

Zlateh the Goat Study Guide

Zlateh the Goat by Isaac Bashevis Singer

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Overview

The stories collected in *Zlateh the Goat* reveal Singer's fondness for his native Poland, particularly the villages inside the "Pale of Settlement," where Jews once lived in considerable numbers. Although life was often hard and many of the villagers were poor, Singer shows the brighter side of life as well. He is especially gifted in blending fantasy and reality, or imagination and the concrete perceptions of actual places, characters, and events. His stories reflect, by turn, reason and emotion, sense and sentiment, playfulness and maturity. They expand the reader's awareness of a different culture with its distinctive ways of thinking, feeling, and believing.

Singer writes about children and adults, wise people and fools, the present world and worlds long since disappeared. His characters display tendencies that are universal, despite their strange names and the faraway settings.

Lazy persons like Atzel in "Fool's Paradise," kindhearted people like Aaron in the title story, or brave youngsters like David in "The Devil's Trick," are part of every reader's experience. Singer places these characters in situations that test their mettle, and most of the time they emerge a little wiser—and more loving—for their experiences. Singer expressed his intention in writing these stories in the foreword: "I hope that when the readers of these stories become men and women they will love not only their own children but all good children everywhere."

About the Author

Isaac Bashevis Singer was born in Radzymin, Poland, July 14, 1904. His father was a fervently religious rabbi, a member of a Hasidic sect, and his mother was the daughter of a rabbi.

Isaac was the third of four children, all but the youngest of whom became writers. The works of Hinde Esther, the oldest, are scarcely known in this country. Israel Joshua, the oldest son, wrote *The Brothers Askenazi* and other novels after immigrating to the United States in 1933, where Isaac followed him two years later.

Singer had been writing essays and stories for Yiddish newspapers in Poland, but for several years after his arrival in New York he could write nothing except reviews for the Yiddishlanguage newspaper *Jewish Daily Forward* and other journals. Meanwhile, his first novel, *Satan in Goray*, was published in Poland, but he left before ever seeing a copy.

Not until the early 1940s did Singer resume writing Yiddish fiction. In 1940 he married Alma Haiman. They have no children, although Singer has a son, Israel, by a former companion, Runya.

In 1953 Saul Bellow translated Singer's story "Gimpel the Fool" in the *Partisan Review*, introducing the writer to non-Jewish audiences, and in 1955 *Satan in Goray* appeared in English translation. From that time on, his work, though usually written first in Yiddish, has regularly been published in English as well. In 1970 *A Day of Pleasure* won the National Book Award for children's books, and in 1974 his collection of stories *A Crown of Feathers* also won a National Book Award. In 1978 he received his greatest recognition with the world's most famous literary honor, the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Singer is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He lives with his wife, Alma, in New York City and North Miami Beach. He teaches a course at the University of Miami and occasionally gives lectures in Israel and throughout the world.

Plot Summary

The book contains seven short stories intended for children though the strong writing and humorous narratives are enjoyable for readers of all ages. The stories are generally about Jewish adults and children living in small, rural areas. Three of the stories are about inhabitants of Chelm and East Chelm. All of the people who live in Chelm are very foolish. The remaining stories are about people who, to one degree or another, wise or even heroic. Most of the stories feature a plot development that is concise and easily followed.

In "Fool 's Paradise," a young man learns the value of hard work and the joys of being anxiously engaged with life. "Grandmother's Tale" is a story told by a grandmother to her grandchildren to educate the about the necessity of behaving appropriately. "The Snow in Chelm" is a humorous story about foolish perceptions and ideas. "The Mixed-Up Feet and the Silly Bridegroom" is a humorous story about a series of ridiculous but funny events and their resolution. "The First Shlemiel" is a story about a man who is incredibly bumbling, and how his life is spared by a fortunate event. "The Devil's Trick" is a story about the heroism of a young boy, who saves his entire family from the devil. Finally, "Zlateh the Goat" is a story about a young boy and a goat caught in a particularly harsh winter snowstorm.

Although many of the characters are portrayed as fools, they are not portrayed in a negative light. In fact, the tender and articulate presentation of the misguided wisdom of the Elders of Chelm, truly great imbeciles, is one of the most enjoyable aspects of the collection. In addition, many of the stories contain moral values and allegory, which are suitable for all readers. Although many of the stories happen during Hanukkah and lightly involve Jewish traditions, no special knowledge is needed for understanding of the narratives. Indeed, the book could serve well as a brief and easy introduction into Jewish culture and tradition for non-Jewish readers.



Fool's Paradise

Fool's Paradise Summary

A man named Kadish has a son named Atzel. A distant relative of Atzel's, an orphaned girl named Aksah, who was the same age as Atzel, also lives with Kadish. When they were children, Atzel and Aksah played together and pretended to be husband and wife. Everyone thought that when Atzel and Aksah grew up, they would become husband and wife. Atzel grew up into a tall young man with black hair and black eyes. Aksah grew up into a tall young woman with blue eyes and golden hair.

When Atzel grows up, however, he proves to be a very lazy young man. He doesn't want to study or work, and he doesn't want to take over his father's business. Atzel remembers the stories his old nurse had told him about paradise. Atzel believes that in paradise, one never works and always feasts on rich foods. Atzel wants to go to paradise, but he knows that before he can get to paradise he has to die. So, Atzel comes to wish he was dead, and then he comes to believe he is dead. Kadish brings many doctors to see Atzel, and all of the doctors pronounce him to be alive. Atzel eats very little and rarely speaks and his family becomes concerned that he will soon die. Kadish then visits a doctor named Yoetz. Dr. Yoetz tells Kadish he will cure Atzel within eight days and tells Kadish and his family to do exactly as he instructs.

Dr. Yoetz visits Kadish's house to check on Atzel. When Dr. Yoetz sees Atzel in bed, he asks why Kadish is keeping a dead body in his house. Dr. Yoetz tells Kadish to have a funeral and bury Atzel. Atzel is very happy and asks for some food to celebrate, but Dr. Yoetz tells Atzel to wait, because he will eat in paradise. Dr. Yoetz then has Kadish prepare a room in the house to appear like paradise. White silk sheets are hung on the walls and all the windows are closed and covered. Candles are kept burning night and day. The room is very comfortable, but there is nothing to do inside the room. Then Kadish holds a funeral and Atzel is so content to be dead that he sleeps through the entire funeral and awakens inside of the room that has been disguised as a paradise.

Atzel is happy to be in paradise. He calls for food, and servants bring him a feast, which he eats. Then, he sleeps and awakens, and the servants bring him the same kind of food again. All of Atzel's experiences are arranged according to the advice of Dr. Yoetz. Over the next few days, Atzel learns that, in paradise, one always eats the same food, there is no day or night or time. There's also nothing to do, paradise will last forever, and there are no visitors. Atzel asks what will happen to Aksah and is told that she will mourn him for a little while, and then she will marry someone else. Atzel spends eight miserable days in paradise, eating the same food and doing nothing. Atzel becomes bored and depressed and wishes he were not dead. On the eighth day, however, a servant tells Atzel that a mistake has been made and that Atzel is not dead and will have to return to earth. Atzel is happy to be leaving paradise and, once he is returned to earth, he exults in the beauty of the world. He quickly proposes to Aksah, and they are quickly wed. Dr. Yoetz is a guest of honor at their marriage. During the rest of his life,



Atzel remembers living in his fool's paradise. Atzel becomes a very industrious and hard-working man, and his merchant business is one of the most prosperous in the land.

Fool's Paradise Analysis

The story is a cautionary tale regarding getting what one wishes for. Atzel wishes to live in paradise, but when he actually arrives at his imagined paradise he quickly becomes bored and depressed. Fortunately for Atzel, he is not really in paradise but is simply being tricked by the canny Dr. Yoetz. After eight days in paradise, Atzel is told he is there by mistake and is led back to earth. Having seen that his paradise is not as desirable as he once thought, Atzel returns to real life with gusto and becomes a successful merchant and a husband to Aksah.

Aside from the young Atzel, the characters in the story are not foolish, as are so many other characters in the collection of short stories. Dr. Yoetz, in particular, is very wise and quickly develops a treatment plan that leaves Atzel wishing for a normal life of work and marriage. Kadish is also not foolish. Instead of consulting with others of no experience, he consults with doctors who prove capable. Aksah, perhaps, is a bit foolish for desiring to be married to Atzel but, in the end, Atzel's successful career proves her to have a certain amount of foresight.



