Henne Fire Study Guide

Henne Fire by Isaac Bashevis Singer

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Introduction

Isaac Bashevis Singer's short story "Henne Fire" first appeared in the magazine *Playboy* and then in his 1968 collection entitled *The Séance*. Singer wrote this story, as he did his other works, in Yiddish, despite being fluent in English; the author and Dorothea Straus translated the story into English. Many critics and readers considered Singer a master of the short story form; among his numerous awards, he received the 1978 Nobel Prize in literature.

"Henne Fire" takes place in a small Polish village sometime before World War I but after the middle of the nineteenth century. The story is filled with supernatural and magical elements, and is told by one of Henne's neighbors in a familiar and intimate style. Henne Fire is a woman whose erratic and frightening behavior prompts the tale's narrator to refer to her as "not a human being but a fire from Gehenna," an ancient word for hell. In the story, Henne's family flees her home, unable to tolerate the sting of her venomous words and physical abuse. Many of Henne's neighbors are afraid of her, as well, having witnessed her violence and paranoia, and simply want her to move to another town. Other villagers, including the local rabbi, try to make Henne's life bearable while striving to protect the townspeople from her wrath and her strange propensity to ignite nearly everything around her.

Author Biography

Isaac Bashevis Singer was born Icek-Hersz Zynger in Radzymin, Poland, on July 14, 1904. He was the son of a rabbi, and the grandson of two rabbis. Singer spent his youth studying sacred Jewish texts, such as the Torah, the Cabala, and the Talmud, in preparation for a life as a rabbi.

Singer spent his childhood years in Warsaw and in the *shtetl*—the term used to describe the exclusively Jewish villages throughout Eastern Europe that were wiped out during Adolph Hitler's campaign against the Jews in the 1930s and 1940s— of Radzymin, Poland. While these locales had a major influence in the settings and references in his stories, Singer's single greatest influence was his older brother, Israel Joshua Singer, a secular Yiddish writer.

Singer forsook his intended career as a rabbi and followed his brother's path, first heading to a writer's club in Warsaw. He took his mother's Hebrew name, Bathsheba, and made it his pen name in Yiddish, Bashevis. In 1935, Singer fled Europe to escape Hitler's regime and landed in America, penniless and knowing only one English phrase. Despondent after his brother's sudden death in America and the devastation of his people in the Holocaust in Europe, he wrote nothing for seven years. Eventually, however, Singer began to write again, publishing prolifically until the time of his death.

Singer's writings, including plays, short stories, novels, autobiographies, and children's stories, respect and reflect both his brother's secularism and his own religious upbringing. Singer's work is filled with both mystical elements and realistic images of contemporary life.

Singer originally wrote in Hebrew but soon switched to Yiddish. In 1923, Singer left rabbinical school and began his literary career as a proofreader for a Yiddish literary magazine. In 1935, he published his first novel, *Shoten an Goray (Satan in Goray)*, prompting the first of many complaints from Yiddish traditionalists that Singer portrayed only the darker side of Jewish life. He continued writing in Yiddish for the rest of his life, even after following his brother to the United States, and after becoming a naturalized American citizen in 1943. Upon moving to America, Singer wrote for the *Jewish Daily Forward* under various pseudonyms, including Isaac Bashevis when he wrote fiction and Isaac Warshofsky when he wrote nonfiction. Occasionally during his career, Singer considered writing in English, but he ultimately rejected the idea, holding fast to the belief that a writer should work in his own language. Much of Singer's body of work remains in Yiddish, untranslated into English.

In 1950, Singer's novel *Di Familie Mushkat (The Family Moskat)* appeared in translation —the first of his work to be published in English. Singer's reputation as the century's foremost Yiddish writer was sealed when Saul Bellow, in 1954, translated the short story "Gimpel the Fool" for *The Partisan Review*. After that, Singer's work began receiving recognition and high praise from readers outside of the small Yiddish literary community.

The short story "Henne Fire" appeared in his 1968 collection of short stories, *The Séance and Other Stories.*

Singer's numerous awards include the National Book Award in 1970 for children's literature and in 1974 for fiction; the 1978 Nobel Prize for literature; and a Gold Medal for Fiction from the National Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1989. In 1983, his short story "Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy" was made into a film, as was his novel *Enemies: A Love Story* in 1989. Singer continued working well into his eighties, during which decade Singer published eight new works, which were all subsequently published in English translation. He died on July 24, 1991, in Surfside, Florida, after a series of strokes.

Plot Summary

Part One

The neighbor narrator begins by introducing Henne Fire as a demon or evil spirit and not a human female. Henne was an emaciated creature, all skin and bones, who screamed and behaved in crazy ways when she was angered. The neighbor considers Henne's husband, Berl Chazkeles, a saint; Henne threw dishes at him so often that he had to buy a new set nearly every week, and when he left for work as a sieve-maker each morning, Henne yelled insults at him.

Henne has four daughters, and the neighbor remembers that each one devised a way to escape Henne as soon as possible. One was a servant in Lublin, one moved to America, one married an old man, and another died of scarlet fever. "Anything was better than living with Henne," notes the neighbor.

Berl finally ran away from Henne, provoking her to become even more out of control. "She knocked her head on the stones, hissed like a snake, and foamed at the mouth," according to the narrator. Traditionally, the narrator explains, when a woman's husband abandoned her, she would work in someone's home to make a living. Henne, though, frightened everyone in the village so much with her curses and violence that no one would let her in their home. Henne tried to earn money by selling fish, but this did not work out well because Henne insulted anyone who tried to buy her fish. Henne became even more paranoid, accusing her neighbors of various slights.

When Henne's daughters came home to visit, she would start fights with them that tumbled out into the streets. Henne was convinced that they were hiding their father and would not tell her his whereabouts. Eventually the daughters stopped coming by, which prompted Henne to have the village teacher write them letters saying that she was disowning them.

The narrator notes that "in a small town one is not allowed to starve," so people brought food to Henne, but she just threw it away. Henne next turned her venomous behavior on the children of the village and also reported various imagined crimes to the chief of police. In the marketplace, she announced that the military was drafting only poor boys and sparing the rich, which, according to the narrator, was true. "But if they had all been taken, would it have been better?" wonders the narrator. Henne's pronouncements provoked the Russian officials to place her in an insane asylum.

In less than six months, Henne returned to the village, and she promptly threw out the people who had settled into her house. She searched for her missing belongings in other villagers' homes and "humiliated everybody." The rabbi refused her entrance into the women's synagogue and his study when she came looking for him. Groups of villagers regularly beat her up after she spit at passing hearses.

One night, Kopel Klotz, a neighbor, awoke to find Henne's house on fire. He ran over with a pail of water, but "It wasn't a usual fire," according to the narrator. "Little flames flew around like birds. . . . [T]he flames danced and turned somersaults. . . . These were not flames, but goblins from hell." Even after the neighbors finally extinguished the fire, Henne's bed burst into flames the next morning. The narrator suggests that the fire was retribution by the devil for Henne's cursing everyone in the village. Henne's neighbors told the rabbi that if he didn't do something they would "take matters into their own hands." As Henne pleaded with the rabbi to help her, her house went up in flames again and was destroyed. She claimed the neighbors set the fire, but the narrator denies this, arguing that no one would try such a thing with the wind blowing as it was. This was when the villagers began calling her Henne Fire.

