

Enemies: A Love Story Short Guide

Enemies: A Love Story by Isaac Bashevis Singer

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Characters

Similar to many Singer characters, Herman is a victim of society and of himself. He is haunted by hallucinations and nightmares of Nazis still chasing him. As he attempts to escape and to assimilate into American life, he becomes a ghost writer for a rabbi and involves himself with a mistress, a former friend from the concentration camp. When his lover obtains a divorce, he marries her too. Unknown to Herman, his first wife miraculously has survived and immigrated to America.

He rationalizes his misery by saying that "after what I've been through, what I have is no longer part of this world." As a result, lust becomes his new religion and, incapable of making decisions for himself, Herman digs his own grave.

Yadwiga, the Polish girl who saved him from the Nazis and later married him, is at first portrayed as a lowly alien, who speaks little English, keeps to herself, and naively believes her husband's trickery. Later, however, she emerges as the heroine, whose conversion to Judaism will result in the perpetuation of the religion, which the Holocaust survivors failed to provide.

Masha, the mistress who feigns pregnancy, is a cheat and a prostitute.

Unable to cope with life, she commits suicide. In contrast, Tamara, Herman's first wife, is an almost saintlike figure who agrees to divorce him to rescue him from his predicament. None of the survivors returns to tradition and the role in society Singer apparently thought appropriate.

Social Concerns/Themes

Enemies deals with Holocaust survivors' readjustment to the mainstream of society. The Hitler era had left its imprint upon them and even when Herman, the main character, is given the opportunity to emigrate to America to start anew, he finds life too complicated to handle. As a husband to three women, he develops into a cheat, a swindler, and a liar. Family life and monogamy are lost virtues.

Like much of the Holocaust literature, *Enemies* wrestles with the idea that the Holocaust survivors are the perpetrators of Judaism, memorializing those obliterated by Hitler's savagery. Previously traditionalist, the main character begins to ponder the existence of God, especially in light of the Holocaust. Herman, now in America, struggling to find a new life, claims he does not know God and begins to turn away. He tries desperately to assimilate into American life; he marries a Gentile, keeps her hidden from society and drops out of community activities. His wife, Tamara, after witnessing man's inhumanity to man, turns to Communism, Zionism and feminism as a substitute for religion. As in many other works, Singer's characters contemplate a return to Judaism, but in *Enemies*, ironically, it is the Polish girl, who, after rescuing Herman from the Nazis and marrying him, converts to Judaism and brings up their child in the ways of his forefathers.

Imprisonment is another predominant theme. Herman, having been saved from extermination, traps himself to the point that there is no way out. Through a series of unlikely occurrences, Herman finds himself married to three women at the same time. Fearful of being exposed and jailed for bigamy, he tries to solve his problems only to discover that this time, unlike the Holocaust, there is no salvation, no escape.

Techniques

Although they become involved in ridiculous situations, Singer's characters are realistically and vividly portrayed in *Enemies*. The people described are plain folk, moderately educated, economically poor, with psychological problems that hinder their adjustments to their environment. The language, as in other Singer works, is simple, poetic, descriptive and colorful.

Adaptations

Enemies: A Love Story was released as a motion picture in 1989. It is directed by Paul Mazursky, who also appears in the picture, and it stars Ron Silver as Herman Broder, a lustful, directionless man. The other cast members Anjelica Huston, Lena Olin, Margaret Sophie Stein, and Alan King give good performances in a fine motion picture that deftly blends comedy and drama.

Literary Precedents

Like the autobiographical character in Elie Wiesel's *Night*, Herman is constantly haunted by his Holocaust experiences. However, whereas Wiesel's character is determined to remember and speak out on behalf of the six million victims, Herman chooses to forget.

The Assistant (1957) by Bernard Malamud portrays a Jewish family adjusting to American life. Although a loyal family man and not a Holocaust survivor, Malamud's Morris Bober shares much with Herman: the reluctance to accept Judaism; the struggles for success; and the entrapment within an alien culture.



Related Titles

Singer's enchanting short stories, reminiscent of Mark Twain, Will Rogers, and Sholem Aleichem, are imaginative folk tales, told with simplicity, and reveal his true literary genius. Using ghosts and supernatural ideas and following the "dybuk" (possession by the devil) of Ansky's Yiddish play *The Dybuk*, Singer weaves stories that will be passed down from generation to generation.

"Gimpel the Fool," Singer's most famous short story, was originally translated from the Yiddish by Saul Bellow in 1953. Gimpel is the archetype of the fall guy, the humorous, yet pathetic, luckless individual who falls prey to mean tricks played on him by his townspeople. He is so gullible, trusting and sincere that he is beloved as the town fool.

Gimpel, however, is a fool who knows what foolishness is, and while he may be ridiculed and may seem ridiculous even to the reader, he is Singer's symbol of the human condition. Those townspeople who would trick him are the foolish ones, for life is full of deceit and pain, and anyone who believes he has conquered life is more ridiculous than Gimpel. As the pranks on Gimpel become more serious, the reader comes to realize that Gimpel speaks for everyone who must face the absurdity of life.

Critics have debated whether or not Singer's view of life is bleak and hopeless. Certainly, misfortune and tribulation plague the characters in much of his work; yet Singer takes delight in life's trickery. According to Singer, one never knows if one is the magician who controls the trick, or the audience who is fooled by the illusion. For Singer, there can be delight in being fooled; unhappiness does not depend so much on who is the magician, the rabbit, or the audience as it does on man's reluctance to be duped. In the end, everyone is a fool, but that is not a bad thing.

"Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy" ("Yentl der Yeshive Bocher") is a story which uses another type of trickery to illustrate the elusiveness of life. Yentl decides that she wants to become a rabbi, which is forbidden by the faith, and so she dresses as a boy and enters into religious training under false pretense.

When she falls in love with one of her male classmates, the trick which she has played on her society turns against her, and in a fit of defiance she decides to marry the rabbi's daughter. Her whole plight is, of course, doomed, and her end is as foolish as Gimpel's, although Singer is careful not to pass judgment. She perpetrated deceit not from selfish interests but because of the societal circumstances which prevented her from pursuing life freely.

She was caught, as everyone in Singer's world will be caught at their tricks.

There may not be any redemptive value in the tricks one plays, or that are played on one, but there can be delight in recognizing when a good trick is played.



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