Grandmother's Tale

Grandmother's Tale Summary

Grandmother Leah's grandchildren are playing dreidel on the third night of Hanukkah, when she tells them to go to bed for the evening. The children request a bedtime story and Grandmother Leah tells them a brief story. One Hanukkah, a father's four sons and four daughters were playing dreidel, when a knock was heard. They opened the door to find a young man with sideburns and a moustache. He wore a fox-fur-lined coat, a feathered hat, and high boots with spurs. The man said he had become lost in the snowstorm and asked if he could remain until morning.

The young man ate heartily, smoked, and then joined in the game of dreidel. He repetitively lost silver and gold coins but remained good-natured and began to drink. The children noticed the barn animals were growing agitated, but they kept playing dreidel, because they enjoyed winning the strange young man's money. Then the oldest boy happened to look at the shadows on the wall and realized the stranger was not casting a shadow. Soon after the clock struck 13 o'clock, and the children realized the stranger was, in fact, the devil.

Once the children realized who he was, the stranger cast off the image of a young man and became devilish in appearance. The devil began to spin like a dreidel, and the whole house began to spin around with the devil. As the devil called out, many mice and goblins appeared, and everything spun around and around, and then the entire company of the devil, mice, goblins, and the children vanished. Grandmother Leah's story concludes with a rhyme and she sends the children off to bed, promising them another story the next evening.

Grandmother's Tale Analysis

Grandmother Leah's family probably does not live in Chelm, the setting for most of the other stories in the collection. Chelm is a place of great fools and Grandmother Leah is not foolish. When Grandmother Leah tries to send the children off to bed, they instead want to continue playing dreidel. Instead, she tells them a cautionary tale of children who are so greedy that they stay up late into the night playing dreidel with the devil. The children in Grandmother Leah's story are, perhaps, from Chelm.

The traditional Hanukkah game of dreidel is played by individuals putting money into a common bank and then taking turns spinning the dreidel, which is a four-sided top. If the top stops on the side with *Nun*, as it did for the devil in Grandmother Leah's story, the next player spins. If the top stops on the side with *Gimel*, as it did frequently did for the children in Grandmother Leah's story, the player wins the entire common bank, and the players again ante into the bank. Thus, the children were excited to keep playing as they continued to win silver and gold coins from the devil. In other words, they became



overly greedy or, as Grandmother Leah said in her rhyme "*Such a pity, such a shame, / Hanukkah night and a devil's game*" (p. 23).

The result of the children's greed was the devil's ability to whisk them all away once his disguise had been penetrated, presumably a little over an hour after midnight. Grandmother Leah's story is therefore a context-appropriate cautionary tale, which instructs the children, as it entertains them. The narrative structure is also interesting in that Grandmother Leah is not the narrator but assumes the narrative function for nearly the entire story.



The Snow in Chelm

The Snow in Chelm Summary

The town of Chelm is a town of fools, and everyone who lives in Chelm is a fool. One night in Chelm, a person saw the reflection of the moon in a barrel of water. The town Elders decided the moon must have fallen into the water, so they had the barrel nailed shut so the moon could not escape. In the morning, when they opened the barrel, the moon was gone. The Elders called the police and reported the crime, but the moon was never found.

The Seven Elders of Chelm are the greatest fools in the town, and in a town of fools, the greatest fools are the rulers. Chelm is in need of money to pay her debts. On one Hanukkah evening, the snow falls and covers the ground of Chelm. Gronam the Great Fool notices that the beautiful snow shines in the starlight and concludes that the snow is in fact silver. Gronam the Great Fool and the other Elders are happy that the silver will pay the debts of Chelm. However, they remember that the people of Chelm like to take walks, and they are afraid that in their walking the people of Chelm would trample the silver snow and ruin it. Silly Tudras decides that the elders must send a messenger to all the houses in Chelm to tell the people not to walk on the silver. Dopey Lekisch realizes that the messenger would trample the silver while delivering the message. Shmerel the Ox determines that the messenger must therefore be carried about.

Gimpel the Errand Boy is summoned and placed upon a table. Four strong working men, Treitle the cook, Berel the potato peeler, Yukel the salad mixer, and Yontel the goatherd, then lift the table and the boy and carry him about. They carry Gimpel the Errand Boy to every house in Chelm where he knocks on the window and tells the inhabitants to stay inside to avoid trampling the silver snow. Meanwhile the Chelm Elders discuss how they will spend their fortunate bounty. Silly Tudras feels the town should buy a goose, which lays golden eggs. Dopey Lekisch feels the town should buy many magnifying glasses, so the town would look, and therefore be, larger. The Elders discuss their fortune.

In the morning, the sunrise allows the Elders to see that the strong men who carried Gimpel the Errand Boy have trampled the silver snow. The Elders realize they have made a terrible mistake and determine that upon the next snowfall, Gimpel the Errand Boy shall be carried about by four other, more careful, strong men. The town of Chelm remains confident in their Elders' ability to collect the silver treasure in the next year.

The Snow in Chelm Analysis

This story begins a series of three stories about the people in and around the town of Chelm. The story relates two incidents in the history of Chelm to illustrate how foolish the inhabitants can be, particularly the venerated town Elders. The first brief story about



the moon establishes that the people have absolutely no sense whatsoever. Instead of realizing the moon's appearance in the water barrel was simply a reflection, the Elders believe that the moon has fallen into the barrel. The police of Chelm are apparently as foolish as everyone else, because they actually search for the missing moon the next day, obviously without success.

The next incident involves a Hanukkah snowfall. The town of Chelm apparently needs money, though the exact needs are not specified. The Elders mistakenly believe the snow to be silver and gems and believe they will be able to collect the snow and pay their debts. Rather than simply attempting to gather the snow, they envision a somewhat complicated plan, which involves sending a boy around to notify the townspeople that they should not trample the snow. Realizing that the boy himself would trample the snow, the foolish elders cause four large men to carry the boy about. Needless to say, the four large men trample the snow even though the boy does not. Of course, the trampling of the snow is insignificant as it is not actually of worth, but the Elders do not understand this. Instead they conclude they have made a mistake and determine to rectify their mistake upon the next snowfall by sending out the same messenger in the same manner. However, he will be carried by four other men, and presumably the four other men will somehow be more careful to walk without trampling the snow. The story concludes by noting that the people of Chelm, though disappointed in their economic misfortune, retain high confidence in the Elders and their ability to lead the town to success.



The Mixed-Up Feet and the Silly Bridegroom

The Mixed-Up Feet and the Silly Bridegroom Summary

East Chelm is a small village near Chelm proper. Like Chelm, East Chelm is inhabited by fools. In East Chelm, Shmelka and Shmelkicha live in a small house with their four daughters, Yenta, Pasha, Trina and Yachna. The four girls share a single bed, and wake up one morning to discover all their eight feet are mixed up in the bottom of the bed. Afraid of getting out of bed with the wrong feet, the girls remain in bed, until their mother tries to rouse them.

Once appraised of her daughters' conundrum Shmelkicha becomes alarmed. Shmelkicha, from Chelm proper, realizes she needs the counsel of the Elder of Chelm. She arranges to have some neighbors complete the morning chores and travels to Chelm where she consults with the Elder. After a prolonged session of pondering, the Elder suggests that Shmelkicha take a stick and, without announcing her intentions, quickly strike the girls' feet with the stick. The Elder reasons that, in their pain, the girls will instinctively grab their own feet and leap from the bed. The Elder then suggests that in order to avoid a similar problem from recurring the daughters should be married off as quickly as practicable. Shmelkicha returns home and does as the Elder advised. Of course, the Elder's stratagem is successful. When struck, the girls leap from the bed with their own feet attached, reaffirming the wisdom of the Elder of Chelm. Shmelka and Shmelkicha then set about marrying off their daughters.

Rather quickly, they locate Lemel, a coachman from Chelm, and contract with his father to wed Yenta to Lemel. Yenta, however, does not want to sign the marriage contract, because she does not want to marry a stranger. Once again, Shmelkicha consults with the Elder of Chelm. The Elder suggests that Yenta sign the marriage contract, because once she has signed, Lemel will be her betrothed, and not a stranger. Thereafter, Yenta will marry her betrothed instead of a stranger. Yenta is mollified by the incredible wisdom of the Elder and decides to sign the marriage contract.

