



A Book Essay
by Evelyn Torton Beck

I. B. Singer's Misogyny

Isaac Bashevis Singer, who recently won the Nobel Prize for Literature, is the one author by whom thousands of people the world over will measure both Yiddish literature and Jewish culture. Unfortunately, readers who are unfamiliar with Jewish history and culture may assume that Singer's portrayal of pre-war Polish Jewry is an authentic representation of reality. It is, instead, a rather distorted picture of *shtetl* and city life, reflecting fringe elements of that society rather than the norm.

Singer is not interested in the ordinary life of the average Jew. His preoccupation with sex, for example, was hardly characteristic of the hard-working Jews of Eastern Europe, who had to wage a daily struggle for mere survival. His focus is not on the values or realities of Jewish life but on the aberrations of human psychology. Unlike nineteenth-century Jewish writers who, while critical of Jewish life, believed in Jewish values and in the possibility of preserving them, Singer is a pessimistic modernist who believes all humans are essentially depraved.

While Singer presents men in terms of their individual psychological aberrations, he treats women as a class, making far more frequent use of clichés and stereotypes in depicting them than in depicting men. Singer's vision—combining the traditional Jewish image of woman as subservient and inferior with the misogynistic view of woman's nature in the philosophies of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud and Weininger—represents a powerful assault on the Jewish woman.

Singer's thinking, epitomized in "Zeitl and Rickel" is that "old maids, you know, also end up half crazy. But when a woman who has had a man is left alone, it goes to her head." The result, in this Singer story, is a lesbian relationship, which Singer views as the ultimate aberration.

The strong, assertive, independent, or what Singer calls "mannish" women in the body of his work all come to a bad end and inevitably bring suffering not only on themselves but also on those around them. Elka, the wife of Gimpel the Fool, is a rolling-pin wielder who lies,

Evelyn Torton Beck is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature, German and Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is the co-editor of a forthcoming collection of feminist essays in the sociology of knowledge entitled The Prism of Sex. She has been teaching courses on Yiddish literature and Jewish women for several years.

Woodcut © 1979 Paula J. Goodman

cheats, and cuckolds her husband: "Her mouth would open as if it were on a hinge and she had a fierce tongue." The tragicomedy of her evil shrewishness lies in what Singer sees as the wrongful reversal of roles: "When you're married the husband's the master," Gimpel reasons plaintively.

The best known of these strong women, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," comes off relatively well in comparison to some of the others, but even here Singer hardly shows enthusiasm for the young woman's remarkable intelligence. In recognition of her capacity for and interest in learning, her father quips:

"Yentl—you have the soul of a man."
"So why was I born a woman?"
"Even heaven makes mistakes."

Singer, who controls the narrative, seems fully to agree with this explanation. For all the apparent sympathy for Yentl's situation, her inclination to study in preference to mending socks is presented as if it were a kind of failing in her.

The only genuinely positive images of women—Teibele in "Short Friday" or Esther in *The Magician of Lublin*—are those who faithfully carry out their traditional subsidiary roles and devote their lives entirely to the care of men, no matter what the cost to themselves. Singer's formula seems to read: men serve God; women serve men.

Who can understand the feminine soul? Even an angelic woman shelters within herself devils, imps, and goblins... It is all part of the perversity so characteristic of the female's nature.

(Shadow of a Crib)

For Singer, the natural perversity of women lies chiefly in female sexuality, which he seems to regard as a natural "flaw" in women that poses a constant threat to men. They must ever protect themselves against it.

The most persistent of Singer's stereotypes, one that almost subsumes all the others, is woman as temptress. (Of course, in a society that encouraged its men to become scholars rather than providers, women frequently became the economic mainstays of their families, and not the sirens-in-search-of-sex that Singer would have us believe.) In "The Captive," an elderly Circe-like woman tries to enslave the narrator/writer into faking her dead husband's memoirs.

*She took my arm and pressed it to her body,
... A few times her leg brushed against mine.
... A sudden lust for that ugly creature seized
me.*

Since Singer does not seem able to see past women's bodies, he presumes that they cannot ever forget their own sexuality either, no matter how inappropriate the situation would appear to be, nor what their age or occupation. Even when the woman is a poet engaged on a purely intellectual mission, as in "The Colony," she behaves lasciviously, as if such behavior were a

female reflex to the presence of any male:

Sonya kept talking. ... At the same time she patted, pinched, and pulled my hand; she even dug the nail of her index finger into it. The calf of her leg she pressed against mine.

