen, and The Last Demon. Satan takes many forms from human to animal and evil spirit that inhabits a human body. Satan is cunning, versatile and unpredictable in every situation. Satan ambushes otherwise righteous people and makes them sin, causing the ruin of entire villages.

Rabbi Ozerappears in The Gentleman from Cracow

Rabbi Ozer cautions his congregation about taking gifts from The Gentleman from Cracow, suspecting something amiss. He issues an edict to prevent young women of Frampol from being paraded like prostitutes at a feast demanded by the doctor from Cracow. This doctor reveals himself as Satan at the height of the debauchery. Once Satan has been driven out and some order restored to the town, Rabbi Ozer is memorialized by a statue in the holy plaza.

Gimpleappears in Gimple the Fool

Gimple is a simple and gullible baker who becomes known as a fool in the village of Frampol. He marries Elka, who has a constant stream of lovers visit her right under her husband's nose. She simply denies it when Gimple asks who is in her bedroom, from which he is banished. Meanwhile, Elka bears six children. Before she dies prematurely, she tells Gimple that none of the children are his. In retribution, he pours a bucket of urine into the bread he bakes each night. Then, confused and disillusioned, he leaves the village in search of some kind of genuine experience, free from deception.

Abba the shoemakerappears in The Little Shoemakers

Abba is a shoemaker in the village of Frampol. He has seven sons with his wife Pescha. All of his sons become shoemakers. His children all emigrate to America and Abba becomes lonely and ill. Pescha dies of cholera. He loses all interest in the world and stops working at his shop. One day a steamship ticket to America arrives in the mail for him. It is a gift from his children. He goes to New York where they all greet Abba. Abba settles in a town in New Jersey with his sons, who build him a workshop like the one he had in Poland. Abba comes back to life and resumes his old work habits where he early to work and late to home. His sons occasionally join Abba at his work bench. Abba is contented and pleased with his new home.

The Narratorappears in The Joke, and others

In many stories, the narrator identifies himself as "I" but bears many characteristics in common with Isaac Bashevis Singer, the actual narrator/author. In this fictional mask-within-a-mask, Singer writes of his own experiences as a Polish immigrant Jew who lives variously in New York City or Miami Beach and is a newspaper columnist for a doomed Yiddish newspaper. This occurs in The Cabbalist of East Broadway, A Day in Coney Island, The Joke, Alone, The Admirer, and others. Often, the narrator, a retiring sort of fellow, is seemingly shocked when someone identifies him as the newspaper columnist, but there is also a part of the narrator who secretly flourishes on the recognition. The narrator presents himself as a worldly-wise and reticent observer of human nature whose passions for literature, women, and reflection occasionally come into clear view.

Yiddishappears in All stories

Although not a person, Yiddish is the language that connects all these stories as it connects most of the Jewish communities worldwide. Yiddish developed in the Ashkenazi culture of the Rhineland in Germany around the 10th century, and is a polyglot of German dialects with Slavic languages, Aramaic, Hebrew and bits of Romance languages. It is written in Hebrew, and is spoken in Orthodox Jewish communities, especially as the foundation language in Hassidic communities. The vocabulary and syntax of Yiddish reflects the various cultures and languages in Europe that comprise the Jewish Diaspora.

Yoineh Meirappears in The Slaughterer

Yoineh Meir is the educated Hassid who is a contender for rabbi of Kolomir, after the death of the sitting rabbi. Powerful families conspire to appoint their own rabbi—someone other than Yoineh. As a sort of consolation prize, they appoint Yoineh the ritual slaughterer of animals to preserve the kosher tradition. A sensitive man with great compassion for animals and other living creatures, Yoineh allows himself to be

convinced he should trade the job. Right away he is appalled and sickened at the task of slaughtering animals for holy feasts. Eventually he goes insane and drowns himself in the river.

Dr, Nahum Fichelsonappears in The Spinoza of Market Street

Dr. Nahum Fischelson is a highly educated academic. He is an adherent to the gloomy views of the misogynistic philosopher Spinoza. Fischelson thinks that other people are all fools and idiots, especially professors who teach Spinoza's views incorrectly to students. He is a hypochondriac who thinks he is dying. He is a man unhappy in the world and in his own skin. Quite suddenly, in his old age, he announces that he is getting married. He goes to the window one night and asks Spinoza's forgiveness because, "I have become a fool."