A new problem arises, when it is discovered that neither Lemel nor Yenta can write, and thus neither can sign their name to the marriage contract. Once again, the Elder is consulted. He suggests that Yenta make three small circles and Lemel make three small dashes, and these symbols can represent their signatures. Lemel and Yenta follow this advice, and once again, the Elder's incredible wisdom has saved the day.

Shmelka desires to give a gift to his soon-to-be son-in-law, and gives him a pearl-handled penknife. Lemel then travels back to Chelm and returns a few days later and announces he has lost the penknife, because he put it in the hay of his wagon and later could not find it. Shmelka tells him a penknife should be put in the pocket. Shmelka then replaces the lost gift with a new gift of a jar of newly cooked chicken fat. Lemel then



travels back to Chelm and returns a few days later with his coat pocket ripped and stained with grease. He tells Shmelka that the jar of fat broke in his pocket and cut and stained his coat. Shmelka tells him a jar of fat should be wrapped in paper and placed in the hay. Shmelka then replaces the lost gift with a new gift of a silver Gulden. Lemel then travels back to Chelm and returns a few days later and announces he has lost the silver Gulden, because he wrapped it in paper and placed it in the hay. Shmelka tells him a silver Gulden should be put in a purse. Shmelka, fed up with Lemel's foolishness, does not replace the lost gift.

Yenta feels that her betrothed should have a gift, though, and she gives him some newly laid eggs. Lemel then travels back to Chelm and returns a few days later and announces the eggs were broken, when he placed them in his purse. Yenta suggests that eggs should be placed in a basket and covered with a cloth. Yenta then replaces the broken gift with a new gift of a live duck. Lemel then travels back to Chelm and returns a few days later and announces the duck died under the cloth. Yenta suggests that a duck should be placed in a cage and fed corn. Yenta then replaces the dead gift with her prized goldfish. Lemel then travels back to Chelm and returns a few days later and announces the goldfish has died in the cage. Yenta, exasperated with Lemel's foolishness, turns to her wise mother for assistance.

Shmelkicha, as expected, consults with the Elder of Chelm. After a prolonged amount of pondering, the Elder announces that the road between Chelm and East Chelm is fraught with peril, and has caused Lemel's misfortunes. He suggests that Yenta and Lemel marry quickly, so that Lemel will not have to make the arduous and dangerous journey to visit his betrothed. Shmelkicha agrees with the Elder's profound wisdom and Yenta and Lemel are quickly married thus bringing Lemel's misfortunes to an end.

Within a year, Yenta delivers a healthy baby. Lemel visits the Elder to announce the baby's arrival. The Elder asks if the baby was a boy, and Lemel says the baby was not a boy. The Elder then asks if the baby was a girl and Lemel is speechless at the Elder's ability to discern the sex of the newborn child.

The Mixed-Up Feet and the Silly Bridegroom Analysis

The narrative consists, essentially, of a series of humorous and ridiculous problems, which are solved by the application of the wisdom obtained by consulting the Elder of Chelm. The central characters are Yenta and Lemel, a couple who is betrothed and wed in the narrative. Of the two, Yenta appears to have the most sense. Yet, it must be remembered that at one point she believed her feet were mixed up with those of her sisters. In the final analysis, she agrees to marry Lemel. Thus, she is not entirely free of the foolishness, which pervades Chelm and East Chelm.

Once Yenta and Lemel are betrothed, Lemel starts a disastrous series of visits to Yenta's home. Lemel, a coachman, travels the road between Chelm and East Chelm and causes several humorous but unfortunate incidents. Over the course of six visits, he loses a pearl-handled penknife and a silver Gulden, breaks a jar of chicken fat and



several freshly laid eggs, and manages to kill a duck and a goldfish. After three visits, Shmelka appears to arrive at the conclusion that Lemel's foolishness knows no bounds and quits giving gifts. Yenta then takes up the task of ensuring Lemel is gifted on his visits, but even the long-suffering Yenta becomes fed up with Lemel's inexhaustible supply of foolishness. It is interesting to note that, despite an accumulation of good advice from Shmelka and Yenta, Lemel proceeds from merely losing items to breaking items to actually killing items.

Of course both Shmelka and Yenta, had they been intelligent, would have instructed Lemel in the correct manner of care for the current item they gave him rather than instructing him in the correct manner of care for the item he has already lost, broken, or killed. The Elder of Chelm accidentally suggests the proper solution, which is a quick marriage. The solution works not, because the road between Chelm and East Chelm is perilous, but because it obviates the need to entrust any task, however trivial, to the foolish Lemel. The narrative is humorous and enjoyable and depicts the incredible foolishness of all of the people in and around Chelm.



The First Shlemiel

The First Shlemiel Summary

Shlemiel lives with his wife and baby near Chelm. Shlemiel is habitually unable to provide for his small family. Therefore, Mrs. Shlemiel sells vegetables in the market to try and make ends meet. Mrs. Shlemiel has made a pot of sweet jam for Hanukkah. Knowing that Shlemiel is lazy and has a sweet tooth, Mrs. Shlemiel worries that he will eat the entire pot of jam, while she is out of the house. She decides to tell Shlemiel a lie. Before leaving for the market, she tells Shlemiel he must do three things. First, he must take care of the baby; second, he must not let the rooster get out of the house; third, she tells him that the pot of jam, high on the shelf, is a pot of poison that he must not eat.

After Mrs. Shlemiel leaves for market, Shlemiel sleeps and dreams that he is fabulously rich. He dreams he becomes a king and eats rich food. He dreams that he and his wife are eating a huge pancake spread with sweet jam and that, as they finish the pancake, their lips meet at the middle. While Shlemiel sleeps, the baby and the rooster also sleep.

The rooster awakens first and crows a very loud cock-a-doodle-do. Shlemiel is startled out of his pleasant dream and mistakes the cock's crowing for a bell that is rung in Chelm, when an emergency situation has arisen. He jumps to his feet and rushes confusedly to the window, which he opens to see if, perhaps, a fire has started somewhere. The rooster quickly flies out of the window and runs away. Shlemiel then tries to comfort the startled baby but accidentally rolls the baby onto the floor, and the baby bumps his head and gets a lump. Shlemiel comforts the child by singing him back to sleep.

Shlemiel then considers his situation and begins to dread his wife's return. He knows she will scold him vociferously and he is afraid of her temper and begins to regret his pitiable situation. Shlemiel thinks he would rather be dead than listen to his wife's scolding. Remembering the pot of supposed poison, Shlemiel determines to kill himself by eating poison. He retrieves the pot of jam, which he believes to be poison, and begins to eat it. Shlemiel is pleasantly surprised that the supposed poison is sweet and delightful, and so he eats the entire pot. He then becomes thirsty but is too lazy to go to the well for water. Instead, he searches the house and discovers an expensive bottle of apple cider that Mrs. Shlemiel has set aside for Hanukkah. Shlemiel thinks that he might as well enjoy the cider, since he will be dead before Mrs. Shlemiel returns, and dead men do not hear their wife's scolding. He drinks the entire bottle. Then Shlemiel lies down to die and falls asleep. He again dreams he is a rich and wise king, and he dreams that his wife honors him.

Shlemiel then wakes up to discover his wife is very angry and loudly scolding him. He wonders how he can hear her, because he believes he must surely be dead. Perhaps,



he reasons, he is not quite dead. Therefore, Shlemiel explains his situation and actions to his angry wife, and concludes by telling her that he has eaten the pot of poison and will shortly die. Mrs. Shlemiel bursts into tears and tells her husband that the pot was really full of jam, not poison. Shlemiel, realizing he will continue to live, is very grateful and also begins to cry with joy.

When the neighbors in Chelm hear about Shlemiel's plight, they rally around Mrs. Shlemiel and bring her a gift of jam and cider. Later the rooster returns, and Shlemiel and Mrs. Shlemiel have an enjoyable Hanukkah with their baby boy. The Elders of Chelm ponder the situation at great length and finally determine that wives should not tell lies to their husbands, even if their husbands are lazy schlemiels.

