The Macksey Journal

Volume 1 Article 211

2020

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Abstract

Although famous for traditional Yiddish folktales like "Gimpel the Fool" and "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" Singer's career also included publishing stories in Playboy during the late 1960s through the 80s. These stories, while intended for an American audience in a secular publication, are nearly indistinguishable from Singer's folktales. Both Singer's traditional Yiddish folktales and his Playboy stories present a variety of messages regarding non-normative sexuality and gender expressions. These messages are often based on responsibility and recognition, halakhah and tradition, and the evocation of sympathy. He does this by focusing on common elements of the supernatural, barren couples, kabbalah and the gendered soul, and explicitly "queer" couples. The similarity in the style and elements of Singer's Playboy stories to his folktales corroborates Singer's belief that his folktales are not for exclusively Jewish readers, despite being written in Yiddish, because the themes of responsibility, tradition, and sympathy are universal. By analyzing five folktales and four Playboy stories, the Jewish questions that Singer confronts on queer, Jewish gender and non-normative sexuality prove to be universal, which allows Singer to publish Yiddish folktales in Playboy.

Introduction

Isaac Bashevis Singer was an icon of Jewish cultural tradition, he received a Nobel Prize in Literature and became one of the most successful Yiddish writers in America.[1] Although famous for traditional Yiddish folktales like "Gimpel the Fool" and "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," Singer's career also included publishing stories in *Playboy* during the late 1960s through the 80s. These stories, while intended for an American audience in a secular publication, are nearly indistinguishable from Singer's folktales. Both Singer's traditional Yiddish folktales and his *Playboy* stories present a variety of messages regarding non-normative sexuality and gender expressions. These messages are often based on responsibility and recognition, *halakhah* and tradition, and the evocation of sympathy. He does this by focusing on common elements of the supernatural, barren couples, *kabbalah* and the gendered soul, and explicitly "queer" couples. The similarity in the style and elements of Singer's *Playboy* stories to his folktales corroborates Singer's belief that his folktales are not for exclusively Jewish readers,[2] despite being written in Yiddish, because the themes of responsibility, tradition, and sympathy are universal.

By analyzing five folktales and four *Playboy* stories, the Jewish questions that Singer confronts on queer, Jewish gender and non-normative sexuality prove to be universal, which allows Singer to publish Yiddish folktales in *Playboy*. I will begin by looking at the use of supernatural forces in Singer's folktale "The Unseen"[3] and in "A Tale of Two Sisters"[4] from *Playboy*. This comparison will include a focus on responsibility and recognition for one's sexual

[1] Payson R. Stevens, "Yiddish Literature in the 20th Century," Yiddish, My Jewish Learning, accessed July 11, 2019, https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/yiddish-literature-in-the-20th-century/.
[2] Grace Farrell Lee and Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Seeing and Blindness: A Conversation with Isaac Bashevis Singer," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 9, no. 2, (Winter 1976): 151.
[3] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Unseen," in *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 57-78.
[4] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "A Tale of Two Sisters," *Playboy*, December 1974, 110-114, 128, 144, 254.

desires and actions. By using the Jewish narrative of Lilith in "The Unseen" and the historical conception of witches in "A Tale of Two Sisters," Singer calls for the enforcement of traditional gender roles. Then, I will turn towards barren couples, discussing separately barren women and sterile men. For this I will begin with barren women by looking at the traditional folktale "Taibele and Her Demon"[5] and the *Playboy* story "The Riddle."[6] Singer utilizes the *Tanakhic* motif of barren women to make the distinction of when a barren person is responsible for their barrenness and when one should feel sympathy for the barren person. Turning to sterile men, I will examine the folktale "Short Friday"[7] and "A Tale of Two Sisters" in reference to the commandment to procreate, circumcision, and Freud's theory of castration anxiety. Focusing on these elements in Singer's works illuminates Singer's preference for normative sexuality (marriage between a man and a woman) regardless of procreative capabilities. I will then discuss the folktale "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy"[8] and the *Playboy* story "A Party in Miami Beach"[9] to point to uses of *kabbalah* and gender-bending. In using these elements Singer expresses sympathy when the character is under duress. Finally, I will examine the incorporation of non-normative, sexual and romantic relationships in the folktale "The Destruction of Kreshev"[10] and *Playboy* story "The Bitter Truth"[11] which emphasize tradition and adherence to social norms in the expression of that sexuality.

[5] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Taibele and Her Demon," in *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer,* ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Farrar, Straus, Grioux, 1982), 131-139.
[6] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Riddle," *Playboy*, January 1967, 164-166, 253-254.
[7] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Short Friday," in *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer,* ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 188-197.
[8] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," in *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 149-169.
[9] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "A Party in Miami Beach," *Playboy*, January 1978, 146-148, 200-204.
[10] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Destruction of Kreshev," in *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 94-130.
[11] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Bitter Truth," *Playboy*, April 1988, 65-66, 138.