Taibeleappears in Taibele and Her Demon

Tybele is a 33-year-old woman who lives with her husband, Chaim Nossen, in Lashnik. They had three children who all died in infancy. In his grief, Tibele's husband packs up and leaves for the town of Lublin, never to return. The town scoundrel, Alchonen, hears of her desertion and sneaks into Taibele's bedroom one night, Alarmed she asks him who he is. He tells her he is the demon Hurmizah; he threatens and cajoles her into sex and leaves. He continues to visit Taibele every Wednesday and Saturday. Alchonen gets sick and starts to weaken, growing thinner. Taibele offers to help but he refuses since demons do not need human assistance. One day, Taibele sees a corpse being hauled through the streets for burial, feet sticking out. Meanwhile, her demon lover stops visiting her. She follows Alchonon's corpse to burial and reflects that he must have been as lonely as she.

Zeidlus the Pope

The devil sets his sights on Zeidel Cohen, a learned man from a distinguished Jewish family. Zeidel has no apparent vices that Satan can use to destroy him, but the Evil One discovers that his one character flaw is pride. He appears to Zeidel and tells him he is the greatest schpolar anywhere and tells him he is to good to be buried in a bacvkwater town place like Lublin. The devil tells Zeidel the only thing for him to do is convert to Christianity. Zeidel obeys but when he is old and dying, Satan appears to take him to "Gehenna" or hell. When he gets there, the imps who rake the coals call him "Zeidlus te Firsst" or "the Yeshiva boy who wanted to become pope."

Objects/Places

Frampol, Polandappears in The Unseen, The Gentleman from Cracow, The Little Shoemakers

Frampol is an imaginary village in northern Poland used as the setting for a number of Singer's stories dealing with evil spirits, dybbuks, and other elements of ancient European Orthodox Judaism. Most of the residents are simple and reverent people who function in a close community with the rabbi as spiritual advisor. Occasionally, though, Satan makes an appearance embodied in human form to cause turmoil and destruction in the village. When that happens, the Jews of Frampol get help in rebuilding their village and reclaiming their families from Jews in another nearby village.

phylacteryappears in Yentl the Yeshiva Boy

In Jewish custom, a phylactery is a small box made of skin from "clean" animals, containing portions of scripture from the Torah written on parchment. One box is usually carried on the arm and the other on the head. Use of phylacteries, in Singer's fiction, signifies a man who is serious about his faith.

Warsaw, Polandappears in A Friend of Kafka

As the one of biggest city in Poland, Warsaw represents all that is sophisticated and a lot of what is evil, to the simple villagers who populate these stories. Whenever one of these characters strikes out on his or her own for the experience that will usher them into adulthood or transform their life, the usual destination is Warsaw.

Lublin, Polandappears in The Destruction of Kreshev

Lublin is a large town that serves as a metropolitan hub for several surrounding villages such as Frampol. It is where villagers go for a taste of sophistication when they can not make the trip to Warsaw or Cracow. For example, Lublin dressmakers provide the wedding gown for Lise, Reb Bunim's daughter, in The Destruction of Kreshev.

gabardineappears in The Letter Writer

Gabardine is a tough and densely woven fabric of either wool or cotton commonly used to make overcoats, suits, and trousers. It is mentioned multiple times in these stories as a fabric of choice for Jews.

Miami Beachappears in Alone

This is the setting for "Alone," a dark tale that suffocates the sunlight in what is generally regarded as a happy tourist destination. The narrator decides to move to Miami Beach from New York after the death of his wife, but discovers that he is more alone there among the retirees and condominiums than he was in the city.

Gehennaappears in Passions

Gehenna is the land of the doomed or hell in Yiddish literature and culture. As in Christianity and other religions, Gehenna is a place of unmitigated torment and suffering to be borne by sinners and those who allow evil into their lives. Gehenna is mentioned in Passions and many other stories in this collection.

New York Cityappears in The Seance

This is the setting for "The Seance," where Zorach Kalisher encounters the widowed medium, Mrs. Kopitzsky in her apartment near Central Park. New York also is the setting for a number of stories narrated by a Polish immigrant who bears an uncanny resemblance to Isaac Singer.

Shidlovtse, Polandappears in The Dead Fiddler

This is a small town near the Mountains of the Holy Cross, and the setting for "The Dead Fiddler." The local rabbi is Reb Sheftel Vengrover, a small man with the longest beard in the surrounding district.

Parisappears in A Friend of Kafka

As the "city of light," cosmopolitan Paris represents to the simple characters in these stories the ultimate freedom, bordering on debauchery. For most characters, Paris is the destination when one wants not only to get away but to be permanently "disappeared" from the web of Polish Judaism.

