The Spinoza of Market Street Study Guide

The Spinoza of Market Street by Isaac Bashevis Singer

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer's short story "The Spinoza of Market Street" was first published in *Esquire* magazine in 1961, later anthologized in *The Spinoza of Market Street*, Singer's second collection of short stories. Irving Malin describes the title story as "clearly one of Singer's best," while Paul Kresh observed that this volume, which inspired Irving Howe to declare Singer "a genius," "marked another step in Isaac's acceptance as one of the great short-story writers of our time."

The story is set in the Jewish *shtetl* (a small community of Eastern European Jews) of Warsaw, Poland, against the backdrop of the events leading to the beginning of World War I in August, 1914. It concerns Dr. Fischelson, a scholar of philosophy who has devoted his life to the study of Benedict de Spinoza's masterwork, *Ethics*. Because of his skeptical ideas regarding religion, derived from Spinoza, Dr. Fischelson has been fired from his job at the synagogue library and alienated from the Jewish community due to their perception that he is a "heretic." When Dr. Fischelson falls ill, Black Dobbe, his "old maid" neighbor, nurses him back to health, and the two are soon married in the synagogue. On their wedding night, a "miracle" occurs, by which the old man and the homely woman engage in a surprisingly passionate consummation of their marriage. Dr. Fischelson awakens in the night to gaze up at the stars and murmur, "Divine Spinoza, forgive me. I have become a fool."

This story concerns many themes typical of Singer's short stories, particularly the conflict of the modern Jewish thinker in the context of traditional orthodox Chassidic Jewish religion and culture. The protagonist's ultimate experience of redemption through physical passion is ironically the event that brings him back into the fold of his Jewish community, having defied the dictates of Spinoza's rationalist philosophy.

Author Biography

Isaac Bashevis Singer, 1978 Nobel Prize laureate, is internationally acclaimed for his short stories and novels, written in Yiddish, but known to readers mostly in translation. He is also a prolific essayist, children's book writer, playwright, journalist, editor, translator and memoirist. Singer was born July 14, 1904, into a Chassidic Jewish family, in Radzymin (or Leoncin), Poland, then part of the Russian Empire. The exact date of his birth is not clear, and has been listed as either July 14, October 26, or November 21. Singer's father and both of his grandfathers were Hassidic rabbis.

In 1908, when Singer was four, the family moved to nearby Warsaw, where he spent most of his childhood. In 1914, Singer read his first nonreligious text, *Crime and Punishment*, by the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevski. From 1917 to 1921, he and his mother lived with relatives in the rural shtetl of Bilgory, before returning to Warsaw.

He was enrolled in the Warsaw Rabbinical Seminary in 1921, according to the wishes of his parents, but eventually left to pursue a career in writing. From 1923 to 1933, Singer worked as a proofreader and translator for a journal where his elder brother Israel Joshua worked, and as an associate editor of a different journal from 1933-1935. His first short story was published in 1927. In Warsaw, Singer lived with a woman named Runya (or Runia), by whom he had an illegitimate son, Israel Zamir, in 1929.

In 1935, Singer immigrated to the United States, joining his elder brother, Israel Joshua, already an established Yiddish fiction writer. Singer lived in relative poverty in Brooklyn, while working for the renowned Yiddish newspaper, *The Jewish Daily Forward.* His fiction was serialized in *The Jewish Daily Forward* throughout the 1940s. Singer remained a staff writer for the *Daily Forward* until his death.

In 1940, he married Alma Hazmann (or Haimann), a German-Jewish immigrant, and in 1943 became an American citizen. His brother Israel Joshua died the following year. Singer's first novel to be translated into English, *The Family Moskat*, was published in 1950. An important turning point in his career was the publication of his short story "Gimpel the Fool," in an English translation by writer Saul Bellow, in 1953. This was the first high profile introduction of Singer's work to English readers.

Singer's international reputation as the leading Yiddish fiction writer of the century grew steadily throughout the 1950s, as more and more of his works were translated into English and other languages. He won the 1970 National Book Award for children's literature, for *A Day of Pleasure*, and the 1974 National Book Award for fiction for A *Crown of Feathers and Other Stories*. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1978.

In later years, he and Alma lived in New York and in Florida. He died after a series of strokes, on July 24, 1991, in Surfside, Florida, and was buried in Beth-El Cemetery in New York. Three of his novels were published posthumously.

Plot Summary

Dr. Nahum Fischelson, a philosopher, has devoted the last thirty years to studying and writing a commentary on the Dutch-German philosopher Benedict de Spinoza's (1632-1677) central text, Ethics. Dr. Fischelson has spent years at this task, but has never actually completed his work. Nevertheless, he attempts to live by Spinoza's rationalist philosophy, and often quotes him in making sense of his life and the world. He has severe stomach ailments, which he attempts to abate with various foods. He lives on a meager income, supplied by the Berlin Jewish community by mail every three months.

Fischelson lives in a garret apartment on Market Street, in Warsaw, Poland, and lives economically, with few, if any, physical pleasures. He had once been a minor celebrity in his community, due to his distinguished scholarship, but this attention has completely diminished. He is somewhat outcast from his Chassidic Jewish community, because his "heretical" following of Spinoza's philosophy goes against Jewish theological doctrine. Dr. Fischelson had been the librarian at the synagogue, but has been fired due to his unorthodox views.

This July, Dr. Fischelson does not receive his quarterly pay from the Berlin Jewish community, and begins to go hungry. Meanwhile, rumors of war are leading up to the advent of the Great War (World War I). Dr. Fischelson goes out to buy food with his last remaining funds, but, due to the war, all of the stores are closed. He then goes to see the rabbi for advice, but the rabbi has gone with his family to the spas. He next goes to the café where he once had several acquaintances, but sees no one he knows. While at the café, he begins to feel ill, and is barely able to make it back home to his garret room and fall into bed, where he falls asleep and dreams, wakes up feeling more ill, and falls asleep again.

That night, Black Dobbe the "old maid" who is his neighbor knocks on his door in order to ask him to read a letter for her (she cannot read). She finds him ill in bed, feeling as if he is on the verge of death, and commences to feed him and nurse him back to health. She informs him of the progress of the war, that the Germans are marching toward Warsaw. Eventually, Black Dobbe demonstrates her entire trousseau to Dr. Fischelson, something that a young girl presents to her suitor. The two get married by the rabbi in the synagogue, with members of the community looking on in amusement. On their wedding night, Dr. Fischelson lies down in bed to read Spinoza's *Ethics* but a "miracle" occurs, when Black Dobbe appears adorned in a silk nightgown, and the unlikely couple consummate their union with unexpected passion. Dr. Fischelson awakens to look up at the night sky, amidst the August meteor showers. The story ends with his "murmur": "Divine Spinoza, forgive me. I have become a fool."

Characters

Black Dobbe

Black Dobbe is Dr. Fischelson's only neighbor in his garret apartment. A "spinster," she is described as:

tall and lean, and as black as a baker's shovel. She had a broken nose and there was a mustache on her upper lip. She spoke with the hoarse voice of a man and she wore men's shoes.

Black Dobbe sells cracked eggs in the market place. She "had no luck with men." Several times, she had been engaged, but each one was eventually broken off. She has a cousin in America, who writes her promises to send for her, but this seems to be an empty gesture, as he never does. When Black Dobbe knocks on Dr. Fischelson's door to ask him to read a letter to her (she cannot read), she discovers him sick in bed. She nurses him back to health, and encourages their engagement by demonstrating her trousseau. On their wedding night, Black Dobbe unleashes a long-neglected passion on her new husband, which causes him to betray his adherence to Spinozan rational philosophy.

