# Gimpel the Fool Study Guide

## Gimpel the Fool by Isaac Bashevis Singer

BOOKRAGS

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# Introduction

"Gimpel the Fool," which first appeared in English translation in a 1953 edition of the *Partisan Review*, is considered one of Isaac Bashevis Singer's most notable and representative works of short fiction. Singer wrote the story, as he did most of his early works, in Yiddish, and its Jewish themes of the individual's search for faith and guidance in a cruel world are explored in a parable form with exaggerated details common to folktales. Noted Jewish-American writer Saul Bellow translated the story into English, as he did many of Singer's early works, thus introducing him to a wide audience for the first time, even though Singer had been writing for many years. The character of Gimpel has been praised by critics as an example of the "schlemiel"— a foolish, unlucky man— common to Jewish lore, whose follies are delineated in order to present a moral lesson. Set in the imaginary village of Frampol, the story centers on Gimpel, a baker, who is continuously heckled and tricked by those around him. Since its publication, critical reaction to "Gimpel the Fool" has been positive, with most reviewers praising its blend of tradition, spiritualism, and realism.

# Author Biography

Isaac Bashevis Singer was born on July 14,1904, in the Polish *shtetl*, or village, of Leoncin, near Warsaw. His parents were devout Jews who wanted their son to become a religious scholar. Singer's interests, however, drew him toward literature, and early in his life he began reading secular, or non-religious, books. His strict religious training often conflicted with his secular interests, and this conflict is explored in his fiction through characters who grapple with faith and skepticism. In 1908 Singer and his family moved to Warsaw, where he spent most of his youth. In 1921, his father made him enroll in the city's rabbinical seminary. Singer remained only one year, and in 1923 he began proofreading for *Literarishe Bletter*, a Yiddish literary magazine. Later he worked as a translator, writing Yiddish versions of popular novels, including Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

In 1927 Singer published his first piece of short fiction in *Literarishe Bletter*, and seven years later his first novel, *Satan in Goray*, appeared in serial form in the Yiddish periodical *Globus*. That same year Singer emigrated from Poland to the United States, leaving behind his wife and son. He followed his older brother Israel Joshua, who later achieved prominence as a Yiddish novelist. Singer settled in New York City and began writing reviews and essays for the *Jewish Daily Forward*. In 1940 Singer married his second wife, moved to Manhattan's Upper West Side, and became a regular staff member at the *Forward*.

The death of his brother Israel in 1944 had a profound effect on Singer. While he has acknowledged his brother as "aspiritual father and master," Singer often felt overshadowed by Israel's achievements, which inhibited his own creativity. Thus, he has admitted to feeling both grief and liberation over his brother's death. Throughout the 1940s Singer's fiction was serialized in the *Forward*, and his reputation among Yiddish-speaking readers grew steadily. In 1950 *The Family Moskat* appeared in translation, the first of Singer's novels to be published in English, and in 1953 "Gimpel the Fool" appeared in the *Partisan Review*, as translated by American writer Saul Bellow. Through the efforts of such admirers as Bellow and critic Irving Howe, Singer was introduced to the American public. Singer won numerous literary prizes during his career, including the National Book Award in 1970 and 1974 as well as the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978. Singer continued to publish new material until his death on July 24,1991.

# Plot Summary

"Gimpel the Fool," opens with Gimpel, the narrator, announcing that he is called a fool but does not think of himself as one. Others see him as a fool, he says, because he is "easy to take in," He is not a fighter, he reasons, so he tries to ignore them. Even so, he admits that "they take advantage of me," thus demonstrating he understands how others see him and is not as foolish as he seems. Gimpel is an orphan being raised by a grandfather who is "already bent to the grave," so the townspeople turn him over to a baker. In such a public occupation, nearly all the villagers have had the opportunity to fool him at least once.

When Rietze the Candle-dipper tells him his parents have risen from the grave and are looking for him, Gimpel knows full well this cannot be, but he goes outside to look just in case: "What did I stand to lose just by looking?" This incident creates such an uproar'that he vows not to believe anything else, but that does not work either. He is confused and turns to the rabbi for advice. The rabbi tells Gimpel, "It is written, better to be a fool all your days than for one hour to be evil. You are not a fool. They are the fools. For he who causes his neighbor to feel shame loses Paradise himself."

Gimpel considers leaving town, but the people will not hear of it. Instead, they decide to fix him up with a wife. He sees several flaws in Elka, his prospective bride, but the townspeople tell him his perceptions are wrong. Elka's "bastard" son is really her little brother, and her limp is "deliberate, from coyness." Furthermore, they threaten to have the rabbi fine him for giving her a bad name.

Elka refuses to let Gimpel into their bed after the wedding, and four months later she gives birth to a boy. Everyone knows that Gimpel is not the father; "the whole House of Prayer rang with laughter." When he confronts Elka about this, she insists that the child is premature and is Gimpel's. He does not believe her, but the next day the schoolmaster assures him that the same thing happened to Adam and Eve. Gimpel begins "to forget his sorrow" because he loves the child. He steals scraps from the pots that women leave in the baker's oven for Elka and begins to love her too.

Gimpel has to sleep at the bakery during the week, but one night he comes home unexpectedly and discovers a man sleeping next to Elka. To avoid waking the child he goes back to the bakery and tries to sleep on the floor. He vows, however, that "there's a limit even to the foolishness of a fool like Gimpel." He goes to the rabbi for advice, and Elka denies everything. The rabbi recommends that Gimpel divorce her, but Gimpel longs for her and the child. Eventually he tells the rabbi that he had made a mistake.

The rabbi reconsiders the case for nine months before telling Gimpel he is free to return home, during which time Elka gives birth to another child. When Gimpel returns, he sees his apprentice in bed beside Elka. She tells him to go outside and check on the goal; when Gimpel returns, the apprentice is gone and Elka denies everything.

Gimpel lives with her for twenty more years, during which time Elka has six more children. He continues to turn a blind eye towards his wife's behavior and professes his belief in everything she says. On her deathbed Elka asks him for forgiveness and confesses that the children are not his. Gimpel imagines that, "dead as she was, she was saying, 'I deceived Gimpel. That was the meaning of my brief life.'"

One night the Spirit of Evil appears to Gimpel, tells him there is no God, and advises him to "deceive the world" as it has deceived him. Gimpel urinates into the bread dough at the bakery, but later Elka appears to him in a dream with a black face and says, "You fool! Because I was false is everything false too? I never deceived anyone but myself. I'm paying for it all, Gimpel." Gimpel awakes, sensing that "everything hung in the balance. A false step now and [he'd] lose Eternal Life." He immediately grabs a shovel and buries the contaminated loaves of bread. Then he divides his belongings among the children and leaves Frampol for good.

Outside Frampol, people suddenly treat him well. He hears "a great deal, many lies and falsehoods," but eventually he comes to understand that "that there were really no lies," Whatever does not really happen is dreamed at night. He begins to "spin yarns—improbable things that could never have happened," and children ask him to tell his stories. In his dreams he still sees Elka, but she is radiant now, and he looks forward to rejoining her in a place "without ridicule, without deception... . [where] even Gimpel cannot be deceived."

# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

The narrator of this story is Gimpel, and is called Gimpel the Fool by the people in his village. He declares immediately that he doesn't think himself a fool; however, his community gave him that name when he was still a schoolboy. Gimpel is an orphan whose grandfather took him in when his parents died; however, the grandfather soon had to turn him over to the local baker because he was too old to look after him. He says that he has seven names in all: "imbecile, donkey, flax-head, dope, glump, ninny, and fool." It's the last one that has endured.

The reason that the villagers call him a fool is that he is gullible, easy prey for their practical jokes. Eventually, it became the only way the community relates to him. After all, Gimpel reasons, according to the Wisdom of the Fathers, everything is possible. At any rate, once the whole town gets in on afflicting him, he knows that if he refuses to believe one of their stories, he would be ridiculed for calling everyone in the town a liar.

The abuse continues in the bakery where he works. One villager even tells him that the Messiah has come and his parents have been resurrected. Actually, he knows that this is not true, but he feels that nothing could be lost by going to look. He vows after that incident that he will not believe anyone anymore.

Eventually, he goes to the rabbi for advice, who tells him, "You are not a fool. They are the fools. For he who causes his neighbor to feel shame loses Paradise himself." Even so, as he leaves, the rabbi's own daughter tells him he must kiss the wall; he does so, and she laughs at him because she was playing a trick on him.

The townspeople arrange for Gimpel to marry the local prostitute, telling him that she is a virgin, even though he knows differently. She even has a child, a little boy that she passes off as her brother. Although the bride usually must contribute a dowry, she tells him that he must come up with 50 guilders and that the town must raise it. So the town raises the money for the wedding, which takes place at the cemetery, and there is singing and dancing and drinking. The townspeople bring many gifts including a crib. He knows he is being tricked, but he reasons, "I'll see what comes of it. A whole town can't go altogether crazy."

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Singer, the author of this story is a Polish Jew, and this story is an allegory of the persecution the Jewish people have suffered throughout history, particularly in modern Europe. Just as Gimpel is abused and ridiculed for no good reason by his neighbors, so the Jews were persecuted in Europe for no reason except their race by the people and governments of the countries where they happened to live. Just as Gimpel is helpless to defend himself, so the Jews of Europe were defenseless in the face of persecution. Just

as Gimpel, at last, goes out to wander the world, so the Jewish people have wandered to the four corners of the earth to find homes. Jewish people have clung fast to their religion and their customs just as Gimpel does in the story; what comfort they have been able to derive for themselves has come from their religion and customs. Isaac Bashevis Singer was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1978, and in his speech, he said: "I believe the nations can learn much from Jews, their way of thinking, their way of bringing up children, their finding happiness where others see nothing but misery and humiliation."

The final conclusion, the meaning of the story, is foreshadowed in the second sentence when Gimpel declares that he doesn't consider himself a fool. At the end of the story we know that it was, in fact, not Gimpel who was foolish but those who mistreated and tyrannized him.

# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Although Gimpel's new wife, Elka, refuses to admit him to her bed, she bears a child less than four months after the marriage, and again he is the butt of jokes in the community. She insists that the child is premature and assures him that the child is his. He accepts this reasoning, confirming once and for all what a fool he really is, but he loves the little boy, and his love is returned. He works hard to support his family. He also demonstrates his extraordinary capacity for living life to the fullest when he comes to love Elka, who is a tower of strength, even though she is sometimes wounding in her treatment of him. He brings her all sorts of treats from the bakery, and under his care she gains weight; he considers her handsome.

Life with Elka and her older son, who is growing bigger, is anything but peaceful. Gimpel endures abuse from the child and gets very little sex from Elka. In addition, she frequently threatens to divorce him and heaps verbal abuse on him. Eventually, he goes to the rabbi regarding her infidelity, and the rabbi has Elka picked up. She denies everything, saying he's out of his head. She declares that the accusation is false. The townspeople support her, of course, but the rabbi tells him that he must divorce her at once. Now he is denied any kind of visitation and the privilege of supporting them with food.

Gimpel misses his family and begins to rationalize; making excuses for Elka's behavior and blaming the men she was sleeping with. After a while he begins to wonder whether he saw what he thought he did. "Hallucinations do happen," he reasons. So he goes back to the rabbi and tells him it was a mistake. The rabbi says he will reconsider, but that he can't go back home until a decision is made. However, he can send bread and money by messenger, which he does.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

This story is told in the first person, and we only know what the narrator is thinking. This is an effective device in a story where there is great suffering on the part of the protagonist. We feel his pain because we are in his mind while he is being mistreated. We want to cry out against the cruel villagers when they tell this abused orphan that his parents have been resurrected. Any other point of view would have diminished the effect.

While we become impatient with this character for his gullibility, in the long run we admire his resilience, his ability to make the best of a bad situation. His ability to love in spite of the greatest obstacles is heroic and suggests the New Testament standard: longsuffering, kind, forgiving, and unselfish.

# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

It takes the rabbis nine months to come to a decision; meanwhile Elka gives birth to another child, a girl. Gimpel takes care of the necessary religious ceremonies and is again the butt of jokes in the community. This time he decides that nothing good comes of not believing. "Today it's your wife you don't believe; tomorrow it's God Himself you won't take stock in."

The rabbis decide that there is an obscure reference in Maimonides, which makes it possible for Gimpel to go back to his wife and family since he has decided that he made a mistake. He wants to rush home but decides to finish his workday and take food when he goes in the evening. He rushes home joyously, looks in on the new baby, and falls in love with her immediately. He then finds the bakery apprentice, who has been delivering food to the family for Gimpel, in bed with Elka. However, she sends him out to check on the goat, which, she says, has been sick. Gimpel does, and when he gets back, the apprentice is gone.

When Gimpel accuses her of being in bed with the apprentice, she goes on the attack, telling him she will raise the entire town if he doesn't cease his accusations. He approaches the apprentice the next day and accuses him, but the apprentice tells him there's something wrong with him - that he must have a screw loose.

Gimpel lives with Elka for twenty years, and when things happen, he refuses to see or hear. "I believed, that's all," he says. The rabbi tells him, "Belief in itself is beneficial. It is written that a good man lives by his faith." Gimpel becomes wealthy and spends much of his wealth on her. Then she becomes ill and is near death and asks him to forgive her. He declares that there is nothing to forgive, that she has been a good and faithful wife. She tells him that the children are not his. He imagines that she has died saying she has deceived her faithful husband and that that was the meaning of her brief life.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Singer has chosen a nine-month interval, the gestation period for a child, deliberately. It reinforces the outrage we feel at the mistreatment that our hero is undergoing. He is not permitted to father the children; even so, he loves them, cares for them, and provides for them abundantly well. His family becomes the very center of his life. They are the only joy to be derived from an existence, which is devoid of all other joy, thanks to the conspiracy of cruelty of an entire neighborhood.