Part Two

Henne tried to live at the poorhouse, but the poor were frightened and turned her away. A gentile woodchopper took in Henne but had to throw her out after the handle on his ax caught fire. Finally, the rabbi allowed her to live in the booth behind his home set up for the Succoth holidays (a Jewish harvest festival, usually celebrated in September, that commemorates the forty years the Jewish people spent in the wilderness). The rabbi's family all worked to make the booth warm and comfortable for the winter; the son installed a stove and his wife arranged a bed and provided Henne with food. Everyone hoped that "the demons would respect a Succoth booth and that it would not catch fire."

The narrator recalls that Henne became a docile person and stayed inside the Succoth booth all day during the winter. "Yet evil looked out of her eyes," the narrator adds. The rabbi's wife suggested to Henne that she come inside the house and help out in the kitchen, but Henne declined and expressed concern that she might cause the rabbi's books to light on fire.

The deep snows of winter gave way to surprising warmth in the early spring, and the town flooded. Even so, one day, the Succoth booth burst into flames "like a paper lantern." The narrator recalls how Henne later told of a "fiery hand" that reached down and ignited the booth. At this point, the rabbi felt he had no choice but to bring Henne into his house, but this greatly upset his family. The community suggested that Henne be sent to another town, but Henne cried out that she could not bear being buried anywhere but in the village. "She had found her tongue again," remembers the narrator, "and everybody was surprised."

Reb Zelig, a plumber, along with other villagers, offered to build a brick house for Henne on the site of her old home, and asked nothing for their labor. The house was finished just before Passover, but no one asked Henne to the Seder meal at their house.

One day, a letter came from Mindel, Henne's daughter who had left the village to live in America. She enclosed money and wrote that she and her husband had become rich in New York City. If Henne and Berl would reconcile, Mindel would pay for them to come to

America and live. Henne's sudden wealth interested a number of villagers, but Henne simply muttered curses at them.

Henne began to drink heavily, according to the narrator, and began appearing in public drunk, angry, and only partially clothed. She tossed coins out of her window and threw trash at the children when they scrambled for the money. The townspeople believed that Henne was bound to "drink herself to death."

After no one had seen Henne for a few days, a group broke down her door and came upon an amazing sight. Henne was sitting in her chair, "burned to a crisp." Nothing else in the house was burned—not even the chair in which they found her. The villagers searched for an explanation but could come up with none, except that the curses Henne had used against others must have come back on her in the form of fire. After Henne's death and burial, the villagers began to report strange incidents, such as washtubs magically overturning and straw suddenly and inexplicably catching on fire. According to her neighbor, "Henne continued to cause trouble even after her death."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

"HenneThis is Fire" tells the story of a woman who lived in a small village in Russia. It is told from the point of view of a man who also lived in the village. Henne was an evil woman with a fiery, shrewish nature. She had dark features, like a gypsy, and was extremely thin. People who had seen her bathing in the river knew she was all skin and bones.

Henne acted like an insane woman. She took offense at anything anyone would say. She would smash dishes, scream, shake her fists, fall into convulsions, spit curses and show all kinds of vile behavior. She suspected that the entire town was out to get her for one reason or another.

She was married to a poor, hard-working sieve-maker, and they managed to have four daughters, all of whom left home as soon as they were old enough. One daughter died of scarlet fever, and one left for America, but the other two remained in the country. One became a servant in a larger nearby town, Lublin, and the other married an old man, because anything was better than living with their mother. Henne's husband finally gave up and left her after 20 years of marriage.

When Henne heard that he had left the village, she had an epileptic fit in the gutter and would not be helped. Her kerchief was knocked off, and the villagers discovered she had not been shaving her head. She cursed her husband, wishing him small pox and gangrene.

She became even worse to deal with when her husband had gone. She never stopped cursing and blaspheming against God, even in the synagogue while the other women tried to pray. She set up a booth in the market to sell fish, but made it impossible for anyone to buy anything without being insulted. When she did her laundry every few weeks, she tore down other people's clotheslines and quarreled with everyone about everything. There was no way to deal with Henne, in speech or in silence, without insulting her.

Occasionally, her two daughters would come to visit from Lublin. There would be a kiss, an embrace and a period of silence, but Henne would soon chase them away, screaming after them. She suspected that they knew where their father was, but when they took holy oaths swearing they had no idea, she accused them of lying. Eventually, the daughters began avoiding her, so Henne had the village teacher write letters to them, disowning them.

A Jewish custom requires that no one should be left to die of neglect. Following this custom, the villagers left food on her doorstep, not wanting to step foot inside her house, but Henne just threw it all into the garbage ditch. Then, because the adults were

ignoring her, she picked fights with the children, accusing them of stealing or anything else she could imagine. She denounced the entire town for one thing or another in the middle of the marketplace and then to the police. The Russian officials finally began to think that she might cause trouble, so they had her sent to the asylum in Lublin. However, she was back in the village in fewer than six months.

When Henne returned, she discovered that another family had moved into her house, so she drove them out into the cold and announced the next morning that she had been robbed. She marched from house to house, demanding all the possessions that had been taken from her, humiliating everyone in the process. She was no longer allowed in the women's synagogue, and everyone ran away when she went to the well for water.

She even cursed the dead when a hearse drove by her house. The lower-class mourners beat her, but she seemed to glory in running around, blaming each of her bruises on this or that person. The rabbi would not allow her in his study anymore. She tried her curses and accusations on the Gentiles, and they only laughed at her.

One night, Henne's house caught fire. True to their customs, the villagers came to help and were able to put out the fire in time to save the house, though the fire seemed to have a life of its own. However, in the morning, parts of the house or furniture were still bursting into flame for no reason. Her neighbors wanted Henne out of their alley, fearing for their own families and possessions. She went to the rabbi to complain and curse and blame them, but as she stood before him, her house went up in flames and burned to the ground, leaving only the chimney. This is when the villagers began referring to her as "Henne Fire," rather than "Black Henne."

Without a roof over her head, she tried to go to the poor house, but they would not let her in. They feared she would set the poorhouse on fire, and then they would all be without a home. The rabbi allowed her to stay in his Sukkoth booth over the winter. His son installed a tin stove for warmth, and Henne became very quiet all through the winter, doing nothing but huddling in the featherbed.

One day, after spring had started to melt ice and snow, the booth burst into flame. Henne claimed that a fiery hand had reached down from the ceiling. The rabbi invited her to stay in his house afterward, and everyone prepared to leave in case of fire. Henne almost apologized. The community elders called a meeting. Some people wanted Henne to move to another village, but she appeared and told them she would rather be buried alive than be sent away from her birthplace. Everyone was shocked at her words after her long silence. A plumber offered to build her a brick house on the lot she already owned, free of the labor costs.

The house was built in a short amount of time, with the help and donations of everyone in the village. By Passover, Henne had a house that could not burn down. Her food cupboard had even been stocked with everything she would need for Passover from the poor fund. However, when a few people checked in on her, she was simply munching on a carrot instead of holding Seder, the traditional Passover meal.

Henne continued her quiet way of life a while longer. Then a letter and some money came from her daughter in America. She had married a man who had become wealthy, so she was offering to pay for passage to America if Henne would make peace with her husband. Once the village learned that Henne had money and might be leaving soon, everything changed. An agent offered her special investment deals. A messenger offered to go in search of her husband, but she told him to bring back his corpse or papers of divorce. She took up heavy drinking, which was unheard-of and blasphemous behavior for a Jewish woman. She kept herself roaring drunk, played mean tricks, like throwing coins out the window and then pouring slop on the heads of those who tried picking them up. She also strolled through the marketplace in nothing but her underwear. Everyone said she would drink herself to death.