Dr. Nahum Fischelson

Dr Nahum Fischelson is the protagonist of the story. He is a philosophy scholar whose life has been devoted to working on a book about one of the Dutch-Jewish philosopher Benedict de Spinoza's (1632-1677) primary texts, *Ethics*. Dr. Fischelson is described as:

a short, hunched man with a grayish beard□quite bald except for a few wisps of hair remaining at the nape of his neck. His nose was as crooked as a beak and his eyes were large, dark, and fluttering like those of some huge bird.

He has been outcast from his synagogue because of his philosophical skepticism regarding Judaism. He lives in a garret room on Market Street, a center of Jewish community and commerce, in Warsaw, Poland. As his life has been preoccupied with, and dictated by, the philosophical thinking of Spinoza, his life has been one of social isolation and abstention from physical or material pleasure. When he falls sick one night, his neighbor, Black Dobbe, an "old maid," discovers him and nurses him back to health. The two are soon married by a rabbi in the synagogue, to the surprise and amusement of the community. On their wedding night, the sick old man and the old maid make passionate love, thus causing Dr. Fischelson to renounce his devotion to the teachings of Spinoza, which disdain such indulgences.

Dr. Hildesheimer

Dr. Hildesheimer is a famous scholar with whom Dr. Fischelson corresponds daily. Dr. Hildesheimer influences the Berlin Jewish community to support Dr. Fischelson with a subsidy of five hundred marks per year.

Themes

Philosophy versus Religion

A central theme of this story is the conflict between the ideas put forth in modern philosophy (such as that of Spinoza), and the ancient beliefs held by Orthodox Chassidic Judaism. The protagonist, who considers himself a Jew, is alienated from the Jewish community of the shtetl in which he lives due to his unorthodox ideas derived from modern philosophy. Because of this, Dr. Fischelson is fired from his job as the synagogue librarian, and considered to be a "heretic" or a "convert" by the members of his community. As in many of his stories, Singer explores the theme of the Jew caught between the Enlightenment of the modern secular world and the ancient beliefs of Chassidic Judaism.

Redemption through Passion

Singer's characters often find some sort of solution to their alienation through the experience of sexual passion. Dr. Fischelson attempts to live by the "rational" tenets of Spinoza's philosophy, eschewing the physical world in the pursuit of philosophical scholarship. His marriage to Black Dobbe first brings him back into the fold of his Jewish community, through their traditional wedding ceremony in the synagogue, officiated by the rabbi, and attended by the (albeit snickering) members of the community. Even on his wedding night, he goes to bed with Spinoza's book of *Ethics* but discovers a long-smothered sexual passion with his new wife. Looking up at the night sky, he declares his apostasy from rationalism and entry into life by his admission to Spinoza that he has become a "fool."

Jewish Culture and History

Many of Singer's stories take place in the nowvanished Jewish shtetl of Warsaw, Poland before the advent of World War II. While the story is centrally concerned with the personal life and thoughts of Dr. Fischelson, it takes place against the backdrop of the very specific historical circumstance of the events leading up to the advent of World War I in August, 1914. Singer's stories address the indirect theme of nostalgia for the Polish Jewish communities desecrated by the Holocaust.

Singer is credited with preserving the memory of this rich culture through the settings of his fictional stories in the context of the Jewish world in which he grew up. In addition, Singer's stories, written in Yiddish and meticulously translated into English, in themselves represent an effort to preserve the Yiddish language, also severely devastated by the death of much of the world's Yiddish-speaking population in the Holocaust.

The Cosmic and the Earthly

Dr. Fischelson's only activity, beyond the study and contemplation of Spinoza's philosophy, is looking through his telescope from the roof of his garret room. From this vantage Dr. Fischelson contemplates the cosmic, while below his window the life of the Jewish community occupies Market Street. Dr. Fischelson's alienation from his community, the physical world, and participation in human life is represented by his focus on the cosmic and refusal to participate in the earthly. It is the "miracle" of his newly discovered sexual passion for his new wife that draws Dr. Fischelson down from the realm of the cosmic to the realm of the earthly, thus leading him back into the stream of life, and, almost ironically, a reentry into the Jewish community.

Alienation and Loneliness

Dr. Fischelson's devotion to Spinoza's Ethics, and his efforts to live by the rational tenets of the philosopher, have ultimately lead to his complete isolation and loneliness. He has been cast out of his synagogue, regarded with suspicion by the members of his community, and lost all ties with his fellow scholars. In his striving to live a rational life, he has cut himself off from human warmth. Black Dobbe, a mannish, homely "old maid," who has been jilted twice, is also a figure of loneliness and isolation. The warmth and human contact she brings to Dr. Fischelson during his illness results in the end of both loneliness and alienation for both of these unlikely bedfellows.

Style

Translation from Yiddish

Throughout his life, Singer wrote almost exclusively in Yiddish. As Yiddish is still spoken by only a relatively small number of people, most readers are acquainted with his work in translation. Later in his life, as he became more comfortable with his own command of English, Singer often translated his Yiddish stories into an English rough draft, and then worked with another translator on the details of the translation. This story retains only one phrase from the original Yiddish; when Black Dobbe appears before Dr. Fischelson in a silk nightgown on their wedding night, she says, "Mazel tov." This is a Yiddish phrase usually spoken on holidays and celebrations.

Narration

The narration is third person, meaning the narrator is not a character in the story, but is "restricted," rather than "omniscient," meaning that the events of the story are primarily told from the perspective of the protagonist. Only occasionally does the narrative perspective venture outside of Dr. Fischelson's head, to describe some of Dobbe's initial impressions of him.

Intertextual References

Intertextual references are elements of a story that refer to texts, or books, which exist in reality outside of the story. Central to this story is the reference to the philosopher Spinoza's philosophical work, Ethics. Dr. Fischelson's life and career have been devoted to the study of Ethics, and his thoughts often refer back to the ideas presented in Ethics, and even to direct quotes from Spinoza. Full appreciation of this story requires a basic knowl edge of Spinoza's life, and a greater familiarity with his philosophy, particularly as set forth in Ethics.

Setting—Location

The setting of this story is typical of Singer's fiction. It takes place on Market Street, in a Jewish shtetl of Warsaw, Poland. Singer grew up in such an area in Warsaw, and his stories that take place there depict the conditions of Polish Jews in the early part of the century. Singer is credited with capturing this pocket of Jewish culture, which was lost forever as a result of the Holocaust.

Setting—Time Period

The time period of the story is in July and August of 1914. This is very important because the very personal story of Dr. Fischelson and his marriage takes place in the context of the early part of The Great War (World War I). Dr. Fischelson hears about the coming war when he goes out to buy food, and learns that it has resulted in food shortages and the closing of shops. While he is sick in bed, Black Dobbe further informs him that the Germans are marching toward Warsaw. Dr. Fischelson's philosophical preoccupations prevent him from thinking about the war from other than a very intellectual, distant perspective. Toward the end of the story, as he is looking up at the night sky, he thinks, "Seen from above even the Great War was nothing but a temporary play of the modes." Nevertheless, a historical perspective on the part of the reader leaves no doubt that the war will eventually have an enormous impact on the Jewish population of Poland.

Historical Context

Spinoza

The protagonist of this story has devoted his life to the study of the Dutch-Jewish philosopher, Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677), particularly his major work, *Ethics*. Although Spinoza finished writing *Ethics* in 1675, it was never published during his lifetime, in part due to its controversial nature and the censure of religious authorities. Spinoza is one of the great modern philosophers, associated with Rationalism. As a Jew, Spinoza's skepticism regarding religion, God, and Judaism was highly controversial within the Jewish community. He was excommunicated from Judaism in 1656 for his radical departure from Jewish doctrine. Unrelated to his philosophical works, Spinoza worked as a lens maker, adept at grinding lenses for telescopes, eyeglasses and microscopes. Dr. Fischelson's telescope in the story is clearly a reference to this connection with Spinoza.