The First Shlemiel Analysis

The story tells of the supposed first Shlemiel who, apparently, was so foolish as to give his name as the very definition of a foolish dolt, or schlemiel. The story's humorous depiction of Shlemiel as utterly incompetent is ended by the foolish Elders of Chelm essentially blaming Mrs. Shlemiel for all of Shlemiel's bumbling. Of course, Mrs. Shlemiel had no alternative course of action, because if she had told Shlemiel the pot was jam and asked him to refrain from eating it she would have been ignored anyway.

The story, however, has a happy ending, as the townspeople from Chelm rally around the hapless Shlemiel and supply his family with all of the necessities for a successful Hanukkah. It's a rare but happy case of a foolish person having his cake and eating it too. The jam and cider are replaced, the rooster returns, and the baby's head will heal. Meanwhile Shlemiel enjoys a day of slumber and dreams with a belly full of jam and cider, the noisy rooster out of the house, and the baby sleeping peacefully. The story concludes the stories of the fools living in Chelm. The remaining stories take on a more serious tone. The story also contains some of the most charming elements of the entire collection; Shlemiel's singing is particularly enjoyable.



The Devil's Trick

The Devil's Trick Summary

A fierce snowstorm has been raging for three days, and the devil and his wife are roaming the countryside. Three days ago, David's father had left for the village to gather supplies. When he did not return, David's mother went looking for him. David's mother has not returned and tonight is the first night of Hanukkah. David decides he must go in search of his parents, so he puts his infant sibling to sleep wrapped in warm blankets, lights the first Hanukkah candle, and goes out into the blizzard.

The storm intensifies and David quickly becomes disoriented and then completely lost. He realizes his parents must have also become lost in the fierce weather. David is unable to see the sky or any landmarks and fears he will perish, when he sees the single Hanukkah candle flame in the distance. David runs toward the candle and quickly finds his house, but he is pursued by the devil and the devil's witch wife. David runs into the cabin and slams the door behind him, keeping the devil and his wife out, but trapping the devil's tail in the door.

The devil tells David to free his tail, but David says unless the devil will return David's parents, David will cut the devil's tail off. The devil sends his wife to fetch David's parents, who have been imprisoned not far distant. The devil's witch wife soon returns with David's parents, who rush into the cabin. David takes the Hanukkah candle and uses it to single the devil's tail then he opens the door and releases the devil's tail. The devil and his wife flee into the snowstorm.

The Devil's Trick Analysis

This brief but interesting story relates an encounter between the heroic protagonist David and the devil and his witch wife. David's father and mother have become lost in a snowstorm, led away and then imprisoned by the crafty devil, who roams the land in the blizzard. The description of the devil and his company, though brief, is notably interesting and with the accompanying illustration by Maurice Sendak is frightful and chilling.

David's faithful observance of Hanukkah ritual allows him to escape the snowstorm and the clutches of the devil by returning home along a path lit by the Hanukkah candle's light. Once home, David catches the devil's tail between the door and the frame and threatens to cut off the tail unless the devil returns David's parents. The devil's wife fetches David's parents and returns them little worse for wear. David then frees the devil but singes his tail with the Hanukkah candle. The devil and his wife, true to their evil nature, then flee into the darkness before the superior moral strength of David.

The story is a delightful tale of Hanukkah and is an allegory of the special protection from evil enjoyed by the faithful. David not only saves himself by his religious diligence,

but also saves his infant brother and his parents. Thus, the entire family benefits from the diligence of the eldest child. David's observance of Hanukkah is also allegorical of the special time of year, and the increased spirituality often felt by the devout during the commemorative ritual.



Zlateh the Goat

Zlateh the Goat Summary

It is almost Hanukkah, and the winter has been a very dry season. The village farmers realize that the dry winter will lead to poor harvests and difficult financial times. Reuven the furrier has also had a bad season, and he reluctantly decides to sell Zlateh, the family goat, to Feyval, the town butcher, for eight gulden. Reuven plans to use the money to purchase Hanukkah supplies and treats for his family.

When Reuven tells his twelve-year-old son, Aaron, to take Zlateh to the butcher, Aaron's mother, Leah, and his sisters, Anna and Miriam, cry. Aaron takes a small amount of food and puts a rope around Zlateh's neck to lead the goat to the butcher. Aaron will spend the night at the butcher's house in town and then return with the money the following day. When Aaron reaches the road, Zlateh acts confused, as she has never been led this way before.

Although the sun is shining, when Aaron leaves the village the weather takes an unexpected turn for the worse and a vast cold wind blows in, bringing heavy hail with it. Soon, the hail turned to thick snow. Aaron has never seen such a storm and he becomes lost. He soon realizes he is no longer even on the road and fears that he and Zlateh will perish in the freezing snow. Aaron prays to God for deliverance. Suddenly, he makes out a shape, which he recognizes as a haystack. He runs to the snow-covered haystack and quickly scoops out armfuls of hay to make a large hollow cave. Aaron and Zlateh enter the hay cave where they quickly become warm and Zlateh begins to eat the hay.

For three days and nights, Aaron and Zlateh remain in the hay cave while the snowstorm rages. Aaron is careful to keep the snow cleared from the mouth of the cave, so the air can circulate. Zlateh eats the hay and is quite content. Aaron first eats the food he brought and then subsists by drinking milk from Zlateh. During the three days of storm, Aaron is comforted by Zlateh's presence and imagines that the goat's simple and repetitive bleats are answers to his questions. Aaron also realizes that one must be thankful for the things that God sends, regardless of the nature of the gifts. Aaron begins to feel that he has no father, no mother, and no family, and that he is a child of the snow. When he sleeps, he dreams of summer and green hills.

On the fourth day, the storm abates and Aaron hears the distant ringing of sleigh bells. He leaves the haystack and makes his way to the road where a passing sleigh directs him homeward. Instead of continuing on to the butcher's shop, Aaron takes Zlateh and returns home. When Aaron returns home, he is greeted by his ecstatic family, who believed he had perished in the storm. They feed Aaron and Zlateh a special supper while Aaron relates the story of his survival. No one in the family again thought of selling Zlateh to the butcher.



As winter cold sets in, the townspeople need the services of Reuven the furrier, and the family's economic situation quickly improves. Hanukkah arrives and is a joyous and prosperous occasion, and the children play dreidel, while Zlateh the goat watches.

Zlateh the Goat Analysis

The tone of the final story in the collection is markedly different from the other stories. The last story has a very serious tone and a gritty texture, which sets the tale apart; this is not a fairy tale of heroic defiance of the devil or a humorous folk tale about fools, but a realistic story of survival and friendship. The attention to detail and the descriptive narrative, particularly the details presented about the snowstorm and its immediate physical consequences, allow a definitive connection to be made with the protagonists - a twelve-year-old boy and a goat.

The narrative structure of this story also varies somewhat from the other stories. The self-effacing narrator remains reliable, articulate, and authoritative, but moves away somewhat from the strict third-person limited point of view employed elsewhere in the text toward an omniscient point of view. For example, the goat frequently bleats, and the bleats are interpreted within the narrative as having greater meaning than a simple animal sound. Sometimes, the protagonist interprets the bleats, but other times the narrator implies the goat's meaning or describes the goat's thoughts. For example, consider the narrative statement, "[The goat] looked back at him questioningly, as if to say 'Where are you taking me?' But after a while she seemed to come to the conclusion that a goat shouldn't ask questions" (p. 80). Whereas the narrative attribution is not absolute - it is qualified with "she seemed to" - the statement is still attributed to the narrator. This interesting approach to an omniscient point of view gives the narrative an intimate tone. The narrator's interpretation does not extend beyond the goat, which makes the simple goat an anthropomorphized character capable of meaningful thought and speech within the confines of the narrative events.

The physical peril described in the story is very real and significant. In many of the other stories in the collection, the physical danger is somewhat symbolic. For example, David is menaced by a cobweb-faced devil and his hoop-riding witch wife. However, for Aaron, the danger of death by exposure is not symbolic and is a very understandable threat. Likewise, Aaron's survival and return to his home is a joyful if not triumphant experience, whereas the resolution to Shlemiel's problems is fanciful and funny. Thus, the final story in the collection is more mature and in many ways more meaningful than the other stories presented, a fact surely responsible for the story giving its name to the entire collection.