A story about a character who is not a fool but is made into one by a cruel village is ironic, the reverse of what is expected. *The Wise Fool* is a classic ironic figure in literature. It's worthwhile to note that in the Middle Ages, retarded people were believed to be particularly protected by God. Shakespeare's fools play important roles in his

plays. In fact, in Twelfth Night, Viola says that Feste is "wise enough to play the fool" and in King Lear, the fool is demented but keenly discriminating. Singer is using a classic literary figure to make a point about the treatment of the Jewish people, or any people who are singled out for discrimination because of their race.

# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

After the period of mourning is over, Gimpel is visited by the Spirit of Evil, telling him that the whole world has deceived him and that he should now deceive the world by accumulating a bucket of urine and putting it in the bread at night so the vicious people of the village will eat filth. Gimpel is concerned about the judgment of God, but the Spirit says there will be no judgment and that there is no God. When asked what there is, then, the Spirit answers, "A thick mire." So he lets himself be persuaded and does it - he urinates on the bread.

He sits beside the warm oven while the bread bakes and, falling asleep, sees Elka in a dream. She calls him a fool and tells him that everything is not false just because she was false and that she never deceived anyone but herself. Her face is black. He realizes that if he makes a false step now he will lose eternal life, so he takes the bread out and buries it in the yard. Then he goes home, takes his money from its hiding place, and divides it among the children. He tells them to forget he ever existed, and he spends the remainder of his life wandering the world. He is looked after by good people and comes to realize that there are really no lies. What doesn't really happen is dreamed at night, and it happens to one if it doesn't happen to another. He sometimes hears of things that couldn't happen only to find in a year or so that they have come to pass somewhere.

He sees Elka in his dreams, but now she has a shining face, and he is comforted. He begs to go to her, and she tells him that the time is near. He feels that the world is entirely imaginary but only once removed from the true world, and he waits for the hereafter. "God be praised," he concludes, "There even Gimpel cannot be deceived."

## Chapter 4 Analysis

The conflicts in this tale are established in the first chapter. They are between Gimpel, an innocent, and the village people who should have cared for him and made his life better but chose instead to abuse and torture him. At another level, the conflicts are between the Jewish people and the Europeans who have persecuted them through the centuries. The rabbi insists that the villagers will not win out over Gimpel in the end; and that prophecy comes true, just as the Jewish people came out the winners in the conflict that reached its climax in World War II. Gimpel wins because he loves the wife foisted off on him as a joke, and the children who are not his give him joy. In spite of all the abuse, he becomes well-to-do. And when he goes out into the world, his faith in goodness is rewarded as caring people take him in and look after him, and he finds peace. He looks forward to a better life where he cannot be fooled, where he will no longer be the fool. The Jewish people won because they held on to their national unity

and were able to go out into the world and establish a state where they would not be subject to the torment of their neighbors.

The conflicts on another level are between truth and falsehood. Gimpel's difficulty in discerning that difference opened the door to the abuse by his neighbors. The story asks the question: what is true? These conflicts are never resolved. In the end, the protagonist concedes that since anything can happen in some place and at some time, there are no lies.

This represents a dichotomy that appears in most of Singer's stories: faith and mysticism on one hand and free thought and doubt on the other. There are also two themes: persecution and truth. Singer is making a powerful statement about the devastation that persecution can bring on a people and about the power to survive, which the whole world witnessed in World War II. The statement about truth is that anyone who believes he has the final answer, the ultimate truth, is probably deceiving himself - that what is true is always open to examination.

# Characters

*See* The Spirit of Evil

Elka

Elka, who is known as the town prostitute, marries Gimpel when he agrees to get the town to take up a collection to raise a dowry for her. She is five months pregnant by another man when they are married, but she tells Gimpel the child is his and, when it arrives four months after their marriage, that it is simply premature. Throughout the story Elka commits numerous infidelities and eventually has ten children, none of whom are Gimpel's. On her deathbed she admits her infidelities to her husband and asks him to forgive her.

The Spirit of Evil

The devil appears to Gimpel the baker and tells him to urinate in the bread intended for the village in order to get revenge for the many injustices the villagers have forced him to endure over the years.

Gimpel

Gimpel is a baker in the village of Frampol. Although he is constantly teased and tricked by his fellow villagers, he continues to believe in the essential goodness of others and to bear life's burdens. After agreeing to marry Elka, the town prostitute, he states, "You can't pass through life unscathed, nor expect to." Gimpel represents the dos kleine menshele, or "the common man" of Yiddish literature; his innocence provides humor and conveys a simple goodness that combats evil.

Rabbi

The rabbi is the spiritual authority in the village of Frampol. Early in the story, Gimpel goes to him for advice after being teased numerous times by the other villagers. The rabbi, who is the only one in the town who recognizes and appreciates Gimpel's goodness, tells him that "it is written, better to be a fool all your days than for one hour to be evil. You are not a fool. They are the fools." Gimpel again goes to the rabbi when he finds Elka in bed with another man. The rabbi tells Gimpel to divorce Elka and to abandon her children. However, when Gimpel tells the rabbi that he loves his wife, the rabbi finds a precedent in the Torah to allow Gimpel to stay with Elka.

# Themes

## Faith

Faith is one of the primary themes in "Gimpel the Fool." Despite being teased and deceived mercilessly by the other villagers as well as by his wife Elka, Gimpel maintains his faith in life, in others, and in God. When Elka continues to nag and bully him, Gimpel simply says, "I'm the type that bears it and says nothing. What's one to do? Shoulders are from God, and burdens too." Gimpel has consciously decided to choose faith over skepticism; through his faith he finds consolation and peace.

## Acceptance and Belonging

Singer also examines the meaning of acceptance in the story. Gimpel is never accepted or appreciated by the villagers for what he is: a kind, compassionate, and honest man. But when he leaves Frampol to become a storyteller, he is considered to be wise and is treated well by those he meets. This suggests that acceptance and belonging is temporal: a person may not be accepted in one environment but is welcomed and respected in another.

Gimpel's acceptance of life, despite his hardships, is also a major theme in the story. He is constantly heckled and mistreated, but he accepts the limitations of and negative qualities in others. He also embraces life, appreciating what he does have: a wife, children, and a successful bakery. Instead of getting angry and vengeful, Gimpel simply states, "One can't pass through life unscathed, nor expect to." While Gimpel does momentarily contemplate revenge on the villagers by urinating in the bread dough, he quickly changes his mind, choosing instead to leave Frampol.

## Knowledge and Ignorance

Although Gimpel is presented as a fool, Singer suggests through his telling of the events of the story that Gimpel actually possesses a special wisdom. It is not that he simply believes the outrageous things the villagers tell him, but rather, that he chooses to do so. For example, when the villagers tell Gimpel that his father and mother "have stood up from the grave," Gimpel states: "To tell the truth, I knew very well that nothing of the sort had happened." Singer also suggests that Gimpel is rather shrewd. He manages to raise a dowry from the villagers for Elka, he becomes a successful baker with his own bakery, and at the end of the story he finds happiness and contentment.