After this had gone on for some time, no one saw Henne for several days. Her neighbors had to break the lock on her door to check on her. They discovered that she had somehow been burned to a crisp, seated in a chair, and there was hardly a mark on the chair's fabric. It was a mystery. Everyone had his or her theory, but no one was able to find out what had really happened to her.

Henne's remains were put in a sack and buried in the cemetery. The gravedigger said the Jewish prayer for the dead. The village coachman bought the brick house from Henne's daughters and turned it into a stable, but a spirit remained. His horses would sweat in the night and catch cold, which was deadly, and straw caught on fire for no reason. A neighbor who had argued with Henne had her sheets torn from the clothesline, and the washtub was overturned. Henne's ghost persisted with mischief in the village.

Analysis

Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote all of his original stories in Yiddish, preserving the speech and storytelling patterns of tradition. The rhythm is well preserved in the translation, which was written in partnership with Dorothea Strauss. Readers can catch themselves falling into the rise and fall of the Jewish dialect of a poor village.

In this particular story, the author's character has very little interaction with Henne, the same way that the rest of the village also tries to keep their distance from her. The author's first few sentences tell us that Henne is a demon, or very close to one, and that she is now dead. Most of the first half of his story is a catalog of examples of her blasphemous and "unwomanly" behavior. Near the end, there is also mention of her having a flat-chest, "like a man." Many of these are references to the traditions based on the Jewish religion. For example, a married Jewish woman was to shave their head so that their hair would not tempt other men into adultery.

There is never an explanation of why she grew to be such a shrew. Yes, she and her husband were poor, but so were most of the other villagers, and the author never mentions that money was the cause of her rage. However, the description of her epileptic fit when her husband leaves does clearly point to traditional demonic

possession: foaming at the mouth, green skin, etc. The fact that she is even worse after this incident means that she is either truly inhabited by a demon now (had her husband kept the demons at bay?) or that she now has a valid reason for resentment and no one is close enough to her now to hold her back.

However, the fire that eventually overtakes her destroys her comfort zone. Now that she has nothing of her own, she is forced to depend on others after being so cruel to all of them for so many years. With a physical fire following her, her own flames of outrage seem to have been extinguished. Perhaps it makes her realize that there is something more powerful than she is. Through this, we discover that she does have a fear after all, either a fear of death, a fear of this greater power, or a fear of depending on others. She goes into hiding through the winter, hibernating in her borrowed featherbed. When her new quarters also burn to the ground when the ice and snow are melting, what she says comes as close to an apology and expression of thanks as Henne probably ever came: "I shouldn't be allowed to do this to you."

When she shocks the townspeople at the meeting by breaking her silence and telling them to bury her alive instead of sending her away, she is at the lowest point a human being can be, grieving to the point of wishing for the death she may have feared. It is an unimaginable way to die. It appears that she is a changed woman. The village takes pity on her and builds her a complete house that will not burn, stocking it with all the basics she should need.

We assume that this is the end and that she will become the do-gooder who has repented her evil ways and lives happily ever after. However, this is not the case. A letter from the now-American daughter triggers the deep-seated anger in Henne. "Who does she think she is, demanding after all these years that I make peace with anyone, let alone the man who left me?" Henne may be thinking. She also discovers how easily the townsfolk forgive her past deeds, now that she has all of this money from a wealthy daughter. In fact, she teases them with it, throwing it out a window and then dumping slop over them while they crawl in the mud for it. However, this money provides her with a way to kill herself, in a manner of speaking, in addition to making everyone else suffer again a little while longer. After all, she no longer lives in a flammable house and is no longer dependent on anyone else. The fire inhabits Henne once again.

We've all heard theories of the causes of spontaneous combustion — a deadly combination of a high level of alcohol in the bloodstream and a warm room with lots of activity — but nothing will ever explain the lack of any effects of such heat on the surrounding materials. The chair she was sitting in hardly had a mark on it. It does indeed appear that the very demons that possessed her in life turned on her, calling for her death. Her fiery death was an appropriate end for her fiery life.

The author ends his story with a few homemade proverbs from three different people in his character's life. Each of these offers a different view of dealing with the trials and tribulations of simple life. His grandmother has a somewhat fatalistic view: if you are poor, life will be frustrating. The character's own saying is a little more jovial: go ahead and let it out occasionally, but always remember the positive side of things. His rabbi's

quote teaches the listener (or reader) as a rabbi should: work hard for your bread, think about the "now," and you won't have as much time to think about a dismal future.

Characters

Berl Chazkeles

Berl is Henne's husband and, according to the story's narrator, "a saint" for tolerating Henne's daily verbal and physical abuse. He earns a meager living making sieves. Eventually, Berl abandons Henne and she becomes even more angry and loud than before.

Henne Fire

Henne Fire, also known in her Polish village as Black Henne, is described by the narrator as a demon. The narrator claims that Henne is "not a human being but a fire from Gehenna," an ancient name for hell. Henne is emaciated, her skin is black, and her eyes look like two burning coals.

For most of the story, Henne behaves as if an evil spirit possesses her; she falls into convulsions and makes animal noises when something displeases her. She has no friends among the villagers, as she is always screaming at them and threatening them with horrible curses. Her four daughters find various ways to escape her house as soon as they are old enough to leave. One daughter dies from scarlet fever, however, and the narrator comments, "Anything was better than living with Henne." Even Henne's apparently gentle husband runs away.

Henne also displays paranoid behavior. She is convinced that everyone in the town is out to cheat her, despite the fact that the townspeople offer to help Henne after her husband disappears, and contribute to her upkeep in various ways. "In a small town one is not allowed to starve," says the narrator. Henne reports to the village's chief of police that her neighbors are committing all sorts of crimes, but the narrator suspects that these crimes are all in Henne's head. The narrator admits that Henne was right to complain that the rich boys are never drafted for the army but excuses the practice as necessary. For Henne's inability to "suffer injustice," says the narrator, the Russian authorities place her in an insane asylum for a few months.

Henne's personality changes after her house catches fire, and she appears possessed by some sort of fiery spirit. After Henne's neighbors threaten to "take matters into their own hands" if she does not leave town, the rabbi allows her to live with his family. While living with the rabbi's family, Henne ceases her screaming and angry accusations and turns silent and passive.

Henne dies after becoming a drunk and, apparently, spontaneously catching fire. The villagers claim that her ghost continued to cause trouble long after her death.

Malkeleh

Malkeleh is one of Henne and Berl's four daughters. Malkeleh is described as the most beautiful of the couple's daughters. She dies of scarlet fever.

Mindel

Mindel is one of Henne and Berl's four daughters. She leaves for America and marries a man in New York City who becomes wealthy. Mindel sends money back to Henne and writes that if her mother and Berl make up she will arrange for them to come to America. Henne accepts her money but refuses to make up with Berl.

The Narrator

Very little is known about the narrator except that he or she enjoys telling a story and lives next door to Henne and her family.

The Rabbi

The village's rabbi takes pity on Henne when her neighbors are ready to run her out of town and arranges for her to sleep in an outdoor booth, or tent, set up for the Succoth holiday. The rabbi's family supplies her with a bed, a stove, and food during the winter. When the tent catches on fire, the rabbi insists that she stay in his family's house. This is very upsetting to his family, so various members of the village offer to build a fireproof brick house for Henne.