Jewish Daily Forward

The Jewish Daily Forward was founded in New York City in 1897, eventually becoming the leading Yiddish language newspaper in the United States. Singer was a staff writer for the Forward from his arrival in the United States in 1935 until his death in 1991. Many of his novels were originally published in serial form in the *Forward*, as were his short stories.

Yiddish Language and Literature

The Yiddish language, associated with populations of the Jewish Diaspora, is rooted in Hebrew and Aramaic, later acquiring the influence of Germanic and Slavic languages. Before World War II, there were approximately eleven million Yiddish speakers, but this number was virtually diminished by half as a result of those who were killed in the Holocaust. Yiddish literature first appeared in the United States as a result of massive migrations of Jews to New York City in the 1880s. Yiddish theater also made its way into U.S. culture in the 1880s, its greatest achievements developing in the 1920s.

World War I

This story takes place in the summer months of 1914, on the eve of the Great War (now referred to as World War I), and its events unfold against the backdrop of the build-up of the war. Dr. Fischelson first hears of the impending war when he goes out to buy food, and learns that "in Serbia somewhere, an Austrian Prince had been shot and the Austrians had delivered an ultimatum to the Serbs." This refers to the event which is considered to have initiated World War I. On June 28, 1914, a Serbian nationalist movement, aiming to "liberate" South Slavs from Austria-Hungary, assassinated the heir

to the Austrian empire, Archduke Francis Ferdinand, and his wife while they were visiting Serbia on a military inspection. In Singer's short story, a shopkeeper warns Dr. Fischelson that they are on the brink of a "small war." This statement is ironic, given that it was not at all a "small" war which ensued, but a World War.

Warsaw, Poland

Many of Singer's stories take place in the Jewish shtetl of Warsaw, Poland. Poland's defeat in the Russo-Polish War of 1831 resulted in the military occupation of Poland by Russia, ruled by the Tsar. A revolt against Russian rule in 1864 was crushed, solidifying the Poles submission to occupation. A later wave of rebellion between 1905- 1907 is mentioned in Singer's story, when Black Dobbe tells Dr. Fischelson "of the battles between the underworld and the revolutionaries in 1905." According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, Warsaw at the turn of the century "contained the largest urban concentration of Jews in the world." Most of this population perished or emigrated as a result of the Holocaust during World War II.

Critical Overview

Singer's "The Spinoza of Market Street" was first published in *Esquire* magazine in 1961, and later in Singer's 1961 collection of stories written between 1958 and 1961, *The Spinoza of Market Street*. According to Paul Kresh, this collection "marked another step in Isaac's acceptance as one of the great short-story writers of our time." Irving Malin describes the title story as "clearly one of Singer's best." Although Singer had been living in the United States for over twenty-five years at this point, all of the stories in this collection are set in Jewish communities in Poland. As Kresh states, "the Polish landscape offers plenty of variety and a cast of caricatures as fascinating as any in the Singer gallery." Kresh goes on to claim that, with this collection, "Isaac proved his power to transmute the stuff of provincial folklore and simple faith into works of art of great beauty and universal appeal." Kresh quotes in some detail the response of Irving Howe to the collection:

This was the collection that prompted Irving Howe in *The New Republic* to call Singer a genius. Howe went on to say that Isaac had "total command of his imagined world; he is original in his use both of traditional Jewish materials and his modernist attitude toward them; he provides a serious if enigmatic moral perspective; and he writes Yiddish prose with a rhythmic and verbal brilliance that can hardly be matched." He added a word of caution: "Singer seems to be mired in his own originality. There are times in some of the lesser stories in The *Spinoza of Market Street*, when he displays a weakness for self-imitation that is disconcerting."

Kresh further sums up the central critical responses to *Spinoza of Market Street:*

Herbert Kupterberg, in the *New York Herald Tribune*, said the stories were of the kind that "haunt the memory, for many of them are concerned with the spectral, the occult, and the demonic . . . But it is the everyday life of his people, rather than his demons, that makes Mr. Singer's stories so unforgettable." Milton Hindus, in the *New York Times*, found these stories "very satisfying as entertainment, and provocatively deep in their implications." Eugene Goodheart, in the *Saturday Review*, pronounced Isaac, "perhaps the greatest Jewish writer of all time" and praised his "freedom from parochial pieties." But the most incisive critical appraisal was offered by J. W. Smith in *Commonweal*, who spoke of the "irony and earthiness and wild humor" of these stories, which is where their real strength lies."

While also a novelist, essayist and translator, Singer is most highly acclaimed for his short fiction, of which over one hundred stories have been published in English translation. His five short story collections in English include: *Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories (1957), The Spinoza of Market Street (1961), Short Friday and Other Stories* (1964), Passions and Other Stories, and The Collected Stories (1982). Irving Malin has observed that "Singer is perhaps more effective as a short story writer than as a novelist. By narrowing his focus even more than he does in the closed novels, he can concentrate upon the intense vision of details. He can give us dream, stylization, and parable."

Singer's best known and most celebrated short story, "Gimpel the Fool," was first published in English in the May 1953 issue of Partisan Review. Malin describes it as "probably his finest achievement" of all of his short stories. Edward Alexander asserts that it is "without question Singer's bestknown, most frequently anthologized, and most thoroughly studied short story." According to Kresh, this is "the short story that many critics regard as the capstone of his achievement." The "stunningly idiomatic if slightly slangy translation" by Jewish- American author Saul Bellow introduced Singer's work to a wide English-reading audience for the first time. Alexander explains that, with the appearance of Bellow's English translation, "the barrier of parochialism which has kept the American literary world ignorant of even the greatest Yiddish writers in the United States was lowered long enough for Singer to make his escape from the cage of Yiddish into the outside world." Lawrence Friedman concurs that Bellow's translation "won for its author the sort of modernist cachet and mainstream acceptance that no Yiddish writer had hitherto enjoyed."

Following this turning point in Singer's reputation among English readers, many other of his short stories were published throughout the 1950s in periodicals such as *Commentary, The Saturday Evening Post, Playboy, The Reporter, Mademoiselle, Esquire*, and *Harper's*. His non-fiction essays appeared in such periodicals as the New York Times and the Herald Tribune.

Describing the wellspring of positive response by the critics to Singer's work, Kresh explains:

Increasingly the critics were praising Isaac's work. Irving Howe called him a genius. *The Times Literary Supplement* said "Gimpel the Fool" was the greatest story ever written about a schlemiel. Milton Hindus praised Isaac as one of the best Yiddish writers in America. Henry Miller, in *Life* magazine, termed him "a writer to drive one crazy if one has the ear for the underlying melody, the meaning behind the meaning." Isaac, he exclaimed, was "afraid of nothing." Miller, the master on the subject, particularly admired Isaac's treatment of sex, "always full-bodied like a rich wine." "Above all," Miller wrote, "there is love, a bigger, broader love than we are accustomed to reading about in books."

One of the most salient features of Singer's work is the frequent setting of stories in the Yiddish speaking world of the Jewish shtetl in Poland, since abolished by the Nazi devastation of Polish Jewry in the Holocaust. Alexander points out that Singer "has devoted his life to writing about a world that was brutally destroyed, and has done so in a language that is itself on the verge of extinction." Friedman concurs that "Singer has all but singlehandedly kept alive a vanished past and a dying language."