## Honor and Integrity

Although Gimpel is considered a fool, Singer presents him as having much more integrity than others in the village. For example, he takes good care of Elka, treats her

ten children as if they were his, and, when he has the opportunity to get revenge on the villagers, he chooses not to. This integrity, Singer suggests, is much more valuable and meaningful than what is typically considered intelligence.

# Style

## Setting

"Gimpel the Fool" is set in an indeterminate time in the fictional Jewish shtetl, or village, of Frampol in Poland. Like many of the settings in Singer's fiction, the shtetl of Frampol is presented as a place where life has a mystical quality, the people are superstitious, survival is difficult, and everyday events and concerns revolve around Jewish faith and traditions. The town of Frampol does exist in real life Poland today. The town was founded in 1705, with a unique, highly symmetric layout of streets in the shape of concentric rectangles around a large central square. In 1869 it lost its official status as a town, to recover it only in 1993. During World War II 90% of the town's buildings were destroyed in a raid carried out by the Luftwaffe on September 13, 1939. During the German occupation the town's significant Jewish community perished in the Holocaust. The town never fully recovered.

## Narrative

The story is told exclusively from the viewpoint of Gimpel and is, therefore, an example of first-person narration. Because readers are only given access to Gimpel's thoughts and feelings and not those of the villagers who frequently make fun of him, they are uncertain how reliable Gimpel's account is and are left to wonder if he is truly a fool. Singer also uses a simple storytelling technique in "Gimpel the Fool"; he relates the events of the story sequentially without much explanation and presents the characters without in-depth description.

## Parable

Because "Gimpel the Fool" is intended to teach a moral lesson, it is considered a parable. Parables generally include simple characters who represent abstract ideas. In "Gimpel the Fool," Gimpel represents goodness, innocence, and the common man; the villagers represent malice and deception. Like most parables, the story works on two levels. While it appears to be a simple tale about a town fool, it raises important questions about such universal concerns as the nature of wisdom, faith, and acceptance.

## Irony

Singer uses irony, the recognition of a reality different from appearance, throughout "Gimpel the Fool." Irony is apparent at the very beginning of the story, which starts with the words: "I am Gimpel the Fool. I don't think myself a fool. On the contrary. But that's what folks call me." This suggests to the reader that Gimpel may not be the fool he appears to be. In fact, as the story continues, Gimpel tells us that he does not always

believe what the villagers tell him even though they think he does. For example, when Elka tells Gimpel that he is the father of the child she bore four months after their marriage, Gimpel seems to accept her explanation, but then admits, "To tell the plain truth, I didn't believe her.... But then, who really knows how such things are?" It is also ironic that when Gimpel leaves Frampol, where he is heckled and mistreated, he becomes a respected and well-liked story teller. Gimpel notes toward the end of the story, "The children run after me, calling 'Grandfather, tell us a story.'"

## Archetype

The character of Gimpel is an archetype, a character type that occurs frequently in literature. He is an example of the "common man" figure that often appears in both Yiddish and Western literature as well as a schlemiel, or "holy fool," a character whose innocence and goodness provides both humor and inspiration.

# Historical Context

"Gimpel the Fool" was first published in English translation in 1953. The 1950s are sometimes called the "American decade" because European political and military power declined in many areas of the world while the influence of the United States increased During this time, American economic growth produced an abundance of consumer goods, the population increased by record numbers, and more people became members of the middle class. For example, the population in the United States doubled between 1900 and 1950, with a record 4.3 million births in 1957. During the 1950s the population also shifted from urban areas to suburbs; the urban population only increased 1.5 percent while the suburban population increased 44 percent.

The United States was also at the forefront of technological development. In 1954, Chinese-American An Wang developed and sold the small business calculator; 1955 saw the distribution of the first IBM business computer. Control Data Corporation produced the first commercially successful "super" computer in 1957, and the microchip was developed in 1959.

The spread of communism was a major concern to the United States during these years. The Soviet occupation forces in Germany set up a blockade between Berlin and West Germany and Czechoslovakia was taken over by communists. In 1950, the United States began a three-year involvement in the Korean War, which was fought between the democratic Republic of South Korea and communist-led North Korea. That same year, Senator Joseph McCarthy started a communist "witch hunt" with his House UnAmerican Activities Committee. Many figures in the entertainment industry were accused of having ties to the Communist Party, and the Hollywood Blacklist, which included some 300 writers, directors, and actors, was compiled. Such popular figures as Charlie Chaplin, Lee Grant,* and Arthur Miller were accused of being communists or communist sympathizers. Many were driven to social and economic ruin by the accusations.

During the 1950s, the United States began to experiment with atomic energy. The first thermonuclear test took place on the Pacific atoll of Eniwetok in 1951. That same year, atomic bombs were exploded, in the presence of army troops, in the Nevada desert, and the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission opened the first nuclear reactor. The United States conducted another atomic bomb test on the island of Bikini in the Pacific Ocean in 1954 and also launched the *Nautilus*, the first nuclear- powered submarine. In 1955, the Atomic Energy Commission denied that radiation had harmful effects on human health, stating "the scare stories about how dangerous this country's atomic tests are simply not justified." Nevertheless, Americans were also encouraged to build air-raid shelters to protect them from enemy attack in the event of a nuclear war.

# Critical Overview

Critical reaction to "Gimpel the Fool" has been positive ever since the story first appeared in translation in the *Partisan Review* in 1953. It was "Gimpel the Fool," along with the translated novel *The Family Moskat* (1950), that first brought Singer to the attention of American reading audiences. The story has been called a masterpiece of short fiction and has been praised for its depiction of Jewish life; its emphasis on spirituality, faith, and morality; its sympathetic portrayal of ordinary people; and its examination of universal themes. Alfred Kazin, writing in his Contemporaries, stated that "it is the integrity of the human imagination that Singer conveys so beautifully," while Paul N. Siegel noted in *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer* that Gimpel "has become representative of poor, bewildered, suffering humanity." Cynthia Ozick also praised Singer's talents in *The New York Times* Book Review: "[Singer's] tenderness for ordinary folk, their superstitions, their folly, their plainness, their lapses is a classical thread of Yiddish fiction, as well as the tree trunk of Singer's own Hasidic legacy—love and reverence for the down-to-earth."

Critical reaction to Singer's fiction as a whole has also been largely favorable. He was an internationally renowned literary figure who was widely considered the foremost contemporary Yiddish writer. Although he lived in the United States for more than fifty years, Singer wrote almost exclusively in Yiddish. Some critics have faulted Singer for occasional sentimentality and for exploring repetitious themes, but he is widely admired for his powers of evocation, his talents as a stylist, and his renderings of the Yiddish language. 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 conditions to life." Singer's reputation rests largely upon his short stories, most notably "Gimpel the Fool."