The Rabbi's Wife

The rabbi's wife appears to be as kind as her husband and helps with Henne's upkeep after a fire destroys her home. She does ask Henne to help out in the kitchen, but Henne refuses, citing the possibility that she may inadvertently ignite the rabbi's books. When Henne's fire destroys the Succoth tent in which she is living, the rabbi is forced to move her into the family's house. This upsets the rabbi's wife so much that she cannot sleep at night.

Reb Zelig

Reb Zelig is a plumber in the village. He offers to build Henne a brick house after the Succoth booth she is living in bursts into flames, forcing her to move in with the rabbi's family. Zelig and others build a house for Henne on the site of her original home and ask nothing for their efforts.

Themes

Community

While Henne is the main character in Singer's story, the community plays a vital role, at times performing as a single entity with a single voice. The story is set in a very insular village in Poland before World War I, and it is told by one of Henne's neighbors. Although Singer refers to gentile characters a couple of times, the community in which Henne Fire lived seemed to be primarily Jewish. Everyone knows one another, and Henne is especially well-known throughout the village.

Singer depicts the villagers constantly attempting to mollify Henne's rage. After her husband left and she was unable to work, many people brought food to her house—"in a small town one is not allowed to starve," notes the narrator. Henne's actions and behavior deeply concerned the entire village, especially after her house burned to the ground and she had nowhere to live. The rabbi eventually allowed her to live with his family, but the community decided that it was best if she had her own fireproof home, and a group collaborated and contributed their labors to build Henne a new house.

As much as the villagers seemed wary of Henne, there was also a note of guilt in their attitudes toward her. The narrator mentions that Henne "suffered greatly for her sins," but also notes that the villagers were loathe "to pay for the sins of another" by tolerating Henne's crazy behavior. In a few instances, the villagers were moments away from forcing Henne from the town, but intervening acts consistently delayed her forced departure.

Fire

Images of fire appear throughout Singer's story and are primarily used to associate Henne with evil. Sometimes these are actual fires, while other times they seem to be figurative or symbolic fires. The fires in the story often seem to have a life of their own, taking on the likeness of an evil spirit or demon.

The neighbor who narrates the story refers to "a blaze" that was always inside Henne, as if fire were consuming her. Her skin was black, her eyes were like "two coals," and she was always angry. In addition, Henne was emaciated and unable to put on weight, as if something inside her was burning up any food she ate.

When Henne's house caught on fire, the flames "danced and turned somersaults." Even after her neighbors put out the fire, another fire the next morning ignited her bed sheets and the garbage and baked a piece of dough. Later that day, Henne accused her neighbors of setting the fire, and pleaded with the rabbi to take her into his home. However, as she spoke to the rabbi, her kerchief burst into flames and her house caught fire once again. The fire took the shape of "a man with long hair," dancing, whistling, and waving his arms. These incidents prompted the villagers to call her Henne Fire.

Henne's final demise resulted from fire. Her neighbors found her corpse "burned to a crisp" in a chair. Oddly enough, nothing else in the house was burned, not even the chair in which she sat. The narrator remarks that it should be no surprise that Henne died by fire, as Henne cursed others by using the word "fire."

The Supernatural and Superstition

Supernatural events occur in nearly every scene in "Henne's Fire," providing an atmosphere of timelessness, such that the amazing events being relayed in the story take on a sensation of truth. The story's narrator makes it clear from the beginning that the supernatural was at work in the village, and especially in Henne Fire. In fact, the narrator goes so far as to claim that Henne "was not a human being but a fire from Gehenna." The reference to an ancient name for hell creates an atmosphere in the story in which flames can suddenly—but not suprisingly—appear, looking like demons.

The world of the narrator and the villagers accepted the idea that evil spirits are as real and as involved in everyday life as any other member of the community. The tale opens with the narrator's assertion, "Yes, there are people who are demons. God preserve us! Mothers see things when they give birth, but they never tell us what they see!" When Henne has her fit after her husband leaves, a fellow villager "pushed a key into her hand," but that superstitious effort didn't help Henne recover. The rabbi gives Henne the small tent in which to live, believing that "the demons would respect a Succoth booth and that it would not catch fire." The rabbi made sure, though, to hang a talisman in the booth as insurance.

In the end, the villagers believe that Henne's curses came back to kill her. Even after her death, Henne continued to bother the villagers, they believed, sending ghosts to turn over their washtubs and throw dirt on their clean clothes.

Madness and Insanity

Madness and insanity define Henne's character, at least according to the narrator. These qualities make her both fascinating and a bit frightening, and they set her apart from the other villagers. As described by her neighbor, Henne was a madwoman, displaying behavior that would lead one to believe that if she was not possessed by a demon, then she suffered from some kind of mental illness. When her husband ran away, Henne "knocked her head on the stones, hissed like a snake, and foamed at the mouth." When the villagers gave her food, she would throw it away and berate them. According to Henne's neighbor, walking into Henne's house was "like walking into a lion's den." Whenever Henne was around, items spontaneously caught fire.

Henne continually cursed nearly everyone she encountered, and suspected them of cheating, lying, or setting fire to her house. She was sent to an insane asylum for accusing the military of exempting rich boys from the draft—not for being insane. These and other incidents in the story raise the possibility that Henne may have simply been extremely angry over whatever events occurred in her life before the narration began,

rather than actually being possessed. On the other hand, she may well have had a physical illness that contributed to what her neighbors described as madness. In fact, the narrator uses the phrase "epileptic fit" just before describing Henne's apparently crazy actions in response to her husband's leaving, suggesting that Henne may have had a medical condition that was the cause of some or all of her frightening behavior. The narrator would lead the reader to believe in the theory of madness, but a perusal between the lines opens the story to other possibilities, thus shedding light on the possible bias of the narrator himself.

Style

Symbolism

The image of fire is used throughout the story: Henne's last name was Fire; fire seemed to follow her wherever she went; and finally, fire was responsible for her death. Fire is so prevalent and so closely linked to Henne that it can be interpreted as a symbol of her life.

Fire has two primary features: it both destroys and purifies whatever it touches. The fires surrounding Henne can be seen as a representation of evil, something that destroys people and societies. As well, it can be seen as a purifying force; Henne may be a scapegoat, carrying the sins of the villagers within her. Her destruction at the end of the story may be a representation of the town attempting to rid itself of sins or evil.

Tone

Singer wrote "Henne Fire" in a very familiar and casual tone. Beginning with the story's opening lines, there is a strong sense that the narrator is relating the tale in an intimate setting. The narrator's use of phrases such as "Now listen to what happened" and "My dear people" interspersed throughout the story indicate the narrator's intention to make a direct connection with his readers.

The narrator is revealed early in the story to be one of Henne's neighbors, someone who might well know the details of her life. Furthermore, the neighbor places himself or herself in the middle of a number of scenes, as if to add authority to the telling.

The narrator, however, may not necessarily be the most trustworthy of storytellers. For example, on the question of whether or not Henne's neighbors set the fire that destroyed her house, the narrator immediately rejects any such possibility. "Who would try such a thing like that," comments the narrator, "especially with the wind blowing?" Since the narrator is one of the neighbors, his or her main interest may be self-exoneration. After all, just a few paragraphs before this scene, the narrator has admitted that many of the people who lived near Henne had warned the rabbi that if she did not leave the village, "they would take matters into their own hands."

Historical Context

Poland in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

The combination of a series of wars in the seventeenth century and corrupt Polish rulers in the eighteenth century left Poland in a shattered state. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Polish king's close alliance with Russia left Poland virtually ruled by the Russians. In 1772, the Polish government was so weak that Prussia, Russia, and Austria agreed to annex portions of Poland, launching a series of partitions of the country that continued through the early nineteenth century and essentially wiped the nation off the map until just after World War I.