In short, the simple story of a boy and a goat caught in a freak snowstorm becomes a metaphor for surviving by intelligent choices, by avoiding danger and seeking what comforts are available, and of survival through cooperation. The goat would surely have perished without the boy; the boy would not have survived without the goat - together, however, they survived a dangerous situation somewhat comfortably and in the process became good friends.



Characters

Kadish

Kadish is Atzel's father. Kadish is a somewhat wealthy merchant and his family lives in a large house and employs many servants. Kadish is concerned for his son's wellbeing and, when Atzel lapses into believing he is dead, Kadish brings many doctors to care for him. Kadish is a minor character in the story.

Atzel

Atzel is a young man, who is described as being tall and having black hair and black eyes. He is, by nature, lazy and wishes that he were in paradise, so he would not have to do any work. Atzel wishes he was in paradise so completely that he eventually begins to think that he is dead. Atzel's father, Kadish, then finds a doctor to help Atzel realize he is not dead. The doctor makes Atzel think that he really has died and gone to paradise. In paradise, however, Atzel quickly becomes bored of doing nothing and eating the same foods over and over again. Then Atzel is told a mistake has been made and he is returned to the earth to continue living. Atzel then finds living to be quite agreeable and goes on to become a wealthy and influential merchant in his own right. He also marries Aksah, his childhood sweetheart.

Aksah

Aksah is a young woman, who is described as tall and having blue eyes and golden hair. She is a distant relative of Atzel and, when she is orphaned, she is brought to live with Kadish. Aksah and Atzel, as children, pretend to be married. When Atzel becomes mentally sick Aksah tries to care for him. When Atzel becomes well Aksah accepts his marriage proposal, and the two young adults are wed. Aksah is a minor character in the story.

Grandmother Leah

Grandmother Leah is the grandmother of several grandchildren. Her grandchildren are playing dreidel with their Hanukkah money past their bedtime. Grandmother Leah tells the children a bedtime story before sending them off to bed. Grandmother Leah fills an interesting narrative role in the story, as she, in effect, becomes the narrator.

The Elders of Chelm

The Seven Elders of Chelm are the greatest fools in a town of fools, and in a town of fools, the greatest fools are the rulers. Several stories in the collection refer to the



Elders of Chelm and their humorous and ridiculous musings and ideas. Usually the Elders give poor advice, but sometimes their advice is good through sheer dumb luck. The four named Elders are Gronam the Great Fool, Silly Tudras, Dopey Lekisch, and Shmerel the Ox. Other unnamed Elders appear in several stories.

Gimpel the Errand Boy

Gimpel is the errand boy of Chelm and does the bidding of the town Elders. On one snowy evening, he is sent about the town to tell the people not to leave their houses and trample the silver snow. Since Gimpel would trample the snow while delivering his message, the Elders of Chelm instruct four strong men to carry Gimpel around the town to deliver his message.

The People of Chelm

The people of Chelm are all fools who are ruled by the Elders of Chelm, or the greatest fools of all. Several stories in the collection refer to the people of Chelm and their humorous and ridiculous behavior. Usually their actions are obviously inappropriate, but at times, they can prove sympathetic and accidentally insightful. Perhaps the People of Chelm's greatest foolishness is found in the trust they have for their Elders. The named people of Chelm include Treitle the cook, Berel the potato peeler, Yukel the salad mixer, Yontel the goatherd, Shmelkicha and Lemel.

The People of East Chelm

The people of East Chelm are all fools like their neighbors in Chelm. Apparently, East Chelm does not have Elders, as the residents of East Chelm travel to Chelm to consult the Elders there. The advice they receive is generally inappropriate but always interesting and usually humorous. The named people of East Chelm include Shmelka, Yenta, Pesha, Trina, and Yachna.

Shmelka and Shmelkicha

Shmelka and Shmelkicha form a married couple who lives in East Chelm, although Shmelkicha is from Chelm proper. The couple has four daughters, Yenta, Pesha, Trina, and Yachna. The family owns and operates a small farm. Yenta marries Lemel, a particularly foolish coachman from Chelm.

Yenta and Lemel

Yenta and Lemel are betrothed and then married. After their marriage, they locate in Chelm where Lemel works as a coachman. Their engagement is a short but eventful period of time involving the giving and accidental losing or breaking of gifts. Both



characters have very little common sense, but of the two Lemel appears to be the greater fool. Aside from their profound lack of common sense, the two characters are proper and likable and try their best to act courteously toward each other and other people.

Shlemiel

Shlemiel is a bumbling man, who lives in Chelm with his wife and infant child. Shlemiel is unable to do anything right and prefers to sleep all day and dream he is a rich and wise king. While Mrs. Shlemiel sells vegetables in the market, Shlemiel drops the baby, frees the rooster, and eats all of the Hanukkah jam and drinks all of the Hanukkah apple cider.

David

David is a resourceful boy, who takes care of his infant sibling while his parents are missing. David then goes in search of his parents in a blinding snowstorm but nearly becomes lost and returns home pursued by the devil. David then successfully tricks the devil into returning his parents.

Aaron

Aaron is a young boy, who is sent to town to deliver the family goat to the butcher. On the way to town, Aaron and the goat are caught in an unexpectedly harsh winter storm. Aaron becomes lost before stumbling upon a haystack. He scoops out a large cave in the haystack and enters the cave with the goat. For several days, the goat and Aaron keep each other warm. The goat eats the hay and Aaron drinks milk from the goat. When the storm eventually ends, Aaron makes his way back home with the goat. The family is so happy upon his safe return that they decide the goat will never be sent to the butcher.



Objects/Places

Fool's Paradise

The fool's paradise is a place of seeming tranquility and peace. Appearances can be deceiving, however, and paradise quickly becomes boring, as there is no time, no day, no night, nothing to do, and no visitors. Additionally, the food in paradise is monotonously repetitive. The fool's paradise is the epitome of getting what one wishes for only to discover what one wished for is not particularly appealing.

Dreidel

A dreidel is a four-sided top. Each side of the dreidel is marked with a letter. In one popular Hanukkah game, children spin a dreidel and either win money from or pay money to a common bank depending upon the letter that is displayed, when the dreidel stops spinning.

Hanukkah Money

Hanukkah money, or gelt, is the money used as part of the game of dreidel played by children on Hanukkah. The money was traditionally genuine coin, but modern dreidel is typically played with foil-wrapped chocolate coins.

Chelm

Chelm is a village of fools. The village is ruled by the Seven Elders of Chelm, who are the greatest fools of all. Aside from being full of fools, the town of Chelm appears to be somewhat normal in most other respects. Houses are separated by streets, and the town has most of the attributes of any small town. At least two coachmen are employed in the town, and several other crafts are mentioned. Apparently, some townsmen make their living as goatherds.

East Chelm

East Chelm is a small village of fools, within just a few miles of Chelm proper. East Chelm apparently does not have village Elders, as the people of East Chelm travel to Chelm to consult the Elders of Chelm with particularly difficult questions of logic. Aside from being full of fools, the village of East Chelm appears to be somewhat normal in most other respects. Farms are arranged in an apparently traditional manner, and a road allows rapid foot and coach travel between Chelm and East Chelm. The people of Chelm and East Chelm apparently view the people of Chelm as somewhat more intelligent and sophisticated than the country bumpkins of East Chelm.



The Snow of Chelm

The snow in Chelm is ordinary snow that falls from the sky and blankets the ground in shimmering white. The foolish Elders of Chelm willfully mistake the snow for a carpet of silver and gems and decide to gather in the bounty of riches to pay for the town's debts. The Elders therefore concoct a ridiculous and somewhat complicated plan to protect the snow from being trampled and destroyed. Unfortunately, the execution of their plan results in the snow being trampled and destroyed.

Lemel's Gifts

Lemel is given six gifts by the family of his betrothed, including a pearl-handled penknife, a silver Gulden, a jar of chicken fat, some freshly laid eggs, a duck, and a prized goldfish. Lemel is particularly inept at caring for his gifts and loses the penknife and coin, breaks the jar of fat and the eggs, and kills the duck and goldfish. As he loses or destroys each gift, his betrothed replaces it with another gift and instructs him in how he should have cared for the previous gift. Lemel then proceeds to care for the current gift in a manner that would have been appropriate for the previous gift.

