

The Slave Short Guide

The Slave by Isaac Bashevis Singer

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Characters

Jacob, the protagonist of the novel, is an honorable and learned man who suffers great misfortune, such as the murders of his wife and two children during a pogrom, his subsequent enslavement, and the death of Wanda/Sarah after she gives birth to their son, Benjamin. Singer mentions, "Like the first Benjamin, this child was a Beboni, a child born of sorrow." The sorrow derives from Jacob's determination to marry a gentile rather than a Jew and to marry for love rather than for social approval and money.

Jacob could have married the wealthy and practical widow of Hrubyeshoyv, but he risks his life and social position to marry a woman whom he knows his community will shun. Jacob is an idealist rather than a pragmatist, and Singer manifests how Jacob's idealism leads to his misfortunes.

Yet Singer's ambivalent portrayal of the widow demonstrates that Jacob would never have been happy with her, either.

When Jacob leaves Josefsv to find Wanda, he pays to the community elders twenty gulden (the community raised fifty gulden to ransom him from Bzik). Jacob's act shocks Reb Moishe because rarely does someone act so honorably by returning money that one actually does not owe and because the community has raised the money as a mitzvah (good deed) and thus does not expect it to be repaid: "Astonished, Reb Moishe tugged at his beard. 'Repaying the community,' he mumbled. 'We can expect the Messiah any day.'" Even though Jacob realizes that Gershon is corrupt and despises him, Jacob risks his own life to save Gershon from the wrath of Pilitzky; ironically, Jacob's heroic deed leads to his downfall (and Sarah's) because his wife pleads for his life, revealing for the first time that she is not a mute. Although Sarah receives a reprieve because some people consider her plea a miracle, the second time she speaks in public (during childbirth) dooms Jacob. Jacob is constantly tormented by his fear that he has violated Jewish law, but his conscience renders him a noble and commendable protagonist. Although he often chastises himself for sinning, he holds himself to a higher moral standard than does any other character in the novel. He loves Wanda so much that he risks his soul by marrying her, allowing her to change her identity to the Jewish mute Sarah, and living in constant fear of being exposed.

Wanda/Sarah is an attractive woman who sees into the future. She possesses the gifts of a prophet, a seer. Even before Jacob is captured and brought to her village, she knows of him through her visions and recognizes that he will come to her village and ultimately marry her: She confesses to Jacob, "I foresaw that you would come to us ... I've known all along that we were fated for each other."

She also foresees the tribulations that will haunt them, yet she feels compelled to live out her destiny with him. She is the only civilized person in her village, which renders her even more noble; the other inhabitants of her village are brutes who rape and attack each other. Most children in this Polish village are born out of wedlock, and men rape their own family members and other villagers on a regular basis. Unlike the other



women in the village, she is not lustful; while other females engage in sex with many partners, she saves herself for Jacob. Sarah also manifests her courage and composure by accepting the Jewish women's insults without retaliating (she must pretend that she cannot understand because she is pretending to be a mute). Her maturity demonstrates that she is superior to them.

Gershon is a hypocritical and jealous leader in the Jewish community in Pilitz.

He acquired his power, ironically, during a pogrom when a wealthy Jew, desperate to save his riches, asked Gershon to hide them for him. When the man died and his relatives asked Gershon for the valuables, he pretended that he received nothing and thus stole the riches for himself. Gershon's subsequent ascent to power indicates that wealth in this community leads to political power. Gershon envies Jacob for his knowledge of the Talmud (Gershon is an ignoramus) and attempts to persuade the Jewish elders to prohibit Jacob from having the honor of reading the Torah in synagogue on the Sabbath. Drunk with power, Gershon even tests the authority of Pilitzky, his life only being spared by Jacob's intervention.

Singer portrays Gershon as a caricature, a two-dimensional figure lacking any positive characteristics.



Social Concerns

A major social concern in *The Slave* is the precarious life that Jews led in seventeenth-century Poland. The Jews periodically endure bloody pogroms incited by Cossacks, including Bohdan Chmielnicki. Singer's protagonist, Jacob, is a slave because his village, Josefov, has experienced a pogrom, one that has resulted in the death of his wife and two children. After he fortunately escapes with his life, Polish robbers capture him and sell him as a slave to a pagan named Jan Bzik. While working for Bzik, he falls in love with Bzik's daughter, Wanda, and they consummate their love. But while she is out of town, Jews from Josefov locate Jacob; they ransom him and return him to their shtetl (small Jewish town); they rescue him contrary to his desire because he loves Wanda and wishes to remain with her—even as a slave. Courageously risking his life by returning to the Polish village where he worked as a slave, he elopes with Wanda and moves with her to Pilitz, a small Jewish community that has recently undergone a pogrom of its own and that is under the rule of a cruel and anti-Semitic gentile named Adam Pilitzky. Wanda transforms her identity, becoming a Jewish mute named Sarah; she assumes this identity because her Polish accent and lack of knowledge of Yiddish and Judaism would expose her as a gentile, thus preventing her from marrying Jacob. Pilitzky, like many Jews in the village, grows suspicious of Sarah, realizing that she actually is not a mute when she screams for him to spare Jacob's life during an altercation between him and her husband; Pilitzky ultimately tells Jacob, upon Sarah's death after childbirth, to leave the shtetl if he wishes to remain alive. Jacob is arrested by dragoons, but escapes from them; heroically, he returns to claim his son.