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

# Critical Essay #1

*Judy Sobeloff is a writer and educator who has won several awards for her fiction. In the following essay, she discusses how the character of Gimpel represents the Yiddish archetype of the "schlemiel," the sainted fool, and notes how the structure of the story compares to the biblical story ofHosea.*

"Gimpel the Fool" is widely viewed as Isaac Bashevis Singer's most popular short story. Singer originally wrote the story for a Yiddish newspaper, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, and then Saul Bellow translated it into English for The *Partisan Review* in 1953, bringing "Gimpel" and Singer to the attention of American readers. Gimpel is a kind and loving man who seems to be punished for his generosity. His willingness to believe the people around him—and to suffer as a result of believing them—is a virtue and remains one after everything else falls away. As critic Edward Alexander writes , of Singer's wide appeal, "Singer writes almost always as a Jew, to Jews, for Jews, and yet he is heard by everybody,"

Many critics see Gimpel as an example of a Yiddish stock character type, dos kleine menschele (the little man) or schlemiel. Sanford Pinsker, in his The Schlemiel as Metaphor, offers the following definitions of this character type: According to the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, & schlemiel* "handles a situation in the worst possible manner or is dogged by an ill luck that is more or less due to his own ineptness." Pinsker's personal characterization is that when a "*schlimazl's* bread-and-butter accidently falls on the floor it always lands butter-side down; with a *schlemiel* it's much the same— except that *he* butters his bread on both sides first."

Pinsker traces the *schlemiel* character back to the mythical town of Chelm, a Jewish community that is the subject of countless "Wise Men of Chelm" stones. Pinsker recounts one such story with a direct parallel to "Gimpel" in which a troubled Chelmite consults his rabbi because his wife has given birth after the couple has been married only three months. The rabbi assists the man with the following calculation: Since the man has lived with his wife three months, and she has lived with him for three months, and together they have lived three months, then three plus three plus three equals nine months. "'So, what's the problem?'"

In addition to representing the recurrent "wise or sainted fool" of Yiddish literature, Gimpel also represents a "centuries-old archetypal figure of western literature," according to critic Paul Siegel. Siegel traces Gimpel's character type back to the idiot of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance who was regarded as being "under the special protection of God."

The reader knows at some level that Gimpel does not believe the lies the townspeople tell him and that he partially endeavors to believe them out of his goodness, or at least his desire to not make trouble. Siegel writes that in the Yiddish version of the story, this ambiguity is broadcast from the beginning In Yiddish the epithet used to describe Gimpel in the title and in the opening line of the story is "*chochem*," which means

"sage," but which additionally "often has the ironic meaning of 'fool,' the meaning in which the villagers and Gimpel's wife use it." Gimpel's readers are thus lost in a "labyrinth of irony" as they watch him deciding when to believe or not to believe. "His belief, then, was in part the wise acquiescence of the butt who must play his role, knowing that otherwise he will never be free of his wiseacre tormentors."

Like Siegel, Edward Alexander sees Gimpel's "descent from the schlemiels of the classical Yiddish writers" and also sees that Gimpel differs from them in several ways, namely that he "chooses to be fooled, to be used, to forsake his dignity. This means that not only his creator but he himself is capable of irony about the sacrifices required by faith. Moreover, Gimpel's folly is connected with his credulity, whereas much of the folly of his Yiddish predecessors comes precisely from their unwillingness to credit unusual and extraordinary events, especially if those events portent evil." In other words, Gimpel's literary predecessors were silly optimists, whereas Gimpel would likely believe bad as well as good.

Gimpel's roots extend all the way back to the Bible, according to critic Thomas Hennings who posits that "Gimpel" is based on the Old Testament Book of Hosea. While understanding Singer's Yiddish background is essential to understanding "Gimpel," his Hebraic background is key as well, and the immigrant audience Singer was writing for would be well aware of Biblical allusions, Hennings sees parallels in that both Gimpel and Hosea marry women who are sexually unfaithful and that "Gimpel" follows the four-part structure of the Book of Hosea exactly: first, the marriage; second, the affairs, the birth of the children, and divorce; third, the reconciliation, remarriage, and continued affairs; and fourth, the "social application of it all, that is, the moral and theological implications of the adulterous marriage for the Jewish community." Like Hosea, Gimpel has a reunion with his repentant wife in a dream and progresses from being a foolish baker to a beloved prophet, Hennings sees that Singer, like Hosea, "deliberately chooses to disturb his readers' complacent assumptions about God, about faith, love, wisdom, and folly—and about themselves.... Singer creates a deeply religious story about a man of simple faith who, because of his faith, has a godlike capacity for love, the ideal Jew, if you will."

What sets the Yiddish holy fool apart from fools in British or French or Russian literature (e.g. Dostoevsky's The Idiot) is the high value that Jewish culture places on intelligence and learning, says critic Sally Drucker. "The holy fool, a fool who is more than a fool ... both subverts and augments this value." Drucker sees Gimpel as a character who displays "a kind of wisdom that does not have to do with ability to reason—which is closer, perhaps, to the Khassidic religious tradition of the heart, than the Talmudic ideal of the head."

It is also possible to see Gimpel's actions as part of a successful coping strategy. Janet Hadda takes a completely different approach to "Gimpel," applying psychoanalytic theory and asking questions in the way she would conduct a clinical case. She notes that while literary critics tend to emphasize Gimpel's relationship with God, students, on the other hand, tend to view Gimpel as a masochist. Since both views are based on the same evidence, Hadda wonders if perhaps another way of looking at the material might

be more to the point. In her view, "Gimpel is not a suffering martyr, although he does experience intense pain.... Gimpel is a successful man whose subjective reality is undaunted by circumstances that would overwhelm a less daring person." She believes that "the central fact" of Gimpel's existence is his orphanhood. When Rietze the Candle-dipper runs into the bakery and tells him that his parents have risen from the dead, Gimpel knows "very well that nothing of the sort had happened," but, writes Hadda, "if there was any chance of seeing a beloved and deeply mourned parent, what small price to serve as the butt of some much less important person's joke."

Indeed, says Hadda, had Gimpel's parents still been alive, they might have been able to protect him from the jokes and pranks. Because of this loss, Gimpel "turns to others in the hope that they will recognize his vulnerable position and therefore treat him with special tenderness—which they certainly do not; quite the contrary." In light of his orphanhood, Hadda believes that Gimpel's seeming masochism can be viewed more as stemming from a "deep need to maintain a bond, no matter at what price." Thus, he maintains his bond with Elka, despite the seemingly high cost, because she gives him "a sense that he is not alone in the world, that he is no longer as abandoned as an orphan, [which] helps him to maintain his equilibrium."

Gimpel asks, "What's the good of not believing? Today it's your wife you don't believe; tomorrow it's God Himself you won't take stock in." Of the connection Gimpel makes between faith in one's wife (however unfaithful she herself may be) and faith in God, Alexander points out that "Gimpel never takes the analogy a step further to say that the Jewish people have been far more faithful to their God than [God has been] to them, but in the aftermath of the Holocaust there are few Jewish heads through which that thought will not at least momentarily pass when they read this passage."