While Singer has been criticized for his unflattering and unorthodox portrayals of Jewish characters, Friedman defends the author's perspective on Judaism:

Jewish traditionalists who criticize Singer for his many unflattering portraits of, and apparent disloyalty to, his fellow Jews miss the point of his fiction. So relentlessly does Singer define transgression as deviation from Jewish law that his sinners become

unwitting allies in preserving Jewish values. Only by doing penance and returning to those values can his sinners find the fulfillment they futilely sought elsewhere. The sexuality, criminality, and demonology which fill his pages and unnerve his orthodox critics are employed to celebrate the pious and humble life style they oppose. Honoring a people and a way of life that are no more but that are worthy of remembrance and emulation, Singer remains faithful to the values traditionally celebrated by Yiddish writers . . . .

Alexander points out Singer's universal appeal, despite his exclusive focus on Jewish characters and culture: "Singer writes almost always as a Jew, to Jews, for Jews: and yet he is heard by everybody." Singer's 1978 Nobel Prize for literature, the first to be awarded a Yiddish writer, speaks to his universal appeal in the culmination of a career comprising one of the greatest literary achievements of the twentieth century.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American culture, specializing in cinema studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the Jewish theological texts referred to in this story.

Critic Lawrence Alexander has pointed out that Isaac Bashevis Singer "almost always writes as a Jew, to Jews, for Jews: and yet he is heard by everybody." Other critics have concurred that it is through Singer's very specific focus on the vanished world of Chassidic Jewry in the *shtetls* (small Eastern European Jewish communities) of Warsaw, Poland, before World War II, the world of his childhood and young adulthood, that Singer's fiction draws its universal appeal. Furthermore, critics generally agree that it is through the skillful translations of Singer's Yiddish stories into English that they successfully maintain the power of his own native language. Given this, many readers will not be familiar with the specific elements of Jewish culture, religion and history referred to in Singer's stories. An explanation of some of these references in Singer's short story "The Spinoza of Market Street" will enhance the appreciation of the reader unfamiliar with these references.

A key element of this story is Dr. Fischelson's lifelong devotion to the study of the Dutch-Jewish philosopher Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677), the leading figure in the philosophy of seventeenthcentury rationalism. In order to fully appreciate Singer's story, it is helpful to have some knowledge of Spinoza's relationship to Judaism and the Jewish community in which he lived. Spinoza's non-conformist ideas about religion led to his excommunication by the Jewish authorities in Amsterdam in 1656, for which he was temporarily banished from his native city. While a prolific writer, all but one of Spinoza's philosophical texts were published posthumously, largely because the controversial nature of his ideas prevented publication during his lifetime. His masterpiece, Ethica (*Ethics*) was completed in 1675, two years before his death from tuberculosis. Acting against local authority, Spinoza's friends arranged for several of his works to be published after his death.

Dr. Fischelson, in Singer's story, is, like Spinoza, censured by his the Jewish community for his unorthodox ideas (based on his study of Spinoza). Dr. Fischelson had been head librarian of the Warsaw synagogue, but "because of his heretical ideas he came into conflict with the rabbi and had had to resign his post as librarian." The members of the Jewish community on Market Street, where he lives in a garret apartment, regard him with suspicion, considering him a "heretic" or a "convert" (to Christianity). Black Dobbe, his uneducated neighbor, even associates him with superstitions such as black magic: "This man made her think of witches, of black mirrors and corpses wandering around at night and terrifying women." Dr. Fischelson, how ever, while clearly a skeptic in the spirit of modern philosophy, considers himself, as he tells Black Dobbe, "A Jew like any other Jew."

Dr. Fischelson's character also shares some similarities with that of the author. Like that of Singer, Dr. Fischelson's community is one of Chassidic Judaism. Chassidism (a variation of the term "Hasidic") was a movement begun in twelfthcentury Germany, which stressed the mystical elements of Jewish theology. Like Singer, Dr. Fischelson's father was a rabbi. Like Singer, Dr. Fischelson had attended a "yeshiva," an institute of rabbinical training. Like Singer, Dr. Fischelson's interests took him in a direction other than that of religious study—for Singer, into literature, for Dr. Fischelson into modern philosophy. Singer has cited his reading of Spinoza as a young man as having had a profound influence on his ideas about Judaism. As Dr. Fischelson has come under censure from the Jewish community for his modern perspectives, so Singer has been criticized by Jewish religious authorities for his literary works, which portray Jewish characters in a less-than-flattering light and express doubt in Jewish theology.

While Dr. Fischelson attempts to live a life in accordance with Spinoza's rationalist philosophy, he also preoccupies himself with contemplation of the cosmic. A few steps up from his garret room, Dr. Fischelson has a telescope, through which he looks out at the night sky. Fischelson's telescope is in part a reference to the fact the Spinoza, unrelated to his philosophical achievements, was a very skilled professional lens crafter, who at times made his living grinding lenses for microscopes, spectacles, and telescopes. For Dr. Fischelson, contemplation of the cosmic is associated with the rationalist philosophy that removes him from the stream of life represented by the lively Jewish community of Market Street below his window. In contemplating the stars and the planets, Dr. Fischelson remains intellectually removed from human companionship, and regards Market Street disdainfully as if it were the depths of Hell.

While Dr. Fischelson's alienation from his Jewish community is in some ways due to his modern ideas, it is in other ways in reaction against the modernization of Jewish culture: "He began to despise everything associated with the modern Jew . . ." His perspective on the Hebrew language, for example, is staunchly traditional. Hebrew is the language in which Jewish theological texts are written. But, while Dr. Fischelson "still read a Hebrew magazine occasionally . . . he felt contempt for modern Hebrew which had no roots in the Bible or the Mishnah." The "Bible," refers to the central Jewish theological text, made up of the Pentateuch, the first five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Together, they make up the Torah. The Mishna refers to the oral commentary on the Torah that was first written down in a comprehensive volume over a period of about two hundred years, culminating in the third century A.D. Later commentary on the Mishna was collected in a text called the Gemara. The Mishna and Gemara together make up the Talmud. Dr. Fischelson also has contempt for the Zionism of "the modern Jew." Zionism was a movement begun in the nineteenth century that advocated the relocation of members of the Jewish Diaspora to Palestine. Palestine at the time was under British rule, and many European Jews moved there during the first half of the twentieth century, although Israel as a Jewish nation was not founded until 1948.

Dr. Fischelson, an adherent to modern philosophy, who also considers himself a Jew, but who is disdainful of ideas associated with modern Jewry, seems disturbed in part by the co-existence of modern, secular Jewish culture with traditional Jewish religious

practice. When he looks down on Market Street, he is disturbed by the existence of Jewish religious observance side by side with the material indulgences of his Jewish community. Dr. Fischelson observes the pious study of Judaism, as "through the window of a Chassidic study house across the way, Dr. Fischelson could see boys with long sidelocks swaying over holy volumes, grimacing and studying aloud in sing-song voices." The "swaying" of the boys in prayer refers to the Jewish practice of "davening," a swaying back and forth while standing in prayer. The "long sidelocks" are the long curls of hair worn by Chassidic men, in accordance with traditional Jewish law.

Yet, alongside this image of piety, Dr. Fischelson observes the pleasure-seeking masses, surrounded by the physical sensations of alcohol, food, music, and sex:

Butchers, porters, and fruit dealers were drinking beer in the tavern below. Vapor drifted from the tavern's open door like steam from a bathhouse, and there was the sound of loud music. Outside of the tavern, streetwalkers snatched at drunken soldiers and at workers on their way home from the factories.

To Dr. Fischelson, such activities represent the vices of people destined for Hell:

Some of the men carried bundles of wood on their shoulders, reminding Dr. Fischelson of the wicked who are condemned to kindle their own fires in Hell.

But, most of all, it is the intermingling of the "sacred" with the "profane" that disturbs the old philosopher:

Husky record players poured out their raspings through open windows. The liturgy of the high holidays alternated with vulgar vaudeville songs.