Singer shows his readers that during this period Jews endured hardships wherever they went, that one could not escape them merely by moving from one village to another. The Jews in Josefov and Pilitz are afraid to rebuild their shtetls after pogroms because they realize that all of their new buildings can be destroyed again, that their diligence can be obliterated in minutes. These attacks are extremely cruel: In one shocking instance, a Jew in Josefov named Dinah is attacked in the same pogrom that killed Jacob's family; Cossacks cut open Dinah's stomach and insert a dog that barks even after it is sewn up into her abdomen. These savage attacks result in a sense of helplessness and pessimism that permeates the shtetls; Jacob is surprised and disappointed when the other Jews unequivocally dismiss his suggestion that the Jews should arm and defend themselves. The atrocities committed during these pogroms anticipate the cruelties inflicted by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

Although *The Slave* includes many passages about pogroms, anti-Semitism, and the immorality of some gentiles, Singer manifests that Jews, themselves, are not free of sin. The Jews in the shtetls of Josefov and Pilitz sometimes comport themselves in a hypocritical, greedy, selfish, and self-righteous manner. Singer wishes to avoid writing a melodrama in which all gentiles are evil and all Jews are virtuous victims. After pogroms in which many Jews have been slaughtered, some Jews steal from other survivors and from those who have lost their lives. Singer portrays Jews who exhibit petty jealousy of others, envying others who enjoy success or achieve honors. Because the Jewish women envy Sarah for marrying a tall and handsome man (they covet him for



themselves), they cruelly mock her to her face, mistakenly believing that she cannot hear them because she is deaf.

And Gershon attempts to destroy the lives of a poor but honest Jewish couple because they help Jacob by allowing him to take his own child, Benjamin, with him when he leaves Pilitz upon the death of his wife, Sarah. The author also presents Jews who obey some of God's commandments but ignore those laws that hinder their ambition or that are not in their best interest to observe; some Jews in the novel even believe in magic and employ it in their everyday lives.

Another significant social concern is the relationship between Talmudic and social law. Jacob violates several important religious laws that cause him to be excommunicated by the Jews of Pilitz, yet he and his wife Wanda/Sarah are unquestionably the most moral and scrupulous characters in the novel. For instance, Jacob could ameliorate his position in Bzik's village, escape slavery, and win Wanda's hand in marriage simply by embracing Christianity, yet he chooses not to do so because he is loyal to his Jewish faith. Jacob acts heroically and honorably many times in the novel (such as when he courageously saves the life of his enemy, Gershon), but he violates Judaic law by engaging in premarital sex with Wanda, a Polish pagan who believes in magic. He then sins by marrying her (a violation of Jewish law because her conversion has not been sanctioned by rabbis) and pretending that she is a Jewish mute named Sarah. Jacob condemns himself for his lust for Wanda/Sarah, yet one may easily discern from his behavior that he actually loves her. And his decision to marry her is not blasphemous because he teaches her about Judaism, allowing her to know more than most Jewish women in Pilitz about the religion; she becomes a devout Jew and observes Jewish laws and holidays, but she never can legally convert because the conversion of a gentile to Judaism could cause the wrath of other gentiles and lead to another pogrom.



Techniques

The Slave is a picaresque novel: Jacob is constantly on a journey, moving from one village to another. The author exploits Jacob's restlessness to make important statements about anti-Semitism and the selective observance of the Talmud by Jews. Even when Jacob regains his freedom, he feels compelled to return to the land where he was enslaved. As the book concludes, Jacob returns from Palestine to die in the same place (Pilitz) as his beloved Sarah. In The Slave, Singer portrays Jacob as an Everyman-figure, a prototypical human being on a physical—but also figurative and spiritual— journey.