Her behavior is described in terms that make the overture repellent; there is even the suggestion of sadism in the detail of nails digging into flesh: the woman's sexuality is an assault.

Reb Bunim also had a daughter, and women, as is well known, bring misfortune.

(Destruction of Kreshov)

Like so many other male writers, Singer sees the world as essentially male-centered and clearly views women as "other"—separate, subsidiary, apart, alien. He betrays a deep mistrust, revulsion and hostility toward women, especially those who stray in any way from their prescribed roles or cease to organize their lives around men.

Singer portrays women almost entirely as the sum total of their biological functions and in terms of their relationships (or lack of them) with men. He uses physical details of women's bodies as signposts of their personalities. In describing unattractive women—particularly older ones whose physical aging often seems to discredit them or make them seem absurd—there are always sagging, wrinkled breasts, grotesquely swollen bellies, female odors, and menopausal instability.

Whenever a woman fails to carry out her physiological destiny (remains a virgin too long, cannot conceive) it is presented as the woman's failing for which she can compensate only by showing extreme loyalty and support to her male partner.

In some stories, Singer equates sexuality with the world of demons who lie in wait for their human prey; the witch is a symbol of human depravity. It is useful to compare here the different treatment Singer accords witches of the two sexes: when men are witches, they are more often explicit incarnations of the devil; their evil comes from sources outside themselves. When women are evil, they seem to be depraved in their human essence. In spite of their greater capacity for evil, female witches have less power than male witches, and are all ultimately under the power of Satan himself. So man rules, even in the witch world.

As a witch, woman is given magical powers to heal but also to harm (midwife and abortionist); she is also, of course, accused of sexual aberrations. Cunegonde, in "The Destruction of Kreshov," is a good example of the witch type—isolated, old and ugly, the object of public scorn and suspicion, she is brutally killed by the angry fiancé of a woman she has ostensibly tried to help.

While Cunegonde, Hodle and other Singer witch figures are based in the *shetl* and have their origin in traditional folk material, Singer also attributes witch-like characteristics to women in stories with a modern venue. For example, in "Alone," the Cuban caretaker of a

deserted hotel in Miami is described as

a deformed creature ... with a hunched back, disheveled hair ... long hairy arms and crooked legs ... (who) stared at me intently, as silent as a witch casting a spell.

In the flash of a sudden storm, this woman becomes "the witch crouched low like an animal ready to seize its prey."

Singer's males almost always seem helpless in these situations and are forever entangled with women's sexuality—obsessively, one might even say. The pattern that emerges most often in his stories has the central male figure or narrator caught in a web of his own making, trapped in relationships with several women, all of whom want him. Asa Heshel in *Family Moskat*, Herman Broder in *Enemies*, Yasha in *The Magician of Lublin* and, most recently, Aaron Greidinger in *Shoshu* are prime examples.

Leib returned to his cherished vision: Rooshke lay there, dress up, legs stretched out, the knife in her stomach with only the metal handle sticking out... He had been having a long dream, all about Rooshke, a strange one, for he had been slitting her throat and at the same time making love to her.

(Under the Knife)

Singer's men's arousal at women's sexuality and their inability (or unwillingness) to deal with their own feelings leads to hostility to women. Male anger at female sexuality is the theme of "Under the Knife," one of Singer's most savage stories. Here the protagonist plots revenge against his woman "for being too tough," that is to say, for jilting him. Even in *Shoshu*, where the narrator ostensibly loves his childlike wife genuinely, the marriage initiation is a rape:

*I awoke excited. I grabbed Shoshu, and before she could even wake up, I mounted her. She choked and resisted. A stream of hot blood burned my thigh. I tried to pacify her but she broke out in a wail. ... It was all out of love,
I cried.*

In so frequently associating male lust with violence toward women, Singer diverges most strongly from traditional Jewish life and comes closest to the Western pornographic imagination. While he does not go as far as to suggest that deep down all women actually want to be raped, he does seem to believe that women enjoy being victimized, degraded, and overpowered by men. The narrator of "A Quotation from Klopstock" boasts that "A few fiery slaps worked like a charm. After slaps she started to kiss. . . . I knew well how to manage my women." The protagonist of "The Briefcase" provides a good summary of this attitude: "I wronged everybody, but all these women continued to shower me with love." In "Blood," another of Singer's most brutal stories, Risha, applauding her lover's sexual prowess, uses the language of his trade (slaughtering): "You sure

murdered me that time." And in "The Dance," an abused wife becomes an abused mother after her husband dies:

I made myself a doornut for him. I suffered all his caprices. Even before he asked for something I gave it to him. Once when I handed him his slippers, he took one and smacked me in the face with it. It was my fault. Not his.