During the 1790s, Napoleon Bonaparte of France recruited thousands of Poles for his effort to capture land belonging to Austria, Russia, and Prussia, assuring them that he would restore their nation in exchange for their services. This never came about, and in 1815 the country was partitioned once again. A large part of what was once Poland went to the Russians, and it is in a small village in this region that Henne and her neighbors lived.

From 1815 until 1917, various Russian kings, or tsars, ruled Poland. This period was marked by a succession of revolutions and uprisings within Poland against the tsar. Typically, tsarist rule in Poland was harsh and repressive; for example, after the unsuccessful January Uprising of 1863, the Russians responded by shutting down the universities and schools and outlawing the speaking of Polish in public places. While serfdom was abolished in Russia by 1861, this abolition did not extend to her Polish territories.

Around 1905, after suffering a number of key defeats in the Russo-Japanese War, Russia began to lose economic and military power, and the country fell prey to internal civil unrest. In 1906, Josef Pilsudski, a founding member of the Polish Socialist Party, organized a number of paramilitary groups that launched raids on symbols of Russian rule, such as post offices, tax offices, and mail trains.

In 1917, the Russian tsarist regime collapsed, and in 1918 Pilsudski proclaimed Polish independence and became Poland's first head of state in the twentieth century.

Yiddish Language and Literature

German Jews developed the Yiddish language around the year 1100 A.D. as a dialect of German that included Hebrew letters and Hebrew and Aramaic words. The language grew with the inclusion and adaptation of words from languages with which European Jews had contact, such as English, Russian, and even Provençal, in southeastern France.

By the fourteenth century, the center of the Yiddish language moved to Eastern Europe when Jews fled persecution in Central Europe. Yiddish soon became the language of everyday life for most Jews living in Eastern Europe. They continued to use Hebrew, however, primarily for religious study and services. Through the middle of the nineteenth century, Eastern European Jews used Yiddish for commercial transactions, general education, and the religious education of women and others lacking a high level of Hebrew.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Jewish authors in Europe began writing in Yiddish to convey a sense of community and culture. The classical period of Yiddish literature is considered to have lasted from the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century. The three greatest fiction writers of that period are considered to be Sholem Aleichem, Mendele Mokher Sefarim, and Isaac Leib Peretz. Singer, too, wrote entirely in Yiddish and, like the writers during the classical period, wrote stories of life in small Eastern European Jewish villages.

Before World War II, some eleven million people spoke Yiddish; currently, about four million Yiddish speakers remain, the huge reduction being due in large part to Adolph Hitler's campaign to wipe out the Jews. While Yiddish is considered by the United Nations to be an "endangered language," there are signs that interest in Yiddish is growing. In 1984, a Russian-Yiddish dictionary containing essays on etymology and grammar was published in Russia, and a number of universities, including a few in the United States, now offer classes and programs in Yiddish.

Critical Overview

Two lines of criticism emerge about the winner of the 1978 Nobel Prize for literature. Many have praised Singer, who always wrote in Yiddish, as the last great storyteller, especially in the tradition of Yiddish storytellers. Stefan Kanfer's 1991 obituary for Singer in *Time*, in fact, highlights the author's lofty position in many critics' minds with its title, "The Last Teller of Tales." The other strain of criticism, according to Dan Miron in *Judaism*, showed itself in the "servings of envy and hatred that [Singer] received from the rapidly shrinking Yiddishist cultural establishment." Abraham Bezanker, writing in *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, also notes that Singer's "reception by his kinsmen is somewhat less admiring" than that of English-speaking and American readers.

R. Barbara Gitenstein, writing in the *Reference Guide to American Literature*, notes that Singer's treatment of "sexuality and insanity alienated him from many of his Yiddish readers." This tension between Singer and those involved in Yiddish literature also is based on Singer's somewhat passive and fatalistic outlook on life, according to Miron, an outlook that does not mesh with modern Yiddish literary culture. This culture has "sprung out of the opposition to what appeared to be the inertia and passivity of the old, traditional Jewish way of life," Miron continues. Singer's "gospel which preaches surrender," according to Miron, cannot be accepted. This sense of surrender and passivity emerges in "Henne Fire," especially when Henne calls attention to the injustice of how the army selects its recruits. The story's narrator, while admitting that Henne is factually correct, accepts the inevitability that someone has to fill the ranks and that it might as well be the poor.

Miron acknowledges, however, the strength and beauty of Singer's writing, admitting that "it is impossible not to be enraptured by Bashevis's narrative art, not to be drawn into the melancholy and mystery of his fatalism." Bezanker, while criticizing Singer for his "qualitative unevenness," notes that in his best work the author "has a good deal of power and emotional impact," especially through his use of humor, mysticism, and the occult.

Israel Shenker, in an appreciation of the author in the *New York Times* soon after Singer's death, also welcomed Singer's liberal use of humor. Singer's fiction reflects his own experiences "leavened by humor," Shenker writes. Susan Moore's article in *Quadrant* argues that Singer finds his prowess in the short story form. He has "a deftness which enchants" and makes the mundane "convey important truths," she states.

Other critics, including Elizabeth Gottlieb, have also noted the humor and mysticism in Singer's fiction. In *Southern Review*, Gottlieb asserts that, while many readers have called Singer the "Yiddish [Nathaniel] Hawthorne," Singer's use of humor sets him apart from the nineteenth-century American author. Gottlieb contends that, unlike Hawthorne, "man's imperfections do not obsess Singer; he and his characters accept it as a kind of divine joke."

This dichotomy—in which Singer is praised as the consummate storyteller on one hand and condemned as a perpetrator of fatalistic Jewish stereotypes on the other—has made it difficult for critics to classify Singer. Gitenstein notes that Singer's refusal to choose between "mysticism and rationality" gives his fiction both "charm" and "sophistication." According to Kanfer, none of Singer's writings can be categorized, and this was what the author desired. He quotes Singer as saying that schools of literature are inventions by professors and that "Only small fish swim in schools." Kanfer asserts that "Isaac Bashevis Singer chose to swim alone. Leviathans always do."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Sanderson holds a master of fine arts degree in fiction writing and is an independent writer. In this essay, Sanderson examines the various roles of Henne in Isaac Bashevis Singer's short story.

Why would Singer write about such a woman as Henne in his short story "Henne Fire?"

As the narrator recalls Henne, the main character in Singer's bizarre and amazing tale, she appeared to be insane or even possessed by some demon. Not only was she physically frightening— skin charred as if by a fire, coal-black eyes out of which "evil looked," and a stature that more closely resembled a skeleton than a living, breathing mother of four—but she behaved in ways that scared adults and children alike. Henne was easily provoked, and she often responded to perceived slights with swear words and curses that were like "worm-eaten peas." After her husband left her and the village proper, she threw herself down on the ground and "hissed like a snake and foamed at the mouth." When her daughters returned for a visit, Henne broke plates and windows, and screamed such epithets at her daughters as, "Bitch, slut, whore, you should have dissolved in your mother's belly!"

As if that were not horrible enough, Henne's presence seemed to call forth some fire-breathing demon. No building was safe from the spontaneous blazes that broke out whenever she was around, and even her death was defined by the fiery wrath of whatever lived inside of her. The townspeople discovered her body, burned to the bone, seated in a chair that did not exhibit even a trace of fire damage.