Supernatural Femininity

In the folktale, "The Unseen" Singer utilizes comparisons with Lilith to argue that traditional gender roles are key to living a pious, fulfilling life. Singer focuses on women that subvert their given role claiming that they are sinful and dangerous. Nathan and Rosie are presented as a childless, rich couple that although pious, had become fat and lazy.[12] Following the death of their servant, the Evil One sends Shifra Zirel to the couple. Shifra is demanding, but efficient. Many people of the town criticized Shifra as her assertiveness was interpreted as "acting like the wife, not the servant."[13] This communal criticism of Shifra points to importance of segregated roles within a household. Not only is a gender binary enforced, since it is the woman of the household who is expected to attend to domestic matters, but strict class roles within the gender binary. As wife, it should be Rosie who instructs Shifra and plans and coordinates meals, cleaning, and other household issues. Shifra subverts her role as obedient servant when she asks to hire an assistant and eventually taking over the organizing that would ordinarily be Rosie's responsibility.

One day, while Rosie is visiting her sick sister, Shifra enters Nathan's bath and flogged, rubbed soap onto, and tickle Nathan thus arousing his desires.[14] Here, again Shifra subverts her role as a woman by taking an active part in initiating an erotic encounter with Nathan. This is further enforced, as Shifra began without the explicit consent of Nathan. Within rabbinic Judaism, consent or the absence of a "no" on the part of the passive (female) partner is necessary in order to engage in sexual acts.[15] However, here Shifra initiates the act, and Nathan gives

[12] Singer, "The Unseen," 57-58.
[13] Ibid, 61.
[14] Ibid, 62-63.
[15] Judith Hauptman, "Rape and Seduction," in *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 78.

consent by not saying "no" effectively taking the passive (female) role in an erotic encounter. This is enforced when Nathan is visited by Lilith, Adam's first wife, in the night.[16] Lilith, the Queen of Demons, was exiled from the Garden of Eden because she requested to "turn the table"[17] during sex.[18] Just as Lilith subverted her role as the receiving partner, and woman, during sex, so does Shifra subvert her role by initiating the erotic encounter. This parallel clarifies the portrayal of Shifra, or of women who take a dominant role during erotic encounters, as sinful and likely to bring evil and chaos with them. Shifra fulfills this result when she convinces Nathan to leave Rosie and then abandons Nathan, taking all of his possessions with her.[19] By connecting Shifra to Lilith, Singer emphasizes the stringent gender roles during sex while condemning any woman who attempts to break down these roles.

Similarly, in the 1974 *Playboy* story "A Tale of Two Sisters" Singer connects the two sisters, Dora and Ytta, to witches, characterizing these women as evil, however this is done within the gender role binary. "A Tale of Two Sisters" is the story of Leon Bardeles during World War II. While travelling through Poland, Leon meets Dora "who literally bewitched [him] on the spot."[20] Immediately, Singer portrays Dora within the *femme fatale* archetype as "such delicate creatures [as Dora] usually didn't survive the war."[21] Leon is immediately taken by Dora as a result of her beauty. This trope of a beautiful sorceress, who entices men in order to eventually betray them is found within Jewish tradition. For example, when the beautiful Delilah

[16] Singer, "The Unseen," 63.
[17] "Turn the table" is a euphemism for any sex position in which the woman is on top or could also refer to anal sex. Daniel Boyarin, "Engendering Desire," in *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 118.
[18] Joseph Dan, "Samael, Lilith, and the Concept of Evil in Early Kabbalah," in *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, ed. Lawrence Fine (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 20.
[19] Singer, "The Unseen," 69.
[20] Singer, "A Tale of Two Sisters," 110-112.
[21] Ibid, 112.

betrays Samson by shaving his head (the source of his strength) and handing him over to the Philistines.[22] Describing Dora as a witch foreshadows Leon's downfall. Leon joins Dora to return to Russia in order to find her mentally ill sister Ytta.[23] Throughout their journey, Leon identified Dora as "a pure virgin" and "a passionate woman."[24] This description suggests something hidden within Dora, which allows her to lure and seduce men. If she appears pure and pious, then she can trick men with her passion. Furthermore, Dora is described as being fairly book-smart,[25] a trait expected of men within Jewish gender roles,[26] thereby Singer establishes that Dora does not have a sense of the proper boundaries between genders. The portrayal of Dora as being like a man in reference to her intelligence and like a witch in reference to her physical attributes, not only indicates a Dora's queer nature, but also as a dangerous combination. Thus, again Singer emphasizes the binary of traditional Jewish gender roles and condemns any subversion taken on by a woman.