Shlemiel's Poison

Mrs. Shlemiel has prepared a pot of jam to eat on Hanukkah. Mrs. Shlemiel has to leave the house and knows that her husband, Shlemiel, is lazy and has a sweet tooth and will eat the entire pot of jam unless she can trick him into leaving it alone. She tells Shlemiel the jam is poison and instructs him to leave it alone. While she is gone, Shlemiel begins to feel sorry and depressed and decides to commit suicide. He looks around and spies the jam - thinking it is poison he determines to eat it. He is rather pleased that the poison is sweet instead of distasteful, and therefore consumes the entire pot of jam. When Mrs. Shlemiel returns, Shlemiel is surprised he hasn't yet died and tells Mrs. Shlemiel that he ate the entire pot of supposed poison.

Hanukkah Candle

The eight-day holiday of Hanukkah is celebrated with a lamp holder, called a menorah or a hanukkiah, which has individual spaces for nine candles. The highest space holds the Shamash, which is used to light the other candles. On the first night of Hanukkah a single candle is kindled, on the second night two candles are kindled, and so on, until the eighth night of Hanukkah, all eight lights, plus the Shamash, are lit. The candles commemorate the rededication of the Temple after the successful Jewish revolt against the Seleucid monarchy by reenacting a miracle related in the Talmud. David appropriately kindles a single candle on the first night of Hanukkah before he goes in search of his parents. When he becomes lost in the snowstorm, he uses the light from the candle to find his way back home.



Zlateh the Goat

Zlateh is the name given to a family goat in the final story of the collection. Zlateh is old and is sent to the butcher, accompanied by Aaron. While Aaron takes Zlateh to town, a strong snowstorm develops, driving Aaron and Zlateh from the road. Aaron digs a cave in a haystack and takes Zlateh inside the cave. The boy and the goat keep each other warm while the storm rages for three days. Zlateh eats the hay and provides milk for Aaron. After the storm ends, Aaron takes Zlateh back home where Zlateh is received as a hero, thus avoiding the fate implied by being sent to the butcher.

Setting

The first story, "Fool's Paradise," begins "Somewhere, sometime, there lived a rich man whose name was Kadish." In this way Singer indicates that his stories are not confined to any particular time or place. On the other hand, as the name "Kadish" suggests, the people in these stories belong to the centuries-old Jewish folk culture that flourished in central Europe until the utter devastation caused by the Nazis in World War II.

References to the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, as well as descriptions of village life and other indications, all point to the world in which Singer grew up, as recounted in autobiographical stories in *A Day of Pleasure* and *In My Father's Court* (1966). But the stories are also timeless. The dress, habits, and beliefs may be unfamiliar, but in essentials the characters could easily change places with the reader's friends and neighbors.

Social Sensitivity

All of the stories in *Zlateh the Goat* are geographically and culturally circumscribed, almost insulated. They are set in predominantly Jewish villages in Poland, and little if any mention is made of Gentile neighbors. Although anti-Semitism historically was a virulent force in the area, Singer does not let it intrude in these stories, for his purposes are far from political. He is interested in men and women and children who happen to be Jewish.

Singer is a humanist, interested in people as people, in their problems, predicaments, ambitions, attitudes, and aspirations. He has no axes to grind, no social programs to advocate. If he has a social message, it is that most people are decent and loving, however silly they may sometimes appear, and they can get along well if they genuinely try to understand one another or at least tolerate one another as human beings.

Literary Qualities

Singer is neither a literalist nor a crusader. He is first and foremost a storyteller. A major attribute of Singer's literary style is his mixture of reality and fantasy. Maurice Sendak's illustrations may help the reader visualize the nightmare experience of David in "The Devil's Trick," but Singer's prose—especially the concrete, deft strokes he uses to describe his characters and situations—is often a sufficient stimulus to the imagination.

With gentle humor, Singer describes the antics and predicaments of his fools and pokes fun at their foibles and follies.

The humor makes them appear less threatening or satirical than they might otherwise have been portrayed. A related gentleness characterizes Singer's depiction of children, for whom he shows a genuine love and affinity. Indeed, the childlike quality of his imagination and the directness of his approach make his stories appealing to readers of every age.

This directness is perhaps best demonstrated through Singer's use of dialogue.

He often lets his characters speak for themselves rather than having the narrator talk about them.



Themes

Heroes and Fools

All of the major characters in the collection of stories, and even most of the minor characters, can be easily categorized as either heroes or fools. The fools play the role of comedian and ignoramus in many of the stories, particularly in the stories centered on the residents of Chelm and East Chelm. For example, Lemel crushes raw eggs into his purse and places a goldfish in a birdcage while the Elders of Chelm cause Gimpel the Errand Boy to be carried by four men to prevent his feet from damaging the snow. These events are funny and ridiculous and, in the end, not much hard comes from them, except for the goldfish. The fools' lives are instructive and enjoyable but ultimately not as significant as the heroes' lives.

The heroes include Grandmother Leah, who enforces sensible bedtime rules and calms her grandchildren by telling them a context-appropriate cautionary tale and the faithful David, who outwits the devil and saves his parents from imprisonment. Another hero is Aaron, who not only saves his own life but that of Zlateh the family goat. It is in the lives of the heroes that we can find inspiration and durable meaning. Their quiet wisdom is all the more profound, when it is contrasted with the ridiculous actions of the fools from Chelm.

God Sends Many Kinds of Gifts

Zlateh says "'We must accept all that God gives us - heat, cold, hunger, satisfaction, light, and darkness'" ("Zlateh the Goat," p. 86). This same theme is encountered in nearly all of the stories in the collection. God's gifts are many and varied, and though they may not always seem desirable at the time, they should be and must be accepted if one is to remain faithful and live life as a strong and devout individual.

Consider, for example, the hapless children in Grandmother Leah's story. They accepted their Hanukkah money gifts and played dreidel as appropriate. Had they stopped, when they should have, all would have gone well for them. Instead they became greedy and looked beyond the gifts sent by God and focused on the gifts sent by the devil - silver and gold coins. Their fate for not accepting all the gifts of God was to be whirled around and whisked away by the devil. Grandmother Leah's grandchildren are thus properly instructed to be grateful for the things that God has sent, including the need to sleep when appropriate, and a shortage of desirable coins when abundance is not granted.

Another example is found in Atzel, who was graciously gifted with many pleasant gifts including a devoted betrothed, a wealthy family, and a hard-working and industrious father. Instead of accepting these things he dreamed of a paradise, a fool's paradise, where he could simply lie in bed all day and be served exotic foods. Once his foolish



dreams appeared to come true Atzel at least had the common sense of realizing they were not equal to the gifts given by God. Atzel thereafter had the good fortune to return to a meaningful life where he was able to take full advantage of God's many gifts.

Experience Is Universal

The stories in the collection are about people who lived far away, many years ago, in a foreign culture and society. Yet their experiences of foolish behavior, unreasonable expectations, devout adherence to tradition, and heroic actions in the face of danger are common experiences for all people in the world. Readers of nearly any age, of any cultural background, in any part of the world can gain insight into the human condition by considering the foolishness of the people of Chelm, by admiring the dedication of David, by recognizing the perseverance of Aaron, and by feeling kinship with Shlemiel.

The game of dreidel is perhaps not universally enjoyed, yet all children play games and all children often desire to stay up past their bedtimes. We have all felt the exasperation of dealing with people who are foolish. Perhaps, they are not quite as foolish as Lemel, but trying to our patience, nonetheless. We have all had lazy days full of coincidental accidents and misfortunes like Shlemiel, and we can all sympathize with his desire to avoid a scolding. Perhaps the cobweb-faced devil has never literally chased us to our doorstep, but we have all felt the shiver of danger pursuing us in our lives. The example of David's strong will and dedication can enlighten us all. The book's deepest strength lies not in the funny actions of the people of East Chelm, but in the universal human experience it portrays.

Themes/Characters

Most of the characters in this collection fall into two groups, fools and heroes. Among the fools is Atzel, the young man in "Fool's Paradise." Because he is too lazy to do the real work of living and is enamored of paradise, where he thinks he belongs, he tries to make people believe that he is dead.

Some of the fools, like the bridegroom, Lemel, in "The Mixed-Up Feet and the Silly Bridegroom," seem unable to learn anything from their experiences and will go through life as the simple-minded but harmless people they are. Others, like Atzel, can profit from an object lesson, such as Dr. Yoetz teaches him. In both cases, the characters' foolishness shows readers how to use common sense and avoid self-indulgence.