Themes

The supernatural

Dybbuks, devils, imps, and evil spirits populate these stories in a recurrent pattern. In The Gentleman from Cracow, for example, Satan rides into the Polish town of Frampol in a splendid carriage, posed as a wealthy physician from Warsaw. He buys flour for the struggling bakery and hands out gold coins to the residents. Mothers groom trheir daughters in hopes they may become his bride. The rabbi warns the Jews that evil is afoot. At a huge feast, Satan brings down lightening bolts that set fire to the town, which burns to the ground in a blinding rainstorm. In The Dead Fiddler, a woman is possessed by not one but two dybbuks until an exorcism is performed by the rabbi. In other stories, there is usually a sense of an inchoate evil in the world and in other men that isn't always objectified in the form of a beast or devil. When that evil is manifested in a creature the powers of good are usually sufficient to dispatch it, but often not before great destruction and misery ot those who fall prey to lust, pride or gluttony in Singer's fictional world.

Evidently this obsession with evil spirits is part of Eastern European Yiddish culture and may be a throwback to ancient folklore and to polytheism, or the belief that that are many gods or forces in the universe that can determine man's fate. Interestingly, Judaism is one of the first religions to embrace monotheism, or the4 belief that all powers in the universe reside in a single god, known to the ancient Hebrews as Yahweh, or YHWH. When a rabbi is called upon to perform an exorcism, symbolically the rabbi drives out the ancient beliefs in multiple evil spirits and replaces them with a single God who is an omnipotent force for good. In that context, many of Singers' stories where supernatural forces overtake man there is a moral lesson: the evil of the world is in ourselves, not in devils, dybbuks, and imps.

Karma

Drawing on a rich tradition of Yidedish folklore, Singer weaves a plentitude of stories in which sin and malfeasance are rewarded with punishment on earth and after death. On the other hand, enlightenment and awareness are rewarded with good things in the present life. In The Spinoza of Market Street, an antisocial and unhappy philosopher learns through marriage that there is much joy to be experienced in the real world. He is redeemed from his cynicism by allowing himself to experience human feelings. Although an obvious lesson in karma could be learned from the Holocaust, the extermination of Jews under the Nazis is mentioned but not exploited in this collection.

In The Gentleman from Cracow, an entire village called Frampol experiences extreme retribution for following the sinful path urged on them by Satan despite the warnings of the rabbi. Satan burns the village to the ground. In Passions, Rabbi Mendel is so transported by his passion for God that he has a heart attack while speaking at the

pulpit in the temple and dies on the spot. Herman Gombiner, a half-starved skeleton of a man who loses all his family in the Holocaust, discovers that life can be good after the publishing house where he works is closed. What is his reward for living a virtuous life? A woman comes to his flat and offers to care for him after an illness and the mouse that lives in his apartment returns to assure Herman that she is doing fine.

Fake vs Genuine

As an author, Singer seems preoccupied with the question of what is real and what is not. In The Seance, the narrator goes to the apartment of a lady friend who is interested in the occult. She stages a seance for her friend in which he thinks he sees a long lost love in the dark shadows. His excitement causes him to run to the bathroom to urinate. There he sees the flesh-and-blood woman who appeared in the seance sitting on the toilet. In Gimpel the Fool, a simple baker gets tired of being the object of ridicule in the town and tired of his wife's infidelity and lying over many years. He runs away to another town where he dreams of his wife, but know that on awakening, everything will be real and free of deception.

In The Spinoza of Market Street, an apostle of the philosopher Spinoza leads a poverty-stricken, penurious, and pathetic life as a social outcast because he believes, like Spinoza, that all people are ignorant swine. The Spinoza apostle grows increasingly lonely and frustrated trying to live a life that is not his own and marries. Everyone is shocked but the philosopher is pleased and happy that he has finally come to his senses and begun to live his own life rather than a fake role. In Singer's fiction, sometimes the incredible hides the truly evil, as when Satan comes to Frampol disguised as a wealthy doctor. He seduces practically the entire town with his cunning and false presentation of himself as a good man who wants to help the struggling village. Soon enough, he is revealed as The Beast with Three Backs and he accomplishes the complete destruction of the town.

Singer obviously prefers the real truth to a dressed-up lie and shows the reader how the former can be tolerated while the latter can cause ruin.

Style

Point of View

The author most often uses the narrative "I" in these stories and closely parallels the author's own life. He is a struggling Yiddish writer trying to get a foothold in America after fleeing the Holocaust. Cleverly, this use of the authorial "i" lends an element of credibility to strange stories from strange lands within the Eastern European Jewish diaspora. When the narrator describes all the characters of the Yiddish subculture such as abbis, beadles, Yeshiva students, and businessmen, the depictions seem very life-like and authentic.