Vaudeville was a form of live, on-stage variety show, popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including musical numbers, comedic acts, brief dramatic sketches and other light entertainments. It tends to be associated with the popular entertainment of the most unsophisticated masses of the population. The "high holidays," on the other hand, are the most holy days of the Jewish religious calendar. Yet, while Dr. Fischelson seems disdainful of the intrusion of the "profane" life on Market Street with the "sacred" observance of religious law, he himself does not participate in religious observance, as it is noted that he does not attend prayer.

Dr. Fischelson's alienation from the Jewish community, both its "sacred" and its "secular" elements, is resolved, however, through his marriage to Black Dobbe. Dr. Fischelson is brought back into the fold of Jewish religious observance through his traditional wedding in the synagogue, officiated by the rabbi. The community from which he has been outcast for so long spontaneously comes together for the ceremony. While it is clear that there is a certain perverse interest on the part of these observers, there is also a sense of community expressed through their efforts to dress up and obtain delicacies for the sake of the celebration:

Although Dr. Fischelson had insisted that the wedding be a small, quiet one, a host of guests assembled in the rabbi's rooms. The baker's apprentices who generally went

about barefoot, and in their underwear, with paper bags on the tops of their heads, now put on light-colored suits, straw hats, yellow shoes, gaudy ties, and they brought with them huge cakes and pans filled with cookies. They had even managed to find a bottle of vodka although liquor was forbidden in wartime.

This description brings into the "sacred" space of the rabbi's chambers the "profane" material luxuries that Dr. Fischelson had so disdained: particularly, food and alcohol. The description of the wedding focuses on several specific elements of Jewish wedding ritual. The wedding ceremony itself "proceeded according to law," meaning that the traditional Jewish religious laws of marriage were observed. It is reported that "several porters" had to be brought in from the street to make up the "quorum"; this refers to the Jewish law that at least ten men must be present for prayer. These same porters also served to support the "canopy"—the "hupah" that is a square cloth supported on four poles, under which the bride and groom stand during the wedding ceremony. Next, "Dobbe walked around him seven times as custom required"; in a Jewish wedding the bride circles the groom seven times. Finally, "according to custom, was the smashing of the glass . . . "; in the Jewish wedding tradition, a glass is placed on the floor and the groom smashes it by stepping on it with his foot. After the ceremony, Dobbe's former employer wishes Dr. Fischelson, "Mazel tov" a Yiddish phrase uttered on holidays and special occasions.

The wedding ceremony alleviates Dr. Fischelson's alienation from his community through their participation in the celebration, as well as alleviating his alienation from Judaism through his participation in the traditional religious ritual officiated by the rabbi. It is the "miracle" of the passionate consummation of his marriage to Black Dobbe, however, which ultimately draws Dr. Fischelson down from his removed, cosmic contemplation of the world from a rational perspective, and integrates him back into full participation in both physical and spiritual life. When he awakens in the night to observe the sky from his telescope, Dr. Fischelson, for the first time, sees himself as "a part of this," as integrated into the "divine substance" of the cosmos: "Yes, the divine substance was extended and had neither beginning nor end; it was absolute, indivisible, eternal, without duration, infinite in its attributes. Its waves and bubbles danced in the universal cauldron, seething with change, following the unbroken chain of causes and effects, and he, Dr. Fischelson, with his unavoidable fate, was part of this."

Source: Liz Brent, Critical Essay on "The Spinoza of Market Street," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Kerschen is a writer and public school district administrator. In this essay she considers Singer's conflict with the philosophy of Spinoza as he leads his audience to question the main character's conclusion that he has become a fool.

The first clue to the interpretation of any story lies in its title. "The Spinoza of Market Street" causes the reader to ask "Who or what is Spinoza?" If the reader knows that Spinoza was a seventeenth century Dutch philosopher, then the question might be "What connection does Spinoza have to this street?" Is it significant that the street is named Market rather than Elm or First? The reader learns in the first line of the story that Market Street is the home of Dr. Nahum Fischelson in Warsaw, Poland.

Many of Isaac Bashevis Singer's stories are set in the Jewish ghetto of Warsaw prior to World War II. It was then that the Nazis exterminated the Jews there. Polish Jews and Yiddish, the language of European Jews, became almost extinct. But Singer wrote in Yiddish about the life he knew growing up in Warsaw in an effort to preserve the language and the memories of a unique society. At the same time, his stories prove that, regardless of the time and setting, humans share common feelings and experiences.

Dr. Fischelson is a man who has studied Baruch (aka Benedict) Spinoza for thirty years. He has dedicated his life to this work and to adherence to Spinoza's principles. But Singer identified more with Albert Camus, the twentieth-century French philosopher. As Edwin Gittleman explained in his essay for the ,*Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Singer was "exasperated by Spinoza's conception of God as infinite intellect but without feelings." Spinoza believed that rationalism, the absence of emotion and the pursuit of purely intellectual thought, led to communion with the mind of God. He proposed that all experience was part of God's plan and was therefore inevitable. Camus, however, taught that the individual cannot make rational sense of his/her experience and that spiritual isolation can have debilitating effects. Singer emphasizes this latter point as he expertly weaves a criticism of Spinozan philosophy into a tale of human foibles and life changes.

Spinoza was expelled from the traditional Jewish community of his time because his teachings were considered heretical. Thereafter, he supported himself as a lens grinder rather than accept any scholarly patronage from others who supported intellectual freedom. In contrast, almost three centuries later, Fischelson earns a doctorate in Spinozan philosophy and is at first heralded by Jewish academia. He is offered many opportunities for personal and professional advancement, but he turns them down because he "wanted to be as independent as Spinoza himself." Then, taking a path similar to Spinoza's, he, too, loses his job because of heretical ideas. He resigns his post as head librarian at the Warsaw synagogue and supports himself "by giving private lessons in Hebrew and German." However, when Fischelson becomes ill, the Berlin Jewish community provides him with a small pension. In all aspects of his life,

Fischelson scrupulously tries to follow the teachings of Spinoza according to his own interpretation of Spinoza's writings.

Singer places Fischelson on Market Street to contrast the busy life of the commerce below the scholar's apartment to the isolation of Dr. Fischelson's life. An ordinary residential street would not have provided the obvious difference that Singer wanted to show between Fischelson's eccentricity and the everyday interaction of people. In Part II of the story, the reader is told that Dr. Fischelson "could see into two worlds." He loves to look out his window at the night sky and to peer through a telescope at the celestial bodies. It puts him in a state of euphoria because he believes, as Spinoza taught, that his study of the cosmos brings him in touch with the infinite extension of God. But, when he observes the comings and goings of the people in the street, Fischelson does not appreciate the liveliness and color of human activity. Rather, Fischelson, in his black coat and stiff collar, sees only a "rabble" that is the "very antithesis of reason."

Fischelson's isolation involves not only a separation from people, but also a separation from the times. A man who spends thirty years studying the same book is not likely to welcome change. Singer points out that the revolt of 1905 "had greatly increased his isolation." Revolution calls for change, and that can be good, but Fischelson feared that it meant the destruction of society. Instead of teaching Spinoza to others and standing up for the preservation of a society he understands, Fischelson withdraws from participation. He no longer reads Hebrew magazines regularly because he "concluded that even the so-called spiritual men had abandoned reason and were doing their utmost to pander to the mob." Although he still occasionally visits a library to check on the latest philosophical writings, he always comes away angry because "the professors did not understand Spinoza, quoted him incorrectly, attributed their own muddled ideas to the philosopher." The astute reader knows that Singer is revealing Dr. Fischelson's own faults through his criticism of others.