Singer, however, presents the reader with a curious scene about halfway through the story that creates a pause in the narrator's inventory of Henne's strange behaviors. The narrator, one of Henne's neighbors, mentions that Henne once called attention to the occupying Russian government's practice of drafting only poor boys and exempting the boys of rich families. The narrator admits that this was true but adds, "[I]f they had all been taken, would it have been better? Somebody had to serve. But Henne, good sort that she was, could not suffer injustice." This is truly an amazing thing to say about someone who has been described, in the previous pages, as crazy and demon-possessed. All of a sudden, Henne the wild-woman proves to have a strong sense of right and wrong. Equally remarkable is the fact that this sense of right and wrong, and not her madness, is what lands her in an insane asylum. With this scene, Singer causes careful readers to question the assumptions he has led them to make up to this point. Henne is not totally depraved, and those around her are not altogether upright and rational. Perhaps this is not the only instance in which Henne has a point.

Writing in *Studies in American Fiction*, Sarah Blacher Cohen surveys Singer's use of female characters. One of the features of Singer's women, according to Cohen, is that they "unsettle" the other characters in a story and force them to question their beliefs and actions. These women have "emblematic qualities [that] unsettle and disorient the

Singer protagonist," she writes, and, "prod him to explore his own guarded interior, to discover unpleasant truths about himself."

Possibly, Henne Fire is not simply a crazy middle-aged woman wandering around a small village and scaring everyone back into their homes; maybe her actions have a significance beyond madness. A close examination of the story reveals that Henne was the physical and human representation of the villagers' own sins and faults and served as their scapegoat and teller of hard truths. Little wonder it is, then, that the villagers wanted her to leave.

One reason it may be difficult to see Henne's true nature is that Singer's story is told through the character and memory of her former neighbor, who narrates the story. Henne is portrayed as being furious with most people in the village, including her husband, her daughters, and her neighbors, but the reader must rely solely on the neighbor's interpretations of this fury. The neighbor records that Henne verbally abused her husband, Berl, but also slyly suggests that her anger may have been due to the small income he made. "He earned only a pittance. Of course, they were poor, but they were not the only ones," the neighbor comments. The neighbor also indicates in those words that poverty was a common condition and that Henne should not have expected much more. As seen through the neighbor's eyes, Henne must be crazy or possessed to be complaining about something that, in his eyes, cannot be helped.

When Henne's daughters returned for a visit, Henne screamed at them, too, demanding that they tell of Berl's location after he abandoned her. The daughters swore that they had no idea where their father was, but Henne believed they were lying and screamed, "Your mouths will grow out the back of your heads for swearing falsely!" The neighbor says that they were "good girls, and that they all took after their father," which raises the possibility that they were, indeed, lying to protect him. The neighbor is assuming that Henne was always in the wrong, no matter the situation. She was wrong to be so angry about how her family treated her, just as she was wrong in challenging the Russian government for drafting only poor boys for the military. Yet the reader knows—and the narrator admits— that Henne's complaints about the Russians were well founded. Maybe her complaints about her family had some basis as well; readers do not hear Henne's side of the story.

In the scene where Henne's house burns down, as well, the neighbor's interpretation reveals more than may be immediately apparent. The first fire erupted suddenly, and the house was saved, but the neighbor swears that the flames were "goblins from hell." The second fire erupted just as suddenly but was restricted to Henne's bed. The neighbor describes this fire as having been "tricks of the Evil Host," and says that because Henne had cursed nearly everyone in the village, "the devil had turned on her." This fire prompted those living in the neighborhood to threaten that "they would take matters into their own hands" if Henne were allowed to continue living among them. Amazingly, there was a third fire later the same day that finally destroyed Henne's house and put her out in the cold. Henne "spread the rumor" that her neighbors had purposely set her house on fire. Three suspicious fires in one day and a threat, but the neighbor narrating the

story still insists that Henne's suspicions were unfounded, citing the "scores of witnesses to the contrary."

Even if the neighbors did not burn Henne's house, why was she so despised that they threatened to do so? Why was she always in the wrong? Singer gives a clue in the fact that the neighbor refers vaguely to Henne's sins on a number of occasions, but never says what they were. This is because the sins are not Henne's, per se; they are everyone's. Singer has created Henne to serve as a scapegoat for the village, bearing the villagers' sins and transgressions. The evil the villagers see surrounding Henne— in the form of the fires as well as her frightening appearance and demeanor—is the evil that lives in their own souls and hearts.

The tradition of assigning a person the role of the scapegoat is a very old one, and one firmly established in ancient Jewish custom. On the Day of Atonement (more commonly known as Yom Kippur, usually occurring in late September or early October) two goats were brought to an altar. By random choice, one was slaughtered as a sacrifice to God and the other was considered the scapegoat. Through a ritual, the high priest transferred all of his sins and the sins of the community to this goat. The goat was then taken to the edge of the village and expelled, signifying that the people were now cleansed of their sins.

Henne was the village's scapegoat—but she wouldn't leave! In fact, the only time she left the village was when the Russians hauled her off to an asylum, and even then, she found her way back to her town.

Despite declarations to the contrary by Henne's neighbor, the village did have its share of sin and transgressions. True, when Henne's husband left her, many of the villagers made sure that she was fed, supplying her with soup, potatoes, bread, and whatever they could spare. As the neighbor notes, "in a small town one is not allowed to starve." After her house burned down, a Gentile took Henne in, as did the rabbi and his family a little later. Again, the neighbor notes, "What else could they do? Jews don't let a person perish." When the rabbi's family began to worry about spontaneous fires in their home, a group of villagers built a brick house for Henne.

But the village was not all kindness and goodness. When Henne accused the Russians of unfairly drafting poor boys and was sent to an insane asylum for punishment, the village did nothing—even though, as the neighbor admits, her concerns were legitimate and expressed in the spirit of justice. While Henne was held in the asylum, another family took over her home, even though it was known to be her property. In addition, the villagers literally pillaged her house once she left town. The neighbor, though, condemns Henne for kicking out the family when she returned from the asylum and for going from house to house in search of her stolen possessions. The neighbor claims that Henne "humiliated everyone" by expecting to have her home and possessions returned. For this, Henne was banned from the women's synagogue, even during the holy days.

The rabbi's behavior was not particularly stellar, either. At one point he refused to see Henne when she pleaded for his assistance. When Henne found herself homeless after her house burned down, the rabbi was not the first person to take her in—that role was accepted by a Gentile after the poorhouse refused to let her in. When the rabbi finally did decide to help Henne, he only allowed her to sleep in an outdoor booth set up for the Succoth holidays. Only when the booth later became engulfed in flames did he permit her inside his home.

Henne, therefore, was not only the town's scapegoat, but also its conscience. One look at Henne, and the villagers could not help but come face to face with their own shortcomings and faults. Hers was a stubborn presence, even though the villagers repeatedly tried to get rid of her.

Interestingly, Singer had something in common with Henne: many traditional Yiddish writers condemned Singer for exposing the dark side of Yiddish and Jewish life. Through his stories, as Henne did through her outbursts, Singer revealed the truth and reality of the human condition, including its evil shadow.

Source: Susan Sanderson, Critical Essay on "Henne Fire," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Ozersky is a critic and essayist. In this essay, Ozersky describes how, beneath the supernatural surface of this story, one can see Singer's deeply tragic view of human life.