A line of schlemiels have followed Gimpel in America, according to Sanford Pinsker, most notably in the works of American Jewish authors such as Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Woody Allen. But critics such as Alexander and Ruth Wisse note that few schlemiels other than Gimpel appear in Yiddish fiction after World War II, possibly because of a disturbing connection between the "schlemiel's innocence or gullibility and the inability or refusal of the majority of Jews 'to face reality' when they were being herded into ghettos, concentration camps, and finally gas chambers." Alexander asks whether it was really the Jews' religious faith that prevented them from seeing the full extent of the threat to their survival, or whether it was their faith in "'mankind' and in the 'world'" that betrayed them. If the latter, then "Gimpel the Fool" can be viewed as a story written "not in spite of, but because of, Singer's awareness of the Holocaust. If worldliness is indeed the gullibility that disbelieves everything, then this is the most intense of all Singer's assaults upon it, for Gimpel is a character who insists on believing everything___If, Gimpel might say, you disbelieve the nations who threaten to remove the Jewish people from the face of the earth, you will disbelieve anything."

In the end, after Elka appears to him in a dream saying that her false witness towards him does not mean that everything is false, only that she had deceived herself, Gimpel realizes once and for all that faith is the most important thing. He undergoes a transformation, giving away his worldly possessions and leaving Frampol. What he

comes to understand is that "there were really no lies. Whatever doesn't happen is dreamed at night," or it happens to someone else, or "in a century hence if not next year."

According to Pinsker, one of the possible derivations of the word schlemiel is the Hebrew phrase which means "sent away from God"; however, another possible translation is "sent from God," as in the sense of being a gift from God. It is often Gimpel's following the dictates of religion which leads him to believe things which at face value are technically untrue. The rabbis reassure Gimpel that to believe is the most important thing. For example, when the townspeople tell him the Messiah has come and his parents have risen from the grave, the rabbi says to Gimpel, "It is written, better to be a fool all your days than for one hour to be evil." When Elka has a child only a few months after the wedding, the schoolmaster tells Gimpel that "the very same thing had happened to Adam and Eve." Gimpel leaves Frampol, continuing to believe even when doing so causes him pain. The longer he lives the more he learns to believe, until even the people around him can see that he is truly wise.

**Source:** Judy Sobeloff, for Short Stones for Students, Gale Research, 1997.

# Critical Essay #2

*Siegel is an American critic who has written extensively on English Renaissance literature and the works of William Shakespeare. In the following excerpt, Siegel views the protagonist and narrator of Singer's short story "Gimpel the Fool" as an ironic example of the archetypal wise- or sainted-fool figure in literature.*

"Gimpel the Fool," perhaps the most widely acclaimed work of Isaac Bashevis Singer, has its roots deep in the soil of Yiddish literature. It is concerned with two of what Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg tell us, in their *Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, are "the great themes of Yiddish literature," "the virtue of powerlessness" and "the sanctity of the insulted and the injured," and has as its anti-hero the "wise or sainted fool" who is an "extreme variation" of "the central figure of Yiddish literature," "*dos kleine menschele*, the little man." The wise or sainted fool is, however, not merely a recurring character in Yiddish fiction; he is a centuries-old archetypal figure of western literature. The manner in which Singer handles this archetypal figure, making use of the ideas associated with it, but in his own distinctive way, makes "Gimpel the Fool" the masterpiece of irony that it is....

Gimpel differs from the other representatives of the archetype, the Yiddish ones as well as the others, in that he is the expression of his creator's own idiosyncratic mixture of faith and skepticism. It is this mixture which, as we shall see in analyzing the story, is the source of its pervasive irony. Singer stated in a *Commentary* interview on November, 1963 that it would be foolish to believe the purveyors of fantasies about psychic phenomena—-just as it was foolish of Gimpel to believe the fantastic lies he was told—yet the universe is mysterious, and there is something of truth after all in these fantasies, at least a revelation concerning the depths of the human psyche from which these fantasies emerged and perhaps something more as well. The need to continue to search for the truth, the realization that this search cannot result in the attainment of the truth, the need to choose belief, the realization that, intellectually speaking, such a choice cannot be defended against the unbeliever—all of this lies behind "Gimpel the Fool." ...

Gimpel is the butt of his village because of his credulity. But is he the fool that the village takes him to be? Telling his story himself, he affirms his own folly in his very first words; "I am Gimpel the fool." In the very next breath, however, he takes it back: "I don't think myself a fool. On the contrary. But that's what folks call me." As he relates the story of his life, this denial of his foolishness seems to be the pitiful defense of his intellect by an evidently weak-witted person who at times tacitly admits that he is a fool, but a steadily deepening ambiguity plays about his narrative. This ambiguity, present from the beginning, is indicated in the title and the opening sentence of the Yiddish, where the epithet used is "chochem" or "sage," which often has the ironic meaning of "fool," the meaning in which the villagers and Gimpel's wife use it___

His credulity has no limits. Repetition seems to make it easier for him to believe rather than the reverse. We should laugh at this spectacle of the fool continuing in his folly, but

we do not, for we have come to wonder if Gimpel, undoubted fool that he has proven himself to be, is not in reality superior to his deceivers. Early in his torments the rabbi had advised him, "It is written, better to be a fool all your days than for one hour to be evil. You are not a fool. They are the fools. For he who causes his neighbor to feel shame loses Paradise himself." The paradox is that Gimpel, born to be a fool all of his days, is not a fool. It is the smart-aleck villagers, devoting their time to playing games upon him, who are fools....

Just as he made a vow before not to believe anything that he was told, a vow which he was unable to keep, so he now makes a vow to believe whatever he is told. "What's the good of not believing? Today it's your wife you don't believe; tomorrow it's God Himself you won't take stock in." It is undoubtedly laughable that Gimpel makes faith in the sluttish Elka equivalent to faith in the divine scheme of things. Yet Singer himself, during the *Commentary* interview in November, 1963, in expounding the philosophy of "as if," the doctrine that all of us must lead our lives in accordance with certain assumptions, such as the assumption that we will go on living, even if these assumptions go contrary to the existing evidence, makes use of faith in one's wife as an illustration....

Before Elka dies, she confesses to Gimpel that she has deceived him all of their married life. The Spirit of Evil comes to Gimpel as he is sleeping and, telling him that God and the judgment in the world to come are fables, persuades him to revenge himself against the deceitful world by urinating in the dough so that the "*chachomim*," the sages of the village, may be fooled into eating filth....

After he has baked the unclean bread, however, and lies dozing by the oven, Elka appears in a dream. She calls him "*cho-chem*" —ironically wise man and fool—for believing that because she was false everything else is a lie. She had in reality never deceived anyone but herself, and now she is paying for it in the other world___

The "as if' that Elka is faithful by which Gimpel had lived is now seen by him to give way, after it has sunk under him, to other "as if s." He buries the bread in the ground, divides his wealth among the children—he had earlier casually mentioned in his unworldly way that he had forgotten to say that he had come to be rich-—and goes into the world. Before he had regarded his village as die world. Now he finds out that the world has much more in it than he knew. He grows old and gray in his wanderings. He hears many fantastic tales, but the longer he lives the more he comes to realize that there are no lies. Everything, no matter how fantastic, comes to pass sooner or later. The something that was supposed to have happened that he hears and regards as impossible actually happens at a later time. Or even, he says in a sentence omitted in the Bellow translation, a sentence reminiscent of Singer's comment on the magazines devoted to psychic phenomena, if a story is quite imagined, it also has a significance: why does one person dream up one thing and another person an entirely different thing?

