

Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Gimpel the Fool"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/module/isaac-bashevis-singers-gimpel-fool>.

Introduction

"Gimpel the Fool" (*Gimpel tam*) is an iconic Yiddish short story, one of the most famous and widely anthologized works by the Nobel Prize laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer. First published in 1945, it was translated into English by Saul Bellow in 1953 and published in *Partisan Review*, helping to establish Singer's reputation in America as a major author. Drawing on significant motifs from Jewish folklore and history, the story addresses crucial questions in modern Jewish life, including how to maintain faith in the face of humanity's evil actions, and how to act in situations of both powerlessness and power.

Subjects

Eastern Europe, Fiction, Holocaust, Yiddish

Reading and Background:

- The [Library of America](#) edition of Singer's stories in English translation fills three large volumes.
- Janet Hadda's *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life* is a useful biography of the author.
- On the translation of "Gimpel the Fool," see Naomi Seidman, "Who's the Fool? Isaac Bashevis Singer in America," *Pakn Treger* (Summer 2004).

Resources

1. Short story, first line in Yiddish (1945) with English translation by Saul Bellow (1953), Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Gimpel the Fool."

The story begins with the titular character introducing himself. In Yiddish he admits that he is תם (*tam*, which comes from Hebrew, and can be translated as "simple"), but says he is not a נאַר (*nar*, a German-derived word that means "fool"). The English translation uses "fool" twice.

Suggested activity: Have students read the first line in English and discuss it: what's strange about the way the word "fool" appears twice? Have students look at and listen to the first line in Yiddish, and see if they can identify what is different from the English translation. Ask them if any know what "*tam*" means, and where it appears in Jewish liturgy. Discuss: what's the difference being simple and being foolish?

Sources: Yiddish original: Yitskhok Bashevis, *Gimpl tam un andere dertseylungen* (New York: CYCO, 1963), 5-17.

English translation: Isaac Bashevis Singer, trans. Saul Bellow, *Collected Stories, Vol. 1: Gimpel the Fool to The Letter Writer* (New York: Library of America, 2004).

Audio: Aba Igelfeld reading the work of Isaac Bashevis, *Gimpl tam un andere dertseylungen*, Yiddish Book Center's Sami Rohr Library of Recorded Yiddish Books (<<https://archive.org/details/IsaacBashevisSinger-GimplTamUnAndereDertseylungen>>, accessed March 1, 2016).

2. Illustration from haggadah, Lola's "The Four Sons," 1928.

There is a long tradition of illustrated Passover *haggadot* that visually represent the four sons described in the *haggadah* text: one wise, one evil, one simple (תם, "*tam*"), and one "who knows not how to ask." This particular illustration of the Four Sons comes



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from a 1928 American edition of the *haggadah* printed in Hebrew and Yiddish.

Suggested activity: Tell the students how each of the four sons are described in the *hagode*, and ask them to match each description to one of these illustrations. What is simplicity contrasted to, and how does this help us to understand what it means that Gimpel is "simple"?

Sources: Lola, "*Di fir zin fun der hagode*" ("The Four Sons of the *Hagode*"), in J. D. Eisenstein, *Hagada* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1928). Retrieved from the Yiddish Book Center's Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library, <<https://archive.org/details/nybc204132>>, accessed March 1, 2016.

The text of this section of the *haggadah* in Hebrew and English is available from sefaria.org.

3. Painting and recollection, Mayer Kirshenblatt's "The Black Wedding in the Cemetery, ca. 1892," 1996.

This painting and accompanying audio recollection describe a "black wedding" in prewar Poland, similar to Singer's fictional one in which Gimpel is married off to Elka.

Suggested activity: Have students look at the painting first, and see if they can guess what it represents. What do they notice about the way this event is represented in Kirshenblatt's painting? Listen to his description of the event, and see if it lines up with their perception of the painting. How is this event similar to, or different from, the black wedding described in "Gimpel the Fool"?

Source: Painting: Mayer Kirshenblatt, "The Black Wedding in the Cemetery, ca. 1892," 1996, in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

Audio: Mayer Kirshenblatt and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Paint What You Remember: The Memories of Mayer Kirshenblatt," <<http://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/ce/kirshenblatt/kirshenblatt-main.htm>>, 2009, accessed March 1, 2016.

For more information about the book and the Jewish Museum's 2009 exhibit on the work of self-taught artist Mayer Kirshenblatt, aka Mayer July, see <http://www.mayerjuly.com>.

4. Anti-Christian line removed from Bellow's translation, Singer's "Gimpel the Fool," 1945, Yiddish with translation.

In the original Yiddish story, this line follows a line translated as, "That was how it was; they argued me dumb. But then, who really knows how such things are?" According to Janet Hadda's biography of Singer, this line was purposefully omitted by Eliezer Greenberg, who helped Saul Bellow to translate the story, along with a couple smaller "anti-Christian references." "Yoyzel" is a playful, sometimes insulting, diminutive form of Jesus' name in Yiddish.

Suggested activity: Show students the line (and play the audio clip), and note where in the original story it appeared. Parse out its meaning in the story. Ask them why they think the translators would have removed that line in 1953.

Sources: Yiddish original: Yitshok Bashevis, *Gimpl tam un andere dertseylungen* (New York: CYCO, 1945), 5-17.

English translation: Isaac Bashevis Singer, trans. Naomi Seidman, "Who's the Fool? Isaac Bashevis Singer in America," *Pakn Treger* (Summer 2004).

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5. Speech, Singer upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, 1978, Yiddish with translation.

This is a short excerpt from Singer's remarks upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, in which he makes a bold claim about the nature of the Yiddish language.

Suggested activity: Ask students whether they think it's true that Yiddish has no "words for weapons, ammunition," and so on. (Does the fact that Singer speaks these words, in Yiddish, itself contradict the claim?) Why do you think he wanted to present

Yiddish in this way?

Sources: Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Nobel Lecture" (December 8, 1978), <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1978/singer-lecture.html>, accessed March 1, 2016. Yiddish text transcribed by Shaul and Shulamit Seidler-Feller, "Yiddish Word of the Week," <<http://yiddishwordoftheweek.tumblr.com/post/58702012433/isaac-bashevis-singers-nobel-prize-speeches>>, 2014, accessed March 1, 2016.

6. Film, Singer answers audience questions, 1986.

Singer was famous for his cleverness in answering audience questions, as captured in these clips.

Suggested activity: Before playing the clips, ask students to think about the following: does Singer answer the questions people ask him? How, and to what end, is he using humor in these encounters? How is this similar to, or different from, the way that Gimpel responds to the world?

Source: *Isaac in America: A Journey with Isaac Bashevis Singer*, directed by Amram Nowak (1986).