Fischelson is so out of touch with the world that, when his pension check is delayed by the crisis that led to World War I, he has to seek out someone to tell him what is happening. The extent to which Fischelson has been in denial about time marching on is illustrated by his inability to find any of his old friends and acquaintances. They have gone on with their lives while he has not; they have moved or they are busy elsewhere. Facing these changes is too much for Dr. Fischelson. He becomes ill and thinks that he is dying. But this ailment, like the stomach trouble he has suffered for years, is a production of his own fears. He has never been truly ill. The doctors have told him that he suffers only from "nerves." So, just as someone with stage fright or an anxiety attack can experience hyperventilation or nausea, Dr. Fischelson, who prides himself on his rationalism, has irrationally manufactured his own illness in response to his inability to cope with anything beyond his obsession with Spinoza. The crippling effect of his malady has given him an excuse for not ever finishing his commentary on Spinoza and to withdraw even further from social contact.

Nili Wachtel, in his article "Freedom and Slavery in the Fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer," describes those Singer characters who "lapse into a position which suspects and negates everything, and see vanity and folly everywhere" as walking a tightrope. In

this story, the tightrope is Fischelson's "garret-room suspended between an orderly heaven above and a chaotic marketplace below. . . . Walking the tightrope means living outside of everything; it means being anchored in nothing more substantial than one's own isolated, 'free' and very precarious self." Wachtel explains that

at issue here is Singer's dualistic perception of reality. As he sees it, reality is fundamentally paradoxical. It does not meet one with a series of neatly separated alternatives, but with a blend in which the contraries exist together. A person, likewise, is a paradox. One dwells a little lower than the angels and a little higher than the beasts; both aspects of one's nature, inextricably intertwined, are at war with each other, and only both together constitute truth. . . . [While] the Enlightenment extolled its rational person, minimizing or altogether ignoring the non-rational aspect of one's nature, Singer labors to show that one does not live by reason alone.

Consequently, Dr. Fischelson must come to a turning point in his life to survive. His intellect cannot will himself to die against a life force he does not even know is still strong within him. To discover this life force requires the introduction of his neighbor Dobbe into Fischelson's life. An expert storyteller, Singer liked to use humor, irony, and the theme of the redemptive power of love. So, he rescues Fischelson through a bride who is his opposite and creates a surprising result that contradicts Spinoza's theories.

Singer saw his primary role in writing as that of an entertainer. Although the richness of Singer's talent still enables one to find depth in "The Spinoza of Market Street," his intent is first a simple humaninterest story. The simplicity is emphasized by an easy-to-follow structure of seven sections, each one with a specific function. In Part I, the reader is introduced to Dr. Fischelson, his life's work, and his supposed ailment. In Part II, the obvious contrast between Fischelson's admiration of the mysteries of God in space and his disdain for the real life rabble of the street, i.e., his pursuit of intellectualism to the exclusion of human contact, is established. Part III reveals Fischelson's past and his fear of the future. Part IV introduces the crisis that serves as the catalyst for change in Fischelson's life. Part V introduces the woman who will change Fischelson's life. Part VI develops their relationship, and Part VII describes their wedding and the miracle of their wedding night.

R. V. Cassill, in a criticism of "The Spinoza of Market Street" for *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction* argues that the simplicity of this story is evidence that it is merely a whimsical tale. Thus the reader need not worry about trying to figure out the motivation for the marriage of Fischelson and Dobbe or explain the transformation that occurs on the wedding night. But the answers seem obvious enough. Dr. Fischelson and Dobbe are both unattractive, lonely people who have been forgotten by friends and family. They reach out to each other in their need: Dobbe wants a husband, is attracted to Dr. Fischelson's intellect, and is flattered by his interest in her; Dr. Fischelson needs someone to take care of him, and a wife who has enough money to go to America, but doesn't want to go, fits the bill. In the process, they awaken long dormant emotions in each other. For Fischelson, allowing himself this explosion of repressed feelings seems a failure. He thinks that he has become a fool. But the truth is that he was a fool to lead the life he did before his marriage. Moreover, he will remain a fool if he continues to

judge his life by Spinoza's standards and fails to embrace the good fortune that has befallen him.

Cassill further suggests that ". . . Fischelson is a very unsophisticated man for all his lifelong study of philosophy. He has retained only a few simple precepts of conduct from Spinoza and these seem to do him little good, being at odds with the barrenness of his external life and the weird tumult of his dream. So probably we are supposed to see him as a special sort of fool." Wachtel says that Fischelson is one of a number of Singer's "aging—and often hilarious—Jewish scholars who, having discarded religious traditions and formulations, spend their lives inventing rational equivalents and substitutes." Dr. Fischelson no longer goes to prayer and appears to his neighbors to have converted away from Judaism. When Dobbe asks him why he does not go to synagogue, he gives her a Spinozan answer: "God is everywhere," he replied. "In the synagogue. In the marketplace. In this very room. We ourselves are parts of God."

Wachtel goes on to say that Singer argued that "the world is not rational, it is thoroughly un- Spinozan. Human existence cannot be coerced into an all-rational mold. Dr. Fischelson's rational truths are half-truths; to work, they would need to incorporate— to marry, if Singer's symbolism is borrowed— the realities of the street." So, Dr. Fischelson marries Dobbe, a woman who is a product of the streets, and it reminds him that people are complex beings subject to their emotions as well as controlled by their intellect. Perhaps this revelation will free him to live and love, to be just a human again.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Alexander examines the role Spinoza and his work Ethics play in "The Spinoza of Market Street."

In several of Singer's stories of courtship leading toward marriage, the woman represents a creative force that can restore vitality to men in whom the springs of life have been dried up by rationalism. These women may distract men from the life of the mind and the dispassionate pursuit of truth seen under the aspect of eternity, but they supply the germinating spirit without which mind remains sterile. One of the most representative of such tales is "The Spinoza of Market Street" (*The Spinoza of Market Street*).

Spinoza, recipient of so much uncritical admiration from both Jews and gentiles during the past century and a half, is here bested not by the Judaism against which he set himself but by ignorant, untutored human love. The Spinozistic ideal of detachment from the passions, including love as well as war, is mocked by life. In the story, thirty years of devotion to Spinoza's *Ethics* have made the hero, Dr. Nahum Fischelson of Warsaw, dyspeptic and flatulent, trying without success to sustain himself on the Spinozistic doctrine that morality and happiness are identical. In his detachment, Fischelson sees two worlds: above him, in the infinite space and silence of the heavens, he glimpses "the *Amor Dei Intellectualis* which is, according to the phi- losopher of Amsterdam, the highest perfection of the mind"; below, he sees Warsaw's Market Street, the confused multitudinousness of the world, with its thieves, prostitutes, and gamblers, "the very antithesis of reason . . . immersed in the vainest of passions." Fischelson feels an un-Spinozistic anger at nearly all "modern" Jewish movements—Zionism, socialism, anarchism, postbiblical Hebrew. In his depression he even thinks of taking his own life, but then remembers that Spinoza□who does, after all, have his uses—disapproved of suicide. This rationalist is plagued by irrational dreams that persuade him of the inescapability of madness.