Gimpel thus becomes a representative of that other variant of *dos kleine menschele* in Yiddish fiction, "the ecstatic wanderer, hopeless in this world because so profoundly committed to the other," as Greenberg and Howe have put it. He also becomes reminiscent of the Wandering Jew, who according to the legend transmitted through the

centuries was punished for having spat into the face of Christ by being deprived of the power to die. Cursed with unwanted life, imbued with the esoteric knowledge he has acquired through having lived through many civilizations, he is generally an evil figure, but he is also sometimes represented as Christ-like in the sustained agony through which he pays for his sin. Longing to join Elka in death, weary from the years of his wandering, Gimpel is transformed by the realization that has come to him from his varied experiences that "the world is entirely an imaginary world," becoming a personification of the ecstatic wisdom that is attained through the agony of suffering.

Yet the wisdom he has attained is the same that he had when, "like a golem," he "believed everyone," reasoning to himself, "Everything is possible, as it is written in the Wisdom of the Fathers, I've forgotten just how." What had seemed to be one of a number of excuses offered by a fool for his gullibility turns out to be indeed wisdom. The outrageously outlandish stories about miraculous births he had accepted really attested to his perception of the miracle of life. The hallucinations which he told himself he had had really attested to his perception that the world is a dream.

But now he who had listened to stories of marvels is the one who tells them: "Going from place to place, eating at strange tables, it often happens that I spin yarns—improbable things that could never have happened—about devils, magicians, windmills, and the like." Sometimes the children who chase after him tell him the particular story they wish to hear, and he satisfies them with a recital of that tale. For Gimpel, it is implied, has come to understand that each one of us has his own favorite fiction to which he is addicted, his own delusion to which he needs to remain faithful. But a sharp youngster tells him that it is really always the same story that he tells. For all of our delusions derive from the dream that is life in this world. The tales which the aged wanderer relates deal with the folk superstitions to which there have been so many references in "Gimpel the Fool "—the windmills, however, seem to be a reminiscence of the illusions of that glorious madman, Don Quixote—but these superstitions, silly as they are, are glimpses of the truth shadowed forth in the dream of life: "No doubt the world is entirely an imaginary world, but it is only once removed from the true world." ...

**Source:** Paul N Siegel, "Gimpel and the Archetype of the Wise Fool," in *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevts Singer*, edited by Marcia Allentuck, Southern Illinois University Press, 1969, pp. 159-74

# Critical Essay #3

*A highly respected American critic, Kazin is best known for his essay collections The Inmost Leaf (1955), Contemporaries (1962), and On Native Grounds (1942), a study of American prose writing since the era of William Dean Howells. In the following excerpt from a review of Gimpel the Fool, and Other Stories, Kazin discusses Singer's combination oftraditionalJewish and modern liteary conventions, focusing on his use of the archetypal fool figure of Jewish literature.*

When I first read "Gimpel the Fool "... I felt not only that I was reading an extraordinarily beautiful and witty story, but that I was moving through as many historical levels as an archaeologist at work. This is an experience one often gets from the best Jewish writers. The most "advanced" and sophisticated Jewish writers of our time—Babel, Kafka, Bellow—have assimilated, even conquered, the whole tradition of modern literature while reminding us of the unmistakable histonc core of the Jewish experience. Equally, a contemporary Yiddish writer like Isaac Bashevis Singer uses all the old Jewish capital of folklore, popular speech and legendry, yet from within this tradition itself is able to duplicate a good deal of the conscious absurdity, the sauciness, the abandon of modern art—without for a moment losing his obvious personal commitment to the immemorial Jewish vision of the world.

Perhaps it is this ability to incarnate all the different periods that Jews have lived through that makes such writers indefinably fascinating to me. They wear whole epochs on their back; they alone record widely separated centuries in dialogue with each other. Yet all these different periods of history, these many *histories*, represent, if not a single point of view, a common historic character. It is the irony with which ancient dogmas are recorded, the imaginative sympathy with which they are translated and transmuted into contemporary terms, that makes the balance that is art.

Gimpel himself is an example of a legendary Jewish type—the saint as *schlemiel* The mocked, persecuted and wretched people, who nevertheless are the chosen—chosen to bear a certain knowledge through a hostile world—are portrayed again in the town fool, a baker who is married off to a frightful slut without knowing what everyone else in town knows, that she will bear a child in four months. Gimpel is *the* fool of the Jews: a fool because he is endlessly naive, a fool because, even when he does learn that he has been had, he ignores his own dignity for the sake of others. His wife's unfaithfulness, her shrewishness—these are not the bourgeois concealment, the "cheating" on one's spouse that it would be in another culture, but a massive, hysterical persecution. The child she already has she passes off as her "brother"; Gimpel believes her. When she gives birth to a child four months after the wedding, Gimpel pays for the circumcision honors and rituals, and names the boy after his own father. When he cries out that his wife has deceived him, she deliberately confuses him, as usual, and persuades him diat the child is "premature":

I said, "Isn't he a little too premature"' She said that she had a grandmother who carried just as short a time and she resembled this grandmother of hers as one drop of water

does another She swore to it with such oaths that you would have believed a peasant at the fair if he had used them To tell the plain truth, I didn't believe her; but when I talked it over next day with the schoolmaster he told me that the very same thing had happened to Adam and Eve Two they went up to bed, and four they descended.

The humor of this is always very real, for these people are rough old-fashioned village types who know their own. The town boys are always playing tricks on Gimpel, setting him on false trails; he is mocked at his own wedding—some young men carry in a crib as a present. His wife, Elka, is a living nightmare, a shrew of monumental proportions, a Shakespearean harridan. Yet in Gimpel's obstinate attachment to her we recognize, as in his customary meekness, the perfection of a type- what to the great world is folly, in itself may be wisdom; what the world thinks insane may, under the aspect of eternity, be the only sanity....

One night, Gimpel comes home unexpectedly and finds another man in bed with Elka; this time he has had enough, and he separates from her. But the town mischiefs take her side and persecute him, while Gimpel worries whether he *did* see the man

Hallucinations do happen You see a figure or a manikin or something, but when you come up closer it's nothing, there's not a thing there And if that's so, I'm doing her an injustice. And when I got so far in my thoughts I started to weep. I sobbed so that I wet the floor where I lay In the morning I went to the rabbi and told him that I had made a mistake.

Elka has another child and "all Frampol refreshed its spirits because of my trouble and grief. However, I resolved that I would always believe what I was told. What's the good of *not* believing? Today it's your wife you don't believe in; tomorrow it's God Himself you won't take stock in."