Another point of view in some stories, such as The Destruction of Kreshev, is that of Satan himself who declares his powers of destruction and goes about the business of proving himself, as both participant in and narrator of the story. "I am the Primeval Snake, the Evil One, Satan," begins The Destruction of Kreshev. The devil also serves double duty as both narrator and participant in The Last Demon. "I, a demon, bear witness that there are no more demons left" sets the tone for The Last Demon. The most effective point of view in relating the stories of demonic intervention seem to be those that use the voice of an independent narrator because reading the devil's account of his own doings raises a question of credibility and insults the intelligence of the reader.

Setting

Most of the stories are set in small villages in Poland or in large cities such as New York, Paris and Miami Beach. Even when the setting is a large city, typically the focus of the story is the Jewish community itself. Such Polish villages as Frampol, Shidlovtse, and Lublin are each distinct communities but with almost identical Jewish subcultures. The type of Judaism practiced in these villages is very orthodox, centered on the rabbi, but with plenty of evil spirits, demonic possessions, and fantastic tales of sin and retribution. The spiritual life of Jews in these small villages seems to have incorporated ancient superstitious beliefs with the belief in a single god who cannot be described as male or female and is removed from the physical world of passions and possessions.

In an urban setting, transplanted Jews who come to New York, Miami Beach, Paris and other large cities seem to maintain the closeness of their community and faith but also to jettison most of the superstituous beliefs from the old country. They quickly adapt to the world of the "automat," the subway, and more "modern" ways of thought and behavior once removed from the ancient connection of European Jewry.

Language and Meaning

The author freely employs "yiddishisms" throughout, occasionally pausing to explain to gentiles what he is writing about. Reading these stories is not unlike jumping into a cold ocean. It feels like shock to the system followed by the awareness that one is in a totally different environment that functions differently than the terrestrial world. This overall effect is to heighten the reader's sensibilities and curiosity to both overcome language and cultural barriers and to internalize the "gestalt" or broader picture of what is happening in the narratives.

Structure

Although each story is structured differently, there seems to be an underlying thread of the ancient morality tale in which someone learns an important lesson about good and evil through their own personal suffering. This is not because someone older and wiser tells them so. Most of the stories follow a problem-crisis-turning point-resolution pattern, even those populated with and narrated by evil spirits. However, in many instances, the resolution is not complete or satisfying, as in the case of Gimpel the Fool who runs from chronic abuse and clings to the hope that in his new location he will be able to know the truth. Old lovers reappear, come in close, than drift away into the ethers. The horrific pall of the Holocaust hovers over transplanted Jews, without resolution because of the total loss of families and relatives. More often, Singer seems to prefer a less-than-complete resolution to emphasize the point that life provides few such experiences and that most of life is gray instead of black-and-white.

Quotes

"Satan himself gave away the bridegroom, while four evil spirits held the poles of the canopy which had turned into writhing pythons. Four dogs escorted the groom. Hodle's dress fell from her and she stood naked. Her breasts hung down to her nqavel and her feet were webbed. Her hair was a wilderness of worms and catepillars. The groom held out a triangular ring" (The Gentleman from Cracow, pg. 25.)

"He [Abba] would walk into clothes closets, lock himself into the bathroom and forget how to come oujt; the doorbell and the radio frightened him; and he suffereed constant anxiety because of the cars that raced past the house" (The Little Shoemakers, pg. 55.)

"Powers long dormant awakened in him [Dr. Fischelson]. Although he had had only a sip of the benediction wine, he was as if intoxicated. He kissed Dobbe and spoke to her of love. Long-forgotten quotations from Klopstock, Lessing and Goethe rose to his lips. The pressures and aches stopped. He embraced Dobbe, pressed her to himself, was again a man as in his youth. Dobbe was faint with delight; crying, she murmured things to him in a Warsaw slang which he did not understand" (The Sp[inoza of Market Street, pg. 92.)

"I am the Primeval Snake, the Evil One, Satan. The Cabala refers to me as Samael and the Jewws sometimes call me merely 'that one.' It is well known that Ilove to arrange strange mareriages, delighting in such mismatings as an old man with a young girl, an unattractive widow with a youth in his prime, a cripple with a great beuty, a cantor with a deaf woman, a mute with a braggart" (The Destruction of Kreshev, pg. 94.)

"From then on, Taibele remained alone, doubly deserted—by an ascetic and by a devil. She aged quickly. Nothing was left to her of the past except a secret that could never be told and would be believed by no one. There are secrets that the heart cannot reveal to the lips. They are carried to the grave. The dead will awaken one day, but their secrets will abide with the Almighty and His judgment until the end of all generations" (Taibele and Her Demon, pg. 139.)