At this low point, Fischelson is saved by an unprepossessing spinster neighbor named Black Dobbe. This unlettered woman nurses the ailing philosopher, brings him back from the edge of death, and□without the slightest encouragement from him□arranges their marriage. Delicious stabs of satire against Spinozistic intellectualism enliven the account of this bizarre courtship. Why, she wonders, if he is a doctor, can't Fischelson write prescriptions or do much of anything to heal himself? And what, she wonders, can this beloved *Ethics* be but a gentile prayer book? So enfeebled that, at the wedding ceremony, he cannot break the glass goblet, Fischelson is certain he will not be able to consummate the marriage. But Black Dobbe's sensual determination vanquishes Spinoza and snuffs out the Enlightenment. He is saved precisely by that part of the universe which he could not light up with his intellect: "The *Ethics* dropped from his hands. The candle went out. . . . What happened that night could be called a miracle. . . . Powers long dormant awakened in him. . . . He . . . was again a man as in his youth." Under the aspect of eternity, Dr. Fischelson's marriage in old age means little, but, the story says, people do not live entirely under the aspect of eternity; they are

not rational beings, but feeling, acting, emotional ones, hence open to miraculous interference. The sterility of Jewish Enlightenment, a frequent theme of Singer's novels, is here expressed through a tale of resurrection wrought by sensuality. After consummating his marriage, Fischelson begs forgiveness: "Divine Spinoza, forgive me. I have become a fool." If so, his new folly is wiser than his old wisdom.

Source: Edward Alexander, "The Short Fiction," in *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Twayne, 1990, pp. 55-56.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Malin discusses the stories in The Spinoza of Market Street, and analyzes the characters of Dr. Nahum Fischelson and Black Dobbe in the title story.

The Spinoza of Market Street (1961) is another wide-ranging collection of stories.

The title story is clearly one of Singer's best. Dr. Nahum Fischelson is an avid reader of Spinoza— as was the narrator of *In My Father's Court*—and he knows "every proposition, every proof, every corollary, every note by heart." The Ethics is his holy text. He attempts to live by its ideas, believing that "according to Spinoza morality and happiness were identical, and that the most moral deed a man could perform was to indulge in some pleasure which was not contrary to reason." Dr. Fischelson is, then, a mature Asa Heschel Bannet or Ezriel; he lives according to a strict moral code (which, of course, has less to do with orthodox Judaism than with rationalism).

But he is a bit obsessive in his life pattern. He has surrendered so completely that he resembles the inhabitants of Goray—he cannot look *ironically* and *playfully* at it. He cannot stop his inflexibility. He gazes at the Milky Way and disregards Market Street below his window. He is between worlds; he is not completely alive on earth. It is, of course, ironic that he condemns the "vainest of passions" exhibited by the masses because he is immersed in his own passion for rationalism. He shuns the unpredictable, fearing that "irrational" events and people will destroy him. He repeats compulsively: "All was determined, all necessary, and a man of reason had no right to worry." The fears remain: "Nevertheless, worry invaded his brain, and buzzed about like the flies."

Singer describes the unpredictable, "mad" things surrounding Dr. Fischelson (even as the doctor worships his text). In the very first paragraph we read of a "variety of insects" buzzing around the candle flame. These creatures disturb Dr. Fischelson; they are strangely uncontrollable and resemble, without his knowledge, his own confusion over flames. (Fire is again dwelt upon as it was in "The Gentleman from Cracow.") A tomcat howls; he calls it "ignorant savage" and threatens it with a broom handle. He views the people in the street as noisy, buzzing, agitated animals. He dreams of the burning red sky, of bells ringing. These details undercut the calm rationalism of Dr. Fischelson; they demonstrate that he is on the edge (like Yasha on the balcony?).

Black Dobbe, his neighbor, is a coarse, unpredictable, and illiterate spinster. She is an "emissary" from the other world. When she visits him, asking him to read a letter, she finds that he is deathly ill. She proceeds to nurse him back to robust (?) health.

The two are, naturally, frightened of each other. Black Dobbe thinks of "witches, of black mirrors and corpses wandering around at night and terrifying women . . ." when she gazes at him. Dr. Fischelson considers her the arch-representative of Market Street. But their differences also attract them. Gradually they think of marriage.

The marriage is presented as a "miracle." It is appropriate because it is perfectly symbolic (and in keeping with the stylized, dream-like tone). Singer is wonderfully ironic. He does not sentimentalize the miracle; he goes so far as to hint that it is black magic. He leaves the outlines fuzzy.

The last paragraph also leaves the matter open; it fails to give a "final solution" because it fights such a simple pattern (a pattern which resembles Dr. Fischel son's former life—design). Dr. Fischelson continues to stare at the heavens—he has just discovered his sexual potency—and to think about "destined courses in unbounded space": "Yes, the divine substance was extended and had neither beginning nor end; it was absolute, indivisible, eternal, without duration, infinite in its attributes." He sees himself as the product of an "unbroken chain of causes and effects." He is, however, "shaky" and unsure. He murmurs: "Divine Spinoza, forgive me. I have become a fool." There is great irony here. It is possible to claim that he is still a fool because he does not realize that his marriage is a divine sign, a life-giving miracle. If only he were truly foolish like Gimpel—that is, wise and vital he would be less shaky. "Fool" means at least two things in the line just quoted—in its ambiguity it defeats the simple-minded "madness" of Dr. Fischelson.

"Shiddah and Kuziba" is only seven pages long, but it creates an extremely powerful impression. The opening sentence introduces the inverted, odd perspective from which the story is told: "Shiddah and her child, Kuziba, a schoolboy, were sitting nine yards inside the earth at a place where two ledges of rock came together and an underground stream was flowing." The juxtaposition of demonic mother and son (no less "schoolboy") and subhuman perspective is wonderfully done, especially when we read that Kuziba "looked like his mother" (how natural in having wings of a bat and feet like a chicken).

There is a great deal of enlightening play when Singer explains the schooling of Kuziba. Like any child the creature is afraid of the unknown, the "demonic"; in this case, however, he is afraid of light and humanity. He is comforted when he hears that they are "safe here—far from light and far from human beings. It's as dark as Egypt here, thank God, and as silent as a cemetery." The playfulness suddenly shifts to rage. It is almost as if Singer cannot refrain from attacking humanity for imperfection. Man is said by Shiddah to have "a white skin but inside he is red. He shouts as if he were strong, but really he is weak and shaky. Throw a stone and he breaks; use a thong and he bleeds." Man is condemned for the inability to consider new perspectives (new worlds possibly inhabited by Shiddah and Kuziba) and to escape from pride. It is no wonder that Kuziba is afraid of humanity; he, like us, yields to the graphic, one-sided sermon.

Part Two continues the juxtapositions of natural (that is to say, human) and supernatural elements. Kuziba cries out in his sleep; he is dreaming about a man (horror of horrors!). He has to be reassured by a lullaby which asks God to save them from Light and Words and Man. While he dozes, he is "cradled" by his mother.

There is a lengthy theological passage. Shiddah remembers her husband (who does not live at home) and his study of silence. She pursues the idea of silence: "He who has reached the final point, the last degree of silence, knows nothing of time and space, of

death and lust. There male and female are forever united; will and deed are the same. This last silence is God." I think that by his inversion Singer praises the words of men (including, of course, his own fiction). These words may be fuzzy and imprecise— how can they capture the supernatural?—*but they are all we have; they separate us from bats and devils who worship deep silence*. It is beautifully ironic that Shiddah expounds at length about silence. Even devils must attempt to shape thoughts in language!

Shiddah also has dreams. She imagines, as any loving mother would, how her boy will grow up (and become a big devil!); how she will take care of her grandchildren (by delousing their heads!); and how her husband will succeed and be offered "the throne in the Abyss of the Great Female, a thousand miles away from the surface where no one had heard of man and his insanity."

But her dreams are shattered by a terrible thundering. The holocaust has come! (We expect it from Singer.) There is the noise of a machine— man-made, of course—as it grinds the rock which they inhabit; the noise reduces her dream of silence to dust. She prays to Satan, to Lilith, and "to all the other powers which maintain creation." But her prayer is not answered. Ironically she moves *up ward*, to earth, where she will establish a new home, build a new "manor."