Even his superstitions—Singer uses local demons and spirits as dramatic motifs—become symbols of his innocent respect for the world. One night, after covering the dough to let it rise, he takes his share of bread and a little sack of flour and starts homeward....

He returns home to find his wife in bed with the apprentice. Characteristically, he suffers rather than storms; characteristically, "the moon went out all at once. It was utterly black, and I trembled"; characteristically, he obeys his wife when she sends him out of the house to see if the goat is well; characteristically, he identifies himself tenderly with the goat, and when he returns home, the apprentice having fled, the wife denies everything, tells him he has been seeing visions, shrieks prodigious curses. Her "brother" beats him with a stick. And Gimpel: "I felt that something about me was deeply wrong, and I said, 'Don'tmake a scandal. All that's needed now is that people should accuse me of raising spooks and *dybbuks*.'"

So he makes his peace with her, and they live together for twenty years. "All kinds of things happened, but I neither saw nor heard." When his wife dies, she tells him that

none of their children is his, and the look on her dead face seems to say to him—"I deceived Gimpel. That was the meaning of my brief life."

Now Gimpel is tempted by the Spirit of Evil himself, who tells him that it is all nothing." 'What,' I said, 'is there, then? "A thick mire."' And, succumbing to the devil, Gimpel urinates into the risen dough. His dead wife comes to him in a dream— and, when he weeps in shame at his act, "It's all your fault," she Gries-—-"You fool! You fool! Because I was false, is everything false, too?"

When the mourning period for his wife ends, he gives up everything to tramp through the world, often telling stories to children—"about devils, magicians, windmills, and the like." He dreams constantly of his wife, asks when he will be with her; in his dreams, she kisses him and promises him that they will be together soon. "When I awaken I feel her lips and taste the salt of her tears."

The last paragraph of the story, Gimpel's serene meditation before death, is of great beauty. It sums up everything that Jews have ever felt about the divinity that hedges human destiny, and it is indeed one of the most touching avowals of faith that I have ever seen. Yet it is all done with lightness, with wit, with a charming reserve—so that it might almost be read as a tribute to human faithfulness itself.,..

Singer's story naturally suggests a comparison with I. J. Peretz's famous "Bontsha the Silent," who was offered everything in heaven, and meekly asked for a hot roll with fresh butter every morning for breakfast. One thinks also of Sholem Aleichem's Tevye the dairyman, who recited his prayers even as he ran after his runaway horse. But in his technique of ambiguity Singer speaks for our generation far more usefully than the old ritualistic praise of Jewish goodness. While Bontsha and Tevye are entirely folk images, cherished symbols of a tradition, Gimpel—though he and his wife are no less symbols—significantly has to win back his faith, and he wins it in visions, in dreams, that give a background of playfulness and irony to this marvel-ously subtle story.

This concern with the dream, this everlasting ambiguity in our relations with the divine—this is a condition that our generation has learned to respect, after rejecting the dogmas first of orthodoxy and then of scientific materialism. This delicacy of conception unites Singer to the rest of imaginative humanity today: Man believes even though he knows his belief to be absurd, but what he believes represents a level of imaginative insight which shades off at one end into art, at the other into Gimpel's occasional self-doubt, the thought that he may be "mad."

It is the integrity of the human imagination that Singer conveys so beautifully. He reveals the advantage that an artist can find in his own orthodox training—unlike so many Jews who in the past became mere copyists and mumblers of the holy word. Singer's work does stem from the Jewish village, the Jewish seminary, the compact (not closed) Jewish society of Eastern Europe. He does not use the symbols which so many modern writers pass on to each other. For Singer it is not only his materials that are "Jewish"; the world is so. Yet within this world he has found emancipation and universality—through his faith in imagination-----

**Source:** Allied Kazin, "*The Saint as Schlemiel*," in his *Contemporaries*, Little, Brown, 1962, pp. 283-88.

# Adaptations

'Gimpel the Fool" was adapted for the stage by David Schechter and produced by Bakery Theater Cooperative of New York in 1982.

"Gimpel the Fool" was read by writer Eli Wallach on national public radio station KCRW. Transcripts are available through the National Yiddish Book Society.

A documentary film called *Isaac Bashevis Singer: Champion of Yiddish Literature* was produced in 1991 by Ergo and is distributed by Ergo Media Inc. In the film, Singer discusses such topics as writing, religion, and Yiddish.

An Academy Award-nominated documentary, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: Isaac in America* was released in 1994. The film profiles the life of the author and includes readings from Singer's works by actor Judd Hirsch. It is distributed by Monterey Home Video.

# Topics for Further Study

Compare Gimpel to the lead character in the 1994 Academy Award-winning movie Forrest Gump.

Research Eastern European shtetls of the late 1800s and early 1900s and discuss similarities between life in the shtetls and in Frampol.

Gimpel is often described as a "holy fool." Find and describe other examples of the "holy fool" figure in literature. Why do they fit into this category?

# Compare and Contrast

**1953:** Americans Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, Jewish members of the Communist Party, are executed for espionage. As civilians, their death sentence sparks controversy.

**1990s:** Aldrich Ames, a high-ranking CIA official, is convicted of spying for the Soviets during his 31-year career. He receives life in prison, the harshest penalty possible. His wife is also convicted, but she receives only a several years imprisonment.

**1950s:** Roughly 5 percent of children are born out of wedlock in the United States.

**Today:** More than 30 percent of children are born out of wedlock in the United States.

**1956:** Polish workers protest the Communist regime. Over 100 demonstrators are killed.

**1993:** In the wake of capitalist reforms, Poland suffers a surge of violent crime inflicted by organized mobs.

# What Do I Read Next?

I. L. Peretz's short story "Bontsha the Silent" centers on a character who, when offered everything in heaven, asks only for a hot roll with butter for breakfast every morning.

Sherwood Anderson's short story "I'm a Fool" is told by a first-person narrator, a racehorse groom, who lies to get what he wants.

The 1989 novel A Prayer for Owen Meany by

American author John Irving centers on a Christ-like hero and examines the meaning of good and evil.

Prussian author Fyodor Dostoevsky's 1869 novel The Idiot centers on the protagonist's loss of innocence and his experience of sin.

James Michener's Poland (1983) is a fictionalized history of Poland which spans 700 years.

# Further Study

*Short Story Criticism*, Vol. 3, Gale, 1989.

Contains previously published criticism on Singer's short fiction.

Siegel, Ben "Sacred and Profane: Isaac Bashevis Singer's Embattled Spirits," *Critique*, Vol. VI, No. 1 (Spring 1963): 24-47.

Discusses Singer's blending of Yiddish and Western literary traditions in Gimpel the Fool and The Spinoza of Market Street.

Singer, Isaac Bashevis, and Burgin, Richard *Conversations with Isaac Bashevis Singer*. New York: Farrar, Straus, 1986,190 p.

Interviews with Singer.

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Drucker, Sally Ann. "I B. Singer's Two Holy Fools," *Yiddish*, Vol. 8, no. 2,1992, pp. 35-39.

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**Editorial**
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**Manufacturing**
Stacy Melson



*For more information, contact*
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535