Similarly, The Slave functions as a bildungsroman, a novel concerning the education and learning experiences of a protagonist. During his journeys, Jacob learns a great deal about gentiles, Jews, human nature, himself, and most importantly, God. Singer's novel concerns one man's exploration of God. Jacob contemplates whether he possesses control over his fate and the fate of others or whether divine intervention and determinism supersede his free will. Does he affect the lives of others or is he merely a puppet of his Creator?

Singer effectively employs a historical backdrop, the life of Sabbatai Zevi, a false Messiah who duped many Jews during the seventeenth century. The author's inclusion of a historical figure lends credibility to the other characters, making them appear more realistic because they are placed in a historical context; Jacob, for instance, despises Zevi and recognizes the "Messiah" as a false prophet. Jacob's refusal to be duped as many of Zevi's followers were indicates his intelligence and perception: "At the mention of Sabbatai Zevi's name, Jacob spat and cried out loudly, 'Let his name and memory be blotted out.'" Ironically, Zevi's followers came to Pilitz after Jacob escaped following the death of Sarah.

These followers admired Jacob for his actions: "Even in the villages outside of Pilitz, the story was told of how Jacob had escaped from the dragoons and come in the middle of the night to claim his son. This story had been particularly popular when the Messianists were dominant in Pilitz."

Another technique of Singer's is his use of local color, his Yiddish expressions.

They add flavor to the novel despite the fact that he initially wrote the novel in Yiddish and later translated it, along with Cecil Hemley, into English. One such expression is: "The family [the Bziks] had become embogged in bitterness and sadness; silent antagonism simmered and bubbled in that household like kasha on a stove." When discussing Jacob's passion, Singer remarks, "The Jews had ransomed him but he remained a slave.

Passion held him like a dog on a leash.

The hounds of Egypt bayed but he could not drive them off." And when Wanda thinks that she can never get Jacob to love her, Singer says "that from this dough would come no bread."



Themes

The juxtaposition between determinism and free will plays a major role in Singer's novel. Does God control the events in Jacob's life or does Jacob control his destiny with his decisions? Jacob ponders this problem throughout the book. He recognizes that God watches over him (such as when his life is spared during Chmielnicki's pogrom in Josefov while his family dies) and is omnipotent, yet he believes that Satan tempts him with Wanda's beauty and that he must find the power within himself to withstand temptation; such resistance represents free will, not determinism. In response to Wanda's question about Creation, Jacob responds, "What was the purpose of Creation? Free Will! Man must choose for himself between good and evil."

Slavery is another important theme in Singer's novel. Jacob is a slave throughout the novel. As the book begins, Jacob works as Jan Bzik's slave after the pogrom in Josefov. But even after attaining his release, he still is not truly free because his emotions—more specifically, his love for Wanda—enslave him. He feels devoted to her and his Jewish faith but comprehends, to some extent, that the two are irreconcilable. He wants to marry her, yet he understands that gentiles may kill him for trying to convert a woman to Judaism and that many Jews will not accept a convert into their shtetl as easily as they would a woman born Jewish. It would be easy for Jacob to marry a Jew and thus live a carefree life, which he almost does (he is contracted to marry the widow of Hrub-yeshoyv), but he cannot live without Wanda. He ponders that his heart may be enslaved to Satan because he loves a gentile; thus, he feels that his emotions may be leading him into sin. But Jacob, in a manner almost befitting an epic hero, attempts to marry a gentile but live as a faithful Jew, despite their apparent irreconcilability.

And he almost succeeds, yet fate works against him when Sarah's difficulties during childbirth cause her to cry out in pain, revealing unequivocally that she is not a mute.



Key Questions

Group discussions should include two integral topics: anti-Semitism and fate versus free will. Religion and religious persecution play major roles in Singer's novel. Cossacks decimate Jewish shtetls simply because they hate Jews. The hate is based on ignorance and prejudice. The pogroms impoverish the Jews, causing them to turn against themselves. Discussions may involve the question why the gentiles hate the Jews and how Jews respond to that hate. What in the novel triggers this anti-Semitism? Why do some characters hate Jews more than other people in the novel do? Do church teachings play a role in the anti-Semitism?

God's will versus free will is a major conflict in the book, one that Jacob attempts to understand throughout Singer's work. In the novel, Jacob often questions his place and purpose on earth, as well as his relationship with God. Group discussions may involve how much control Jacob—and any human being—has over his life. Is Jacob a well-meaning Jew whose inability to control his lust leads to his downfall? Or is he a human being who is merely God's puppet? Existentialism could be a prominent part of a group discussion.

1. How would you characterize Jacob's feelings for Wanda/Sarah? Does he lust for her, as he claims throughout the book, or does he really love her? If you decide that he does love her, why does he refer to his feelings as lust?