The last paragraph is especially chilling (as the playful irony I have mentioned is dropped). Shiddah knows that "the last victory would be to darkness." Then "the remembrance of man and his abominations would be nothing but a bad dream which God had spun out for a while to distract Himself in His eternal night."

Thus "Shiddah and Kuziba," unlike the other stories I have discussed (or, for that matter, most of the novels), ends on a hopeless note—at least for mankind. Although it is possible to claim that Shiddah is an absolutist who cannot see clearly (and dreams of salvation through miracle), it is still difficult to escape the fact that Singer apparently agrees with her denunciations. He is not joking at the end; he is "fiendish" here.

"The Black Wedding" begins with a description of "apathetic" Rabbi Aaron Naphtali. He allows the study house to decay—we are told that "toadstools grew unmolested on the walls"—and he spends his time "practicing miracle—working cabala." He is, obviously, a false spiritual leader (who resembles in part the various ineffectual fathers Singer has portrayed).

Rabbi Aaron Naphtali is so involved with "signs" that he allows the black hosts to destroy him. He hears steps on the roof; he notes candles extinguished suddenly. Is he really able to see vengeful devils? Or does he merely project his madness upon the world? These questions are raised but not answered by Singer (as is true in most of his "demonic" fictions). We are offered facts to support both kinds of explanation; we are free to interpret as we wish. Thus Singer allows our freedom, compelling us to use it and to behave openly (unlike Rabbi Aaron).

The madness extends to the Rabbi's daughter, Hindele. She reads esoteric books; she goes into seclusion as does her father. After he dies, she is urged to marry Reb Simon.

She cannot stop crying: "She cried at the celebration of the writing of the marriage contract, she cried when the tailors fitted her trousseau, she cried when she was led to the ritual bath." We confront the same ambiguous motivations with Hindele. We do not know how to read her. Perhaps it is best to say that like Dr. Fischelson and the Frampol citizens in "The Gentleman from Cracow," she is an obsessive believer; she wants to fit reality into her design (which was mysteriously passed on to her by the Rabbi). She creates "miracles"; she shapes visions.

When Hindele stares at her future husband she apparently realizes "what she had suspected long before—that her bridegroom was a demon and that the wedding was nothing but black magic, a satanic hoax." She believes, furthermore, that the wedding is destined to be a Black Wedding. She is alone; she cannot communicate her crazy visions to anyone else. She cannot even tell us because we cannot get behind her insights. We see powerfully what she sees; we do not know more than she. We notice, for example, the canopy as "a braid of reptiles," the "hoof" of Reb Simon, a dancing witch, and the "webbed roosters' feet" of the musicians. But we are not sure why we (and she) observe these things. In a way we are as unknowledgeable and isolated as Hindele. Singer makes us share in her experience, but he does not completely convince us. He plays a trick.

The story falters after a while because Hindele goes so far in her madness that we cannot assent to it. When she rebels against the child in her womb, calling it "half-frog, half-ape," she oversteps the boundary. She becomes simply another lunatic; she no longer teases us with her great ambiguity.

The story ends ironically. There is a frame effect which demonstrates that the community (like us) can never understand her tortured delusions: "In Tzivkev and in the neighborhood the tidings spread that Hindele had given birth to a male child by Reb Simon of Yampol. The mother had died in childbirth." The previous madness has dissolved; calm objectivity conquers all. I prefer the ending (which is open and playful) to the somewhat easy condition of Hindele before her death.

Source: Irving Malin, "The Short Stories," in *Isaac Bashevis Singer*, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1972, pp. 78-84.

Topics for Further Study

Singer's fiction has been contrasted with that of other prominent twentieth-century Jewish-American writers, such as Cynthia Ozick, Philip Roth, Saul Bellow and Bernard Malmud. Learn more about one of these writers and their short fiction. In what ways does this writer's treatment of issues of Jewish identity and religion compare and contrast with those of Singer?

Singer's short story takes place in a Jewish shtetl (a small Eastern European Jewish community) in Warsaw, Poland, amidst the backdrop of the beginning of World War I (The Great War). Find out more about the history of Polish Jews in the twentieth century. In what ways did major historical events—such as World War I and World War II—affect the Jewish population in Poland?

Singer's story takes place in the setting of a Chassidic (or Hassidic) Jewish community. Find out more about the history of Hassidic Judaism, it's beliefs, traditions and customs. How is it different from other denominations of Judaism— such as Conservative, or Reform Judaism?

The main character's alienation from his community is based on his preoccupation with modern philosophy over Jewish theology. What is modern philosophy? In addition to Spinoza, who are some of the major modern philosophers? Pick one of these to learn more about, including most important works and central tenets of the philosophy.

Compare and Contrast

Early 1900s: There are some eleven million speakers of the Yiddish language.

Late Twentieth Century: Approximately half of the world's population of Yiddish speakers have been killed in the Holocaust.

Early 1900s: Poland is part of the Russian empire under the Tsar (Czar).

Late Twentieth Century: With the breakup of the Soviet Union, formerly under communist rule, Poland becomes an independent nation.

Early 1900s: The shtetls in Warsaw, Poland, include a high concentration of the Jewish population, and are a locus of Jewish culture.

Late Twentieth Century: Much of the population of Polish Jews has perished in the Holocaust, while others have left Poland to escape such persecution.

Early 1900s: The aborted Russian Revolution of 1905 leaves the empire still under the rule of the Czar. However, the Russian Revolution of 1917 leads to decades of communist rule.

Late Twentieth Century: The USSR suffers from internal difficulties, signalled, among other things, by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and eventually ceases to exist in 1991. Russia allows member states to declare their independence.

What Do I Read Next?

The Spinoza of Market Street (1961) by Isaac Bashevis Singer is a collection of short stories, translated into English from Yiddish.

Isaac Bashevis Singer: Children's Stories and Childhood Memoirs (1996) by Alida Allison is a collection of fictional children's stories as well as excerpts from memoirs of Singer's childhood.

Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life (1997) by Janet Hadda is a comprehensive biography of Singer.

The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories (1956) by Cynthia Ozick is a prize-winning collection of short stories written by one of the foremost Jewish-American short fiction writers.

Anglish-Yinglish: Yiddish in American Life and Literature (1989) by Gene Bluestein is about the influence of Yiddish language on American English. Pieces include listings and definitions of common Yiddish words and phrases.

Spinoza: A Life (1999) by Steven Nadler is a biography of the Jewish-Dutch rationalist philosopher who greatly influenced Singer.

Benedict de Spinoza: An Introduction (1987) by Henry E. Allison is an accessible introduction to the basic texts and philosophy of Spinoza.

A Treasury of Yiddish Stories (1954) by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg is a collection of short stories originally written in Yiddish, translated into English. This text includes "Gimpel the Fool" by Singer, as well as a story by his brother, Israel Joshua Singer.

Further Study

Farrell, Grace, ed., *Critical Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer*, Prentice Hall International, 1996.

This collection consists of essays on Singer by such well-known writers and authors as Irving Howe, Susan Sontag, and Leslie Fiedler.

Lifson, David S., *The Yiddish Theater in America*, Yoseloff, 1965.

Lifson's text presents a history of the Yiddish theater in New York City.

Weinreich, Beatrice Silverman, ed., *Yiddish Folktales*, Pantheon, 1988.

This work collects folktales and fairy tales from Eastern European Jewish culture.

Zamir, Israel, *Journey to my Father, Isaac Bashevis Singer*, Arcade Publishers, 1995.

This work contains memoirs about Singer by his son.

Zuckerman, Yitzchak, *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, University of California Press, 1993.

This history of the uprising of Jews in the Warsaw ghetto during the Holocaust is based on personal narratives of Holocaust survivors.

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BOOKRAGS

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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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