While many of the predicaments the fools find themselves in are humorous, they are not pointless. Even those who are not foolish, like Mrs. Shlemiel in "The First Shlemiel," have something to learn from protecting fools from themselves or preventing them from making a shambles of everything.

The heroes, like David in "The Devil's Trick" and Aaron in "Zlateh the Goat," demonstrate how courage and good sense can overcome the most difficult obstacles and dangers. Setting out to find his mother and father, who have disappeared in a terrible snowstorm, David soon realizes that the devil is after him and has probably captured his parents. But his faith shines as brightly as the Hanukkah candle burning in the window of his home that steers him safely back. Through a trick of his own he outsmarts the devil and rescues his parents.

Similarly, Aaron saves himself and his goat when a terrific snowstorm overwhelms them on their way to the butcher, where Zlateh is to be sold.

Aaron finds them shelter in a haystack, which provides food for the goat and warmth for them both until the storm passes. Aaron also has sense enough to realize that it is no ordinary snowstorm; hence, instead of continuing on his journey to the butcher, he returns home with Zlateh—to the relief and delight of his whole family.

The Elders of Chelm, who appear in several stories, represent an interesting combination of foolishness and heroism.

In "The Snow in Chelm," only their foolishness seems apparent, as they decide that a snowfall is really made up of precious stones and silver—gifts that will save their village from poverty. But in "The Mixed-Up Feet and the Silly Bridegroom," one of the Elders really does come up with several practical solutions to the problems that beset poor Shmelka and his wife and daughters. Despite their white beards and high foreheads, the Elders have a reputation for the dubious quality of their wisdom, but they are not entirely ridiculous. They bring a smile and occasionally an idea that works.

Another important character in these stories is the devil. Invariably, he tries to work his mischief, and though he almost succeeds, he is eventually found out and repulsed, as in "Grandmother's Tale." If he does not directly appear in "The First Shlemiel," he seems to be lurking somewhere in the background, as disaster after disaster befalls poor Mr. Shlemiel.

But Shlemiel's essential innocence is his protection, and everything works out well in the end—the baby's bruised skull, the temporarily lost rooster, and the devoured pot of Hanukkah jam notwithstanding. The world is not a simple or a very safe place, Singer is saying, and there are demons enough; but if one has faith or at least a good heart, evil will have a difficult time achieving victory.

Style

Point of View

All of the seven stories in the collection are narrated in the third-person limited point of view by an unnamed and traditionally removed narrator. The self-effacing narrator is reliable, articulate, and well informed. The point of view selection is appropriate for the nature of the stories being told and contributes to the fairy-tale or nursery rhyme feel of many of the stories. The tone of the stories requires an even-handed but sympathetic portrayal of the characters, particularly as many of the characters are humorously foolish in their behavior, and such a portrayal is accomplished.

One story, "Grandmother's Tale," has a somewhat more complex point of view. The very short story begins from the typical point of view but, within just a few lines, the grandmother begins to tell a tale to her grandchildren. Her story is not delivered as dialogue and is not set apart, textually, from the main narrative. When her story concludes the principle narrator seamlessly takes up the story's brief conclusion. Thus, Grandmother Leah assumes the role of narrator for most of the short story, which makes the narrative construction interesting and notable.

Setting

All of the stories are set in a simple and rural area where farming is a way of life and traditional Jewish values are the norm. Three of the stories are set in the town of Chelm, a town of fools. The other four stories are set in an unnamed town, possibly Chelm, but probably not, because many of the characters in the other stories are decidedly not fools, but heroes. Many of the stories happen during the Hanukkah period, and many of the stories involve snow and winter.

The sense of place is well constructed but is not particularly tied to any single location; thus, the stories could be interpreted as having transpired in nearly any rural Jewish community of traditional values. This allows the stories to function as modern fairy-tales, an effect complemented by their subject matter.

Language and Meaning

The language used in translation is simple and easily accessible. Although a few Yiddish words have been retained through translation, their retention serves to create texture and tone and in no way detracts from the intelligibility of the translated narratives. For example, the character Shlemiel in "The First Shlemiel" is indeed a schlemiel - the word retention here adding enormously to the texture of the story. In addition, the illustrations by Maurice Sendak are very enjoyable and appropriate, and aid in an understanding of the stories, particularly when they are read to pre-literate children or beginning readers.



The meaning of the stories is straightforward and easy for children to understand. Some of the stories feature an additional sub-text that requires a somewhat greater sophistication to interpret. For example, the story of David in "The Devil's Trick" can be understood as the brave actions of a young boy, but can also be read as an allegory for the resistance of evil by the faithful. The strength of the stories comes from their easily accessible meaning and clear development, however, and not from intentionally hidden structures.

Structure

The 90-page book is divided into 7 short stories and contains 17 pen-and-ink full-page illustrations. The illustrations markedly increase the book's readability. Each story is demarcated by a full title page and generally followed by a blank page; thus the book contains roughly 35 pages of text. Stories vary in length from two pages to perhaps seven pages. Each story is an independent narrative although three stories take place in the same town of Chelm and involve an unnamed Elder of Chelm, probably Gronam the Great Fool. The entire book can be read in a single sitting and makes a suitable book for children. The narratives are universally accessible, and the construction and timeline development are simple and easily intelligible. In a certain sense, several of the stories are brief morality tales, but none of them suffer from the stilted prose or artificial form so common to similar types of stories.



Quotes

"The time came when he could no longer conceal his sadness. He remarked to one of the servants, 'I see now that it is not as bad to live as I had thought.' "'To live, my lord, is difficult. One has to study, work, do business. Here everything is easy,' the servant consoled him. "'I would rather chop wood and carry stones than sit here. And how long will this last?' "'Forever.' "'Stay here forever?' Atzel began to tear his hair in grief. 'I'd rather kill myself.' "'A dead man cannot kill himself.' "On the eighth day, when it seemed that Atzel had reached the deepest despair, one of the servants, as had been arranged, came to him and said, 'My lord, there has been a mistake. You are not dead. You must leave paradise.' "'I'm alive?' "'Yes, you are alive, and I will bring you back to earth.'" ("Fool's Paradise," pp. 12-13)

"Gold and silver turned to dust, "In the snow a track of rust, "Gone the treasure on the bench, "Nothing left but devil's stench. "Elflocks in the children's hair, "Devil's dirt was everywhere. "Good the devil's gone away "With his horses and his sleigh. "Such a pity, such a shame, "Hanukkah night and a devil's game." ("Grandmother's Tale," p. 23)

"Chelm was a village of fools, fools young and old. One night someone spied the moon reflected in a barrel of water. The people of Chelm imagined it had fallen in. They sealed the barrel so that the moon would not escape. When the barrel was opened in the morning, and the moon wasn't there, the villagers decided it had been stolen. They sent for the police, and when the thief couldn't be found, the fools of Chelm cried and moaned. "Of all the fools of Chelm, the most famous were its seven Elders. Because they were the village's oldest and greatest fools, they ruled in Chelm. They had white beards and high foreheads from too much thinking." ("The Snow in Chelm," p. 29)

"The road between East Chelm and Chelm is fraught with all kinds of dangers, and that is why such misfortunes occur. The best thing to do is to have a quick marriage. Then Lemel and Yenta will be together, and Lemel will not have to drag his gifts from one place to another, and no misfortunes will befall them. "This advice pleased everyone, and the marriage was soon celebrated. All of the peasants of the hamlet of East Chelm and half of the townspeople of Chelm danced and rejoiced at the wedding. Before the year was out, Yenta gave birth to a baby girl and Lemel went to tell the Elder of Chelm the good tidings that a child had been born to them. "'Is the child a boy?' the Elder asked. "'No.' "'Is it a girl?' "'How did you guess?' Lemel asked in amazement. "And the Elder of Chelm replied, 'For the wise men of Chelm there are no secrets.'" ("The Mixed-Up Feet and the Silly Bridegroom," pp. 49-50)

"As soon as his wife left, Shlemiel began to rock the baby and to sing him a lullaby: "*I am a big Shlemiel. "You are a little Shlemiel. "When you grow up, "You will be a big Shlemiel "And I will be an old Shlemiel. "When you have children, "You will be a papa Shlemiel "And I will be a grandpa Shlemiel. "The baby soon fell asleep and Shlemiel dozed too, still rocking the cradle with his foot."* ("The First Shlemiel," p. 56)