2. What correlations do you make between the pogroms and the Holocaust?

The pogroms in the novel occur in the seventeenth century and the Holocaust occurs in the twentieth century. What is their relationship? Could the former be a precursor for the latter or are they merely isolated examples of hate and anti-Semitism?

3. How much control does Jacob have over his life? Does he control his future or does God or fate control him?

4. Discuss Jacob's relationship with his religion. What role does Judaism play in his life? How do you justify his devotion when he decides to marry Wanda/Sarah?

5. Singer portrays Jews as innocent victims of vicious anti-Semites, yet he also characterizes them in a negative way, especially in regard to their treatment of Sarah. What do you think Singer's purpose is in portraying Jews in such an ambivalent way and what is the effect of this treatment upon the plot of the book?

6. Although one may believe that the tide of Singer's novel derives from the fact that Jacob begins the book as a slave, some may argue that he is a slave throughout the work. How is this possible if he receives his freedom early in the book? How is it possible that he is more of a slave after his rescue by the Jews of Josefov? If this idea is valid, to whom or to what is he a slave?



7. A significant schism appears in the novel between the first two sections: Jacob's life working for Jan Bzik and Jacob's life after his return to Josefov.

What differences and similarities do you discern in Jacob's character between these two parts?

8. Discuss the significance of Jacob's return to Pilitz as the novel concludes.

What is his purpose in returning? What does he hope to achieve? And what is Singer's purpose in including this homecoming?

Literary Precedents

An important literary antecedent is the Bible. Jacob's decision to steal clandestinely his own child may symbolize Jacob's theft of the birthright from Esau.

Like the biblical Jacob, Singer's Jacob is perceived (by the Messianists) as a patriarch. Jacob's toil on the land for several years before he marries Wanda/Sarah resembles the biblical Jacob's toil for seven years in order to marry Rachel.

Jacob's story is like the story of Joseph, who was separated forcibly from his family only to be returned. When Jacob is ransomed by the Jews of Josefov and reunited with his sister Miriam, after a long absence, a Jew remarks, "It's exactly like Joseph and his brethren." Even the rustic setting seems biblical. And Jacob resembles Moses when he carves out the 613 commandments on stone.

The Slave is a love story about a couple who are destined to be together but whose relationship is destined to end tragically; Jacob and Wanda/Sarah are "star-cross'd lovers" like William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Jacob and Wanda/Sarah belong together but can never be happy because they derive from two irreconcilable religious groups during an era of religious tension. Similarly, Romeo and Juliet come from two rival families during a time of contentious feuding. Fate plays a major role, first bringing the two lovers together but then cruelly separating them through death.

Related Titles

Jacob resembles Ben Dosa in Singer's *King of the Fields* (1988; see separate entry); both men are Jews living in a gentile and anti-Semitic culture but who are relentlessly pursued by women. Jacob and Ben Dosa fight temptation by considering the possibility that their wives and children may still be alive—if they survived a pogrom; both men are slaves who observe their Jewish beliefs faithfully, abstaining from sex because of their marriage but mostly because their love interests are not Jews. Both women (Wanda and Kosoka) willingly embrace the Jewish faith in order to pursue the men they love, even though many other villagers desire them and envy the Jewish men for having acquired the women's love. In both novels, Singer presents gentile females who aggressively pursue modest men; these novels contain a reversal of gender roles in regard to the sensuality and romantic relationships with the women as pursuer and the men as the object of affection.

Gershon, the Jew who becomes a rich man at the expense of other Jews living under a gentile and anti-Semitic regime, resembles the character Weiskopf in Joshua Sobol's *Ghetto* (1983). Gershon and Weiskopf both benefit from acting as sycophants in a time of bloodshed (Gershon during the pogroms in Poland and Weiskopf during the Holocaust in Vilna, Lithuania). Both men experience rapid sociopolitical rises, parasitically elevating themselves as other Jews deteriorate; both thrive at the expense of their fellow Jews and act egocentrically.

The section about Sabbatai Zevi resembles Martin Sherman's *Messiah* (1982), which concerns the religious hysteria involving Jews who are hoodwinked into believing that Zevi is indeed the Messiah.

The works by Singer and Sherman manifest how the desperate hope of Jews during the times of pogroms leads to religious fanaticism and foolishness. The section about Zevi also reminds one of a previous novel by Singer entitled *Satan in Goray* (1945), a work about the false Messiah. Goray, a Polish town located near Lublin, becomes enthralled by religious hysteria in 1665-1666 because the inhabitants foolishly believe that Zevi is the Messiah. The people of Goray, like those in Pilitz in *The Slave*, have become wounded so badly by poverty and pogroms that they allow themselves to be duped by a false Messiah.



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