Singer, considered one of the most important Yiddish writers of the twentieth century, presents contemporary readers with a confusing paradox in his stories, and "Henne Fire" is no exception. Singer writes of lost periods of time and distant, forgotten places, like the European *shtetl* (village) communities destroyed by the Nazis, and the postwar communities of expatriate Jews living in America amidst the specter of the holocaust. Yet Singer makes no attempt to explain Jewish culture or life to the reader. Furthermore, his straightforward tales of demons, imps, black magic, and evil spirits puzzle many readers. Does Singer really believe in such things? (He claimed to.) Or is this magic realism? Are his works ethnic literature, half fiction and half anthropology, read as a kind of time capsule of Yiddish culture? Or do you have to be an elderly Jew to "get" Singer?

It is an important question because nearly all of Singer's works are written either in the first person, or inside the mind of a Jewish protagonist. There are almost no outsiders in his works; if a gentile appears, he is likely to be a faceless Cossack, or perhaps a good-hearted *shabbes goy*, hired to do tasks forbidden to Jews on the Sabbath. Moreover, most of Singer's short stories, including "Henne Fire," were written originally in Yiddish, and published in the Yiddish-language *Daily Forward*, for a wholly Jewish readership. Yet, as with "Henne Fire," the stories seem nearly universal. The reader does not need to know anything about Jews or Jewish culture to grasp the essence of the stories. Readers in every language seem to respond to them, and Singer's Nobel Prize for Literature was applauded everywhere in the world as a triumph of the universal power of literature.

"Henne Fire" testifies to this universality of scope. Singer's tale of a shrew possessed by hellfire is intensely localized, and at the same time universal. It is because the story is so fully realized as a folk story of the *shtetl* world that everything in it is so believable. The narrator believes in it, which allows readers to believe in it. Since the essential truth of the story is not about Jewish life or demonic possession, but human unhappiness, readers tend to forget that they do not know about or believe in Jewish folkways.

Consider the beginning of "Henne Fire": "Yes, there are people who are demons. God Preserve us! Mothers see things when they give birth, but they never tell us what they see!"

The first sentence tells readers something that many people have been trained since birth to disbelieve, that demons exist, and that people can be truly evil. People seldom make exclamations like "God preserve us!" —which even in the original Yiddish would have sounded folksy and uneducated, particularly to the educated, secular readers of the *Daily Forward*. The first two lines do a lot of work: they tell readers who is talking, and they let readers know that the narrator is old-fashioned and superstitious. The last section cleverly identifies the speaker as someone whose world-view is characterized

by mystery and dread. It also identifies him as a man, speaking to other men. So readers can begin to sense that the narrator is not going to have much empathy for Henne.

The narrator of "Henne Fire" constantly lets readers know how inexplicably bad Henne is. "Whatever one said to her, she immediately took offense." "How could one love such a fiend?" "There was no dealing with her without being insulted." To the narrator, Henne is shrewishness personified. When she becomes cursed by hellfire, he sees it, implicitly, as just an extension of her infernal character. Her curses and abuse are like fire, such that adding a supernatural element merely takes Henne's pathology to the next level. But, as is common in all of Singer's works, readers are left to feel a compassion and an understanding that is denied to the narrator.

In Henne's case, readers have to look especially hard to gain compassion for her. Henne is a shrew's shrew, universally scorned even in the close-knit community of her village. One thing readers might notice, however, is that everything they learn about Henne involves seeing her from the outside. It is a neighbor's perspective. Readers hear about her screams, her tantrums, her sale of rotten fish in the market, her blasphemy and curses, but never really get a glimpse of her private life.

This is not to say that the story's nameless narrator, or for that matter Singer himself, harbors much doubt about Henne's essentially miserable nature. Whether one interprets the hellfire that eventually consumes her in a literal manner, as the narrator seems to, or as a metaphor, as Singer perhaps implies, there is no doubt that Henne is a creature of pure, raving, uncontrollable unhappiness. But where the narrator sees Henne as merely a freak of nature, the worst harridan he ever encountered, Singer takes a more tragic view. This tension between the garrulous, story-telling nature of the text and the vast sadness of the story's subtext goes a long way toward explaining why Singer's stories are considered great literature, and not just snapshots of Jewish life of the kind popularized by Shalom Aleichem.

This tension is a key characteristic of Singer, and of Jewish culture as well. Stories like "Henne Fire,""The Spinoza of Market Street,""Gimpel the Fool,""Enemies: A Love Story," and many more, center on characters whose lives are profoundly unhappy. But the stories are told by profoundly good-humored narrators, who seem to relish the telling of a good story for its own pleasures. They come out of an oral tradition, centuries of aphorisms and fables and tall tales. Singer feels that "genuine literature," as he calls it (writing in the Introduction to his *Collected Stories:*)

is unique and general, national and universal, realistic and mystical. While it tolerates commentary by others, it should never try to explain itself. . . . The zeal for messages has made many writers forget that storytelling is the raison d'être of artistic prose.

Thus, "Henne Fire" never explains the true meaning of Henne's curse. The narrator tells readers, "Henne sent everyone to the devil, and now the devil had turned on her." The Evil One is at work; and on a storytelling level, that is enough. But if that was all there was to it, why bother following Henne through her last misadventures? Because it is in

the supernatural, second part of the story that "Henne Fire" really develops as a work of art. Under the force of her misfortune, Henne is partially redeemed. She wants only the gift of community which she has so violently rejected for her entire life. Only when the hell-fire is upon her does she realize how much she needs the village: "Rabbi," she tells the village elder, "I've lived here all my life, and here I want to die. Let them dig me a grave and bury me. The cemetery will not catch fire." It is as if the fire inside Henne is somehow transferred outside her inner self, and despite the devastation it brings her, she also finds some peace. Again, the narrator does not seem to notice this; but readers do.

The villagers seem to notice it, too. Upon hearing her hopeless request, they build Henne a brick dwelling that they imagine will not burn. No one will have her for the Sabbath dinner, however, the most sacred social activity in the life of observant Jews. Henne sits by herself, "munching a carrot." It is as if Henne has finally accepted her dismal lot. Soon after, however, good news arrives in the form of a letter and money from her daughter in America. Worldly good fortune can not save Henne, any more than it was worldly ill fortune that made her so unbearably unhappy to begin with. Today, such deep, chronic unhappiness is understood as "depression" or some other condition, a handicap to be corrected with medical and/or psychiatric treatment. But for most of history, it was either misfortune or, worse, evil spirits—a kind of divine misfortune for which no cure of this world could suffice. Henne's suffering is of the latter kind, so there is no possibility that a boat to America, or more comfortable surroundings, can succor her.

Worse still, Henne's neighbors are soon corrupted by money, and begin to treat her well for callous motives. This seems to have the effect of making Henne even more miserable, and she takes to drink. Soon she burns to death, a victim of spontaneous combustion. The simple-minded narrator has no idea this is coming, but readers do; because readers see the trajectory of Henne's unhappy life, and whether the fire is diabolic or metaphorical does not really matter in the end.

Some of this seems to penetrate through to the narrator. In one of Singer's most powerful sentences, the narrator has a vision of Henne that finally transcends his picture of her as a enraged shrew. He no longer thinks of her a monster, or even a woman: "I see her to this day, black, lean, with a flat chest like a man and the wild eyes of a hunted beast." There is no room for condemnation or stereotyping here; he has finally found the essence of Henne in the purity of her pain. "Something was smoldering within her," he says. "She must have suffered."