In causing the victim to blame herself, Singer is not only creating a distorted image of the Jewish woman as emotional cripple. He is also granting license to her oppressor.

"We often drew [our] situations from your stories in the Yiddish papers. I wonder if you realize how much literature influences life."

As this quote from one of Singer's characters shows, the author is well aware that literature and life are mutually interdependent. For this reason, the images in a fictional world can never be dismissed simply as harmless creatures of the imagination. Unchallenged stereotypes help to keep groups in inferior positions, be they Jews in a gentile society or women in a patriarchy. But while American Jews have long recognized the power of art, and have unhesitatingly spoken out against novels and films that perpetuate derogatory images of Jews, they have remained disturbingly complacent when faced with similarly damaging stereotypes about women.

Singer seems to be responding favorably to the feminist challenge, at least on the level of official pronouncement. At a public lecture in New York City last fall, he went so far as to say that Judaism had made an "historical mistake" in not teaching women Torah, that the denial of women's rights had contributed to assimilation, that he welcomed giving Jewish women full religious rights in the synagogue (including *aliyah* and ordination), and that a reversal of this would be "wonderful for religion and justice." (*JTA*, 11/8/78)

As encouraging as such remarks may be, they nonetheless stand in stark contrast to Singer's most recent fictional writings, which continue to present the male/female dichotomy in unchanged sexist terms. While it is possible to explain this gap between the written and the spoken word as the result of the time lag between the two media, it seems more likely that this discrepancy is exactly what it appears to be—an unresolved contradiction.

Acknowledging that women have been deprived of their rights within Judaism is an essential step toward the creation of a changed consciousness. But it is only a beginning. For Singer to be able to portray women as full human beings, as subjects seen in relation to themselves and each other rather than as appendages or complements to men, would require a deeper re-vision and a determination to shed years of acculturation. We can only hope that in time, Singer will influence Singer, and that his theory and his practice will become more fully integrated.

Color me Jewish.



My name is Annie Applebaum and I'm excited about learning the teachings of the Sabbath with my family. Share the fun with me in a 28 page quality bond coloring book, with a full color picture of me on the cover! Send a check or M.O. for \$1.75/50¢ postage and handling to Sterling Publications Dept. A-5, P.O. Box 17633 Tucson, AZ 85731

**Enjoy...
eat in
good health!**



*The Most Trusted Name in
Kosher Poultry and Foods . . .
Preferred World-Wide*

A FIRST HAGGADAH

by

Shulamit E. Kustanowitz

and

Ronnie C. Foont



Haggadah means telling a story and A FIRST HAGGADAH tells it beautifully. The translations are modern. The transliterations are unique and truly readable. Clear explanations of the SEDER will captivate the young reader. The illustrations are exquisite.

Hardcover 34 illustrations, 17 in full color 64 pp.

ORDER DEPARTMENT,
HEBREW PUBLISHING COMPANY,
80 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10011

HONEY IN THE LION



COLLECTED POEMS

Doris B. Gold

A contemporary collection of 55 poems responding to events and moods of the recent past: political and social issues, personal and familial changes and relationships, Jewish themes, women.

80 pgs. 5" x 8 1/2" paper. \$3.00 Postpaid

Foreign orders: Add \$1.00

Bookstores: Please inquire.

Academic orders (on letterhead)
receive 15% off single copy.

Produced at the Print Center, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Distributed by Biblio Press.

All checks to the order of

Biblio Press, P.O. Box 22, Fresh Meadows, N.Y.
11365

BIBLIOTECA FEMINA—

A HERSTORY OF
BOOK COLLECTIONS
CONCERNING WOMEN

by Maryann Turner

A rare find that compiles information about women's collections in libraries in the USA, indispensable for any who like to browse or research women's subjects.

"A fascinating and
valuable analysis of
libraries with women's
collections"

—*Library Journal*

A handsome printed and illustrated
paperback, sold orig. at \$5.00,
now discounted only through:

BIBLIO PRESS
P.O. BOX 22
Fresh Meadows,
N.Y. 11365

\$4.00 each
(add 60¢ for postage)
10% added Discount
to LILITH readers