"Again he began to rock the cradle and sing a song: "*In my dream I was a rich Shlemiel* "But awake I am a poor Shlemiel. "*In my dream I ate pancakes with jam; "Awake I chew bread and onion. "In my dream I was Shlemiel the King "But awake I'm just Shlemiel.*" Having finally sung the baby to sleep, Shlemiel began to worry about his troubles. He knew that when his wife returned and found the rooster gone and the baby with a bump on his head, she would be beside herself with anger. Mrs. Shlemiel had a very loud voice, and when she scolded and screamed, poor Shlemiel trembled with fear. Shlemiel could foresee that tonight, when she got home, his wife would be angrier than ever before and would berate him and call him names. "Suddenly Shlemiel said to himself, 'What is the sense of such a life? I'd rather be dead.' And he decided to end his life. But how to do it? He then remembered what his wife had told him in the morning about the pot of poison that stood on the shelf. 'That's what I will do. I will poison myself. When I'm dead she can revile me as much as she likes. A dead Shlemiel does not hear when he is screamed at.'" ("The First Shlemiel," p. 58)

"The devil's wife rode on her hoop, with a broom in one hand and a rope in the other. Before her ran a white goat with a black beard and twisted horns. Behind her strode the devil with his cobweb face, holes instead of eyes, hair to his shoulders, and legs as long as stilts." ("The Devil's Trick," p. 71)

"He rushed over to the window, took the Hanukkah candle, and singed the devil's tail. 'Now, Devil, you will always remember,' he cried, 'Hanukkah is no time for making trouble.' "Then at last he opened the door. The devil licked his singed tail and ran off with his wife to the land where no people walk, no cattle tread, where the sky is copper and the earth is iron." ("The Devil's Trick," p. 73)

"Aaron did not want to admit the danger, but he knew just the same that if they did not find shelter they would freeze to death. This was no ordinary storm. It was a mighty blizzard. The snowfall had reached his knees. His hands were numb, and he could no longer feel his toes. He choked when he breathed. His nose felt like wood, and he rubbed it with snow. Zlateh's bleating began to sound like crying. Those humans in whom she had so much confidence had dragged her into a trap. Aaron began to pray to God for himself and for the innocent animal." ("Zlateh the Goat," pp. 81-82)

"When Aaron opened his eyes, he didn't know whether it was morning or night. The snow had blocked up his window. He tried to clear it, but when he had bored through to the length of his arm, he still hadn't reached the outside. Luckily he had his stick with him and was able to break through to the open air. It was still dark outside. The snow continued to fall and the wind wailed, first with one voice and then with many. Sometimes it had the sound of devilish laughter. Zlateh too awoke, and when Aaron greeted her, she answered, 'Maaaa.' Yes, Zlateh's language consisted of only one word, but it meant many things. Now she was saying 'We must accept all that God gives us - heat, cold, hunger, satisfaction, light, and darkness.'" ("Zlateh the Goat," p. 86).

"Once in a while Aaron would ask her, 'Zlateh, do you remember the three days we spent together?' "And Zlateh would scratch her neck with a horn, shake her white

bearded head and come out with the single sound which expressed all her thoughts, and all her love." ("Zlateh the Goat," p. 90)

Adaptations

Singer's related fiction includes many stories in his collections, such as *The Fools of Chelm and Their History* and *Mazel and Shlimazel*. His autobiographical stories in *A Day of Pleasure* (mostly taken from *In My Father's Court*) are firsthand accounts of what it was like to grow up in Poland—in the countryside, which gave Singer an abiding love of nature, and in Warsaw, Poland's largest city. The stories go back to the time before World War I and show how life became more difficult once the war began.

Some of Singer's stories have been made into plays or films, such as "Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy," which was first dramatized in 1974 and made into a film starring Barbra Streisand in 1983.

Several of his stories and novels set in Poland have been filmed, such as *The Magician of Lublin* (published in 1960; filmed in 1979), in which Alan Arkin plays an irreligious magician who becomes a saint. Unfortunately, films emphasize the literal or realistic aspects of Singer's fiction, often neglecting the fantasy.



Topics for Discussion

1. What is the Jewish festival of Hanukkah? How does it figure in several of Singer's stories, such as "Grandmother's Tale" and "The Devil's Trick"?

2. Is Chelm a real or imaginary village?

Does it matter? What are its main characteristics?

3. Is the trick played on Atzel in "Fool's Paradise" a cruel joke or a good lesson?

Why? What does Atzel seem to think?

4. Do Maurice Sendak's illustrations help you to visualize the characters and events in these stories? Are they necessary?

5. Compare David in "The Devil's Trick" with David in the biblical story of David and Goliath. Are there any similarities? If so, what are they?

6. Singer says he has been a lifelong lover of nature. Which stories reveal this aspect of the writer?

7. Do you know any real persons who resemble the characters in any of these stories? What are their essential similarities?



Essay Topics

Would you rather live in Atzel's "Fool's Paradise" or perform hard work every day for the rest of your life? Explain your answer.

Which bride ended up with the better husband, Aksah or Yenta? In what ways was Atzel a better husband than Lemel? In what ways was Lemel a better husband than Atzel?

Have you ever played dreidel? Does it sound like a fun game to you? Why do you think the devil in "Grandmother's Tale" was happy, even though he was losing so many silver and gold coins?

The foolish people of Chelm viewed snow as silver and riches. To David, the snow was a blinding and dangerous veil that separated him from his parents and his home. Aaron and Zlateh are also threatened by a heavy snowstorm. Compare the various characters' perception of snow in the stories in the collection.

Most of the characters in most of the stories are either fools, such as Lemel, or heroes, such as David. Is Yenta a fool or a hero? What about Aksah? Do you think Shlemiel's baby will grow up to be a fool or a hero?

Compare the people in your town to the people who live in Chelm and East Chelm. How are they similar? How are they different?

In "The Devil's Trick," the devil flees to a place without people or cattle, where the sky is copper and the earth is iron. What would you call a place such as that?

Aaron spent three days in a cave he scooped out of a haystack buried in snow. He lived in the cave with a goat. The goat ate hay, and Aaron drank milk from the goat. If you had an experience similar to Aaron's, would you think of it as an adventure or as a trial?

Zlateh the goat frequently bleats out a 'Maaaa' sound, which Aaron interprets to mean many things. Do you think it is possible for a single sound to mean more than one thing? Does the goat really talk to Aaron, or is Aaron just imagining it, because he is bored and lonely?

Which story from the book is your favorite story? What about the story makes it your favorite?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Most of these stories take place in winter. Are they "winter's tales" in the sense that Shakespeare uses the term in his play *The Winter's Tale*?
2. Compare the use of fantasy and reality in these stories. Does the use of fantasy cancel out Singer's use of realistic detail? If not, how does it work in the stories; that is, what purpose does fantasy serve?
3. Read some of the stories in *The Fools of Chelm and Their History*. Do any of the characters or situations there resemble those in this collection? Discuss their main traits and Singer's obvious fascination with such people.
4. Define the heroic qualities that some of the characters in these stories share.

Are they qualities that children or adults today have? Who do you know that has such qualities?
5. Why do the Elders of Chelm have a great reputation for wisdom? Is it deserved? If not, why do the villagers keep asking them for advice?
6. The game of dreidel is mentioned in several stories, and a dreidel appears in some of Sendak's pictures, such as the one facing the title page of "Grandmother's Tale." What is a dreidel, and how is the game played? Why is it important in "Grandmother's Tale"? Why do the children love the game?
7. How wicked is the devil in these stories? Is he really fearsome, or is he a figure of fun? Do the children in the stories believe in the devil? Why?
8. Can you derive a definition of the word shlemiel from the story called "The First Shlemiel"? Is Lemel in "The MixedUp Feet and the Silly Bridegroom" a shlemiel? If so, explain why.



Further Study

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Beacham, Walton, ed. *Research Guide to Biography and Criticism*. Washington: Beacham Publishing, 1985. Contains a useful brief survey of the major books on Singer's life and work.

Kresh, Paul. *Isaac Bashevis Singer*. New York: Dial Press, 1979. A biography of Singer with many interviews and excerpts of conversations with Singer, his wife, and others.

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