Tellingly, his last comments on the matter are not his own. Though he may not realize, the narrator sees that Henne is not an isolated case. An old saying of his grandmother's comes to his mind: "A good life never made anyone knock his head against the wall." Maybe there was a reason Henne was afire; and maybe, just maybe, she's not the only one. Why else would the narrator's parting words be another proverb, this one a stark statement about the darkness of life in this world? "If people did not have to work for their bread," he quotes the rabbi as saying, "everyone would spend his time mourning

his own death and life would be one long funeral." In essence, that is what Henne's life has been—a walk toward death.

The work of Isaac Bashevis Singer, as noted earlier, is rooted in pain and disaster; indeed, that had been the experience of his people for thousands of years, and never more so than in the decades after the Holocaust. To sound the depths of misery and sin with lively stories and rollicking black humor was Singer's gift. Even in his shortest and simplest works (and few are shorter than "Henne Fire"), he manages to reveal the cosmic paradox of human unhappiness.

"Henne Fire" is a tale of the abyss, which somehow finds compassion and empathy at its core.

Source: Josh Ozersky, Critical Essay on "Henne Fire," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

In the story, the narrator indicates that a demon possessed Henne. What do you think caused Henne to behave as she did? Write a short essay explaining Henne's behavior and include evidence from the story and other sources (such as medical, scientific, or psychology texts) to support your argument.

Research the origins, history, and current status of the Yiddish language. Create a map to show how it has been transported from Central Europe to various parts of the world. Yiddish has incorporated words from many other languages, such as German, English, and Russian; and English has also adopted some Yiddish words. To go with your map, create a chart showing some of these borrowings.

Investigate the history of the Jews in Poland from the 1800s through today. Create a time line showing critical dates and brief explanations of the events.

"Henne Fire" is packed with strong visual images. Create storyboards for a movie version of the story. Decide which scenes and images you would include and how you would bring them to life.

Compare and Contrast

1800s: Poland does not exist as a separate, sovereign nation but as a territory of Russia. Efforts to suppress any glimmer of Polish nationality include closing all of the universities.

1960s: Poland is a nominally independent country economically and militarily controlled by the Soviet Union, although with more autonomy than many other Soviet client states. It is referred to as the Polish People's Republic.

Today: Poland is a constitutional republic with no political ties to Russia.

1800s: The vast majority of Poles work in rural areas or on small family farms.

1960s: The Polish economy is experiencing near total collapse, and the price of food and other goods begins to skyrocket.

Today: About 19 percent of the Polish workforce is involved in agriculture, but Poland still experiences difficulty meeting its requirements for food and feed grains. Other economic sectors include fertilizers, electronics, ship building, and petrochemicals.

1800s: Poland is home to one of the largest contingents of Jews in Europe, including the Ashkenazi (from other parts of Central and Eastern Europe) and Sephardi (refugees from the Spanish Inquisition and Portugal). However, under the rule of the Russian tsars, Jews are not granted the same rights as Christians until the 1860s. By the close of the century, many Jews are leaving Poland for Western Europe, prompted by a surge in anti-Semitism in Poland.

1960s: Anti-Semitic activities by the Soviet government in Poland prompts the United States to cool its official relations with Poland.

Today: Poland is a very homogeneous country; only about two percent of the population is not ethnic Polish, and about 95 percent is Roman Catholic. Estimates of the number of Jews remaining in Poland range from three thousand to fifteen thousand.

1800s: Realizing that the numerous revolutions and uprisings against occupying governments have proven fruitless, many Poles decide to focus on strengthening the nation through education, economic development, and modernization. The movement takes on the name "Organic Work" for its efforts to strengthen Poland at the grassroots level.

1960s: Polish students and intellectuals, encouraged by similar movements in Czechoslovakia, decide to challenge Soviet limits on their intellectual freedom. Student riots break out in Warsaw, Krakow, Lublin, and other Polish cities, and more than 2,500 are arrested.

Today: Poles celebrate more than a decade of free elections. Political parties in Poland are varied; major parties include the Democratic Left Alliance, Solidarity Electoral Action (associated with Nobel Peace Prize winner Lech Walesa's ground-breaking political party of the 1980s, Solidarity), the Polish Peasant Party, and the Freedom Union. In the 2001 parliamentary elections, the Solidarity Electoral Action fails to win any seats, but a number of other parties spring up to take its place.

What Do I Read Next?

Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories (1996), translated by Hillel Halkin, is a collection of Sholem Aleichem's Yiddish stories from the early 1900s. Aleichem's tales about Tevye, considered some of the finest examples of storytelling in all of literature, formed the basis for the popular musical *Fiddler on the Roof.*

Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers (1994) presents an anthology of tales about life in Eastern European *shtetls* (Yiddish neighborhoods or villages), the Holocaust, and Jewish immigration to the United States and Israel. This collection includes stories previously available only in Yiddish and was edited by Frieda Forman, Ethel Raicus, Sarah Swartz, and Margie Wolfe.

The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer (1983) includes forty-seven of Singer's short stories selected by the author. The collection features some of Singer's lesser-known works as well as such classics as "Gimpel the Fool," "The Dead Fiddler," and "A Friend of Kafka."

Singer's first major work, *Satan in Goray* (1996), originally published in Yiddish in 1935 as *Shoten an Goray*, takes place in seventeenth-century Eastern Europe during a period that featured anti-Semitic pogroms—official efforts to persecute or eradicate the Jews—and a false messiah called Shabbatai Zevi.

Singer originally wrote *Shadows on the Hudson* as a series for the Yiddish-language *Jewish Daily Forward* in 1957. In a 1999 edition, Joseph Sherman has translated Singer's expansive novel about a family of prosperous Jewish refugees in New York City during the 1940s.

Further Study

Kacyzne, Alter, *Poyln: Jewish Life in the Old Country*, Metropolitan Books, 1999.

In 1921, a New York City Yiddish daily newspaper commissioned photographer and journalist Alter Kacyzne to capture Jewish life in Poland (or Poyln, as the Eastern European Jews once referred to the country). For ten years he traveled across Poland, documenting a way of life that literally disappeared after Hitler's campaign against the Jews in the 1930s and 1940s. The materials from Kacyzne's project sat for sixty years until this recent effort to bring it to the public's attention.

Rogovoy, Seth, *The Essential Klezmer: A Music Lover's Guide to Jewish Roots and Soul Music, from the Old World to the Jazz Age to the Downtown Avant Garde*, Algonquin Books, 2000.

Klezmer music traces its roots back to the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe and is currently experiencing a revival. It is now played by such varied musicians as the classical violinist Itzhak Perlman and the pop band Yo La Tengo. This book introduces the reader to klezmer's beginnings and examines how it has been incorporated into numerous other musical styles.

Silvain, Gerard, and Henri Minczeles, *Yiddishland*, Gingko Press, 1999.

In their book, Silvain and Minczeles refer to "Yiddishland" as an area that included Poland, the Ukraine, Belorussia, Romania, Bessarabia, Eastern Hungary, and the Baltic States before World War II. The authors have collected images and texts from attics, trunks, and Jewish family archives all over the world to tell the stories of those who lived and worked in Yiddishland during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Telushkin, Dvorah, *Master of Dreams: A Memoir of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, Morrow/Avon, 1997.

Dvorah Telushkin spent nearly eighteen years as Singer's literary assistant, all the while keeping the diary of her experience, which became the basis of this memoir. The book also includes black and white photographs.

Vishniac, Roman, *A Vanished World*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986.

Originally published in 1983, *A Vanished World* is the pictorial story of German and Eastern European Jews in the years immediately before Hitler's Holocaust. This edition also includes a forward by Nobel Peace Prize winner and author Elie Wiesel.

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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:

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