"No more sins, no more temptations! Messiah does not come. To whom should he come? Messiah did not come for the Jews, so the Jews went to Messiah. There is no further need for demons. We have also been annihilated. I am the last, a refugee. I can go anywhere I please, but where should a demon like me go? To the murderers?" (The Last Demon, pg. 186.)

"Dr. Kalisher began to doubt his own [belief] system and fell into despair. He had to leave his hotel and move into a cheap furnished room. He wandereed about in shabby clothes, sat all day in cafeterias, drank endless cups of coffee, smoked bad cigars, and barely managed to survive on the few dollars that a relief organization gave him every month. He, Zorach Kalisher, could save no one from the Nazis" (The Seance, pg. 200.)

"Yoineh Meir heard shouts, screams, the stamping of running feet. The earth began to slope and Yoineh Meir rolled downhill. He reached the wood, leaped over tufts of moss, rocks, running brooks. Yoineh Meir knew the truth: this was not the river before him; it was a bloody swamp. Blood ran from the sun, staining the tree trunks. From the branches hung intestines, livers, kidneys" (The Slaughterer, pg. 215.)

"More years went by, but the dead fiddler was not forgotten. He was heard playing at night in the cold synagogue. His fiddle sang faintly in the bathhouse, the poorhouse, the cemetery. It was said in town that he came to weddings. Sometimes, at the end of a wedding after the Shidlovtse band had stopped playing, people still heard a few lingering notes, and they knew that it was the dead fiddler" (The Dead Fiddler, pg. 239.)

"He [Herman Gombiner] shaved slowly and carefully. His hand, with its long fingers, trembled and he could easily have cut himself. Meanwhile, the tub filled with warm water. He undressed and was amazed at his thinness—his chest was narrow, his arms and legs bony; there were deep hollows between his neck and shoulders. A short man in oversized pajamas, [he was] emaciated to skin and bone with a scrawny neck and a large head, on either side of which grew two tufts of gray hair. His forehead was wide and deep, his nose crooked, his cheekbones high. Getting into the bathtub was a strain, but then lying in the warm water was a relief" (The Letter Writer, pg. 251.)

"They are all insane: the communists, the fascists, the preachers of democracy, the writers, the painters, the clergy, the atheists. Soon technology, too, will disintegrate. Buildings will collapse, power plants will stop generating electricity. Generals will drop atomic bombs on their own populations. Mad revolutionaries will run in the streets, crying fantastic slogans. I have often thought that it would begin in New York. This metropolis has all the symptoms of a mind gone berserk" (The Cafeteria, pg. 298.)

"I passed a sideshow displaying a creature that was half-woman, half-fish; a wax museum with figures of Marie Antoinette, Buffalo Bill, and John Wilkes Booth; a store where a turbaned astrologer sat in the dark surrounded by maps and globes of the heavenly constellations, casting horoscopes. Pygmies danced in front of a little circus, their black faces painted white, all of them bound loosely with a long rope. A mechanical ape puffed its belly like a bellows and laughed raucously. Negro boys aimed guns at metal ducklings" (A Day in Coney Island, pg. 374.)

"We stopped in the middle of the dirt road and kissed with fervor, as if we had been waiting for each other God knows how long. Her wide mouth bit into mine like the muzzle of a beast. The heat from her body baked my skin, not unlike the glowing roof a few hours earlier" (The Yearning Heifer, pg. 458.)

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Topics for Discussion

What is the author's attitude toward the Old World Yiddish culture he depicts in these stories, in terms of whether he sees it as a limiting or liberating influence on the characters' lives?

As described in these stories, what parallels do you see between the practices of Judaism and Catholicism?

What is the author's attitude, reflected in this collection of stories, toward monogamous male-female relationships?

Can you find any instances in the stories of love without some form of trickery or deception?

From what is depicted in these stories, how well do Jewish immigrants seem to adapt to life in America, specifically in New York City?

What seems to be the attitude of the author about those who convert from Judaism to Christianity?

In The Psychic Journey and The Seance, the narrator comes into contact with the occult and the psychic. In both instances, he sees the deception inherent in those practices. Yet in many of the stories dealing with Satan and evil spirits, their existence is accepted as a fact. Why is there such a disparity of belief?

In Something Is There, what opens the agnostic eyes of the Rabbi of Bechev to the possibility of a real God?

Why does Aaron, the narrator in The Cafeteria, try to avoid those he calls "Yiddishists?"

What drives Yoineh Meir in The Slaughterer to commit suicide?