In both "The Unseen" and "A Tale of Two Sisters" Singer emphasizes the importance of the gender roles found in Jewish tradition by incorporating imagery of Lilith, witches, and *femme fatale*. While these associations do indicate a negative inclination towards women who subvert their traditional role, the key factor in measuring this disapproval is *halakhah* and tradition. It is within the canonized, rabbinic texts that Judaism's stringent gender roles are enumerated.[27] Singer himself holds tradition as one of the highest markers of a person's character and authenticity. Singer tells Richard Burgin in an interview that without one's roots, one's tradition,

[22] Judges 16:4-22.
[23] Singer, "A Tale of Two Sisters," 112.
[24] Ibid, 112.
[25] Ibid, 112.
[26] Michael L. Satlow, "'Try to Be a Man': The Rabbinic Construction of Masculinity," *The Harvard Theological Review* 89, no. 1 (January 1996): 20.
[27] Ibid 27-28.

a person is incapable of contributing meaningfully in society.[28] Singer thus expresses a universal struggle to conserve tradition, whether that be Jewish, American, etc. By abandoning gender roles, Shifra and Dora each abandon their Jewish roots and their feminine roots. They compromise their designated role, regardless of what tradition or their society says. Singer portrays Shifra and Dora, and those like them, as connected with the evils of the world, such as "the Evil One," Lilith," and witches, because they have willfully betrayed their tradition and roots. With "The Unseen" and "A Tale of Two Sisters," Singer advocates for the importance of maintaining stringent gender roles.

Being Barren and Taking Responsibility

In his folktale "Taibele and Her Demon," Singer portrays an extramarital relationship positively, focusing on its necessity as both partners are socially barren outsiders within their village. The story begins with the breakdown of the marriage of Chaim Nossen and Taibele. Chaim and Taibele are childless since all of their children died as infants. Due to this strain on their marriage, Chaim begins to isolate himself, eventually abandoning Taibele. Without divorce papers or official record of Chaim's death, Taibele is rendered a "grass widow" or *agunah*, meaning she is still *halakhically* married to her absent husband and cannot remarry.[29] With this in mind, Singer begins to build a sympathetic case for Taibele. Without family, or the possibility of one in the future, Taibele is isolated from her community. While Taibele's friends will come visit her at night, they are married with children and must attend to household needs during the day.[30] Taibele is portrayed as an outsider within her village. Her partner, Alchonon, is a widower

[28] Isaac Bashevis Singer and Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Isaac Bashevis Singer* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985), 63.
[29] Singer, "Taibele and Her Demon," 131-132.
[30] Ibid, 132.

and an aspiring wedding jester but has been relegated to be a teacher's helper. However, due to his "cunning, goatish tricks," many parents refuse to trust their children with him, [31] and thus he is impoverished and ostracized from the community. Through their poverty and relationship status, Singer builds sympathy for these two characters. One night, Alchonon overhears Taibele tell her friends the story of a demon who visits a Jewish woman, "ravishe[s] her," and eventually live together as if they are married. Upon hearing this story, Alchonon decides to recreate it, and that night he breaks into Taibele's house, and claims that he is the demon of the story. Alchonon, posing as Hurmizah, the demon, then coerces Taibele into having sex with him and eventually Taibele falls for Hurmizah. [32] Their sexual relationship results in a romantic relationship that brings happiness to each party. Their relationship is legitimated because of Taibele's "social barrenness"[33] and isolation creates a need for a partnership. Fulfilling this need for intimacy, as Singer presents the relationship, takes precedence over the *halakhic* prohibition of extramarital affairs.

In contrast to the sympathy for Taibele and Alchonon, in the *Playboy* story "The Riddle," no remorse is felt Oyzer-Dovidl but understanding is granted to his wife Nechele. Like Taibele and Achonon, Ozyer-Dovidl and Nechele are barren. "The Riddle" takes place on Yom Kippur Eve; however, this is not visible in their house. Throughout the day, Nechele cleans her clothes rather than preparing the pre-fast feast. Meanwhile, Oyzer-Dovidl performs the rituals of Yom Kippur Eve, attending synagogue, flogging, and giving to the poor but, his thoughts reveal that

[31] Ibid, 132.
[32] Ibid, 132-136.
[33] "Social Barrenness" is a term defined by Janice Pearl Ewurama De-Whyte as a woman who can biologically have kids but due to circumstances (widowhood, estrangement, etc.) are unable to do so. As a result of her "barrenness" a woman can be considered less than complete or a disgrace.
Janice Pearl Ewurama De-Whyte, "Wom(b)an: An Introduction," in *Wom(b)an: A Cultural-Narrative Rereading of the Hebrew Bible Barrenness Narratives*, ed. Alice Bach (Boston: Brill, 2018), 2-4.

these rituals are performative.[34] Throughout the day Oyzer-Dovidl thinks about sex with Nechele, as well as the beauty of the women in his village.[35] Oyzer-Dovidl recognizes that he should not feel lustful towards these women, but insists that he has been cursed either because of or resulting in Nechele's barrenness. His all-consuming lust, according to Oyzer-Dovidl, is a part of this curse. Oyzer-Dovidl removes any sort of responsibility from himself and continues to fantasize about the women of town. Instead, Oyzer-Dovidl places the blame on his barren wife, who is clearly unhappy in their marriage. Nechele expresses this discontent in her refusal to participate in Yom Kippur ritual and her having stopped shaving her head in the months before.[36] By removing the blame from himself and continuing his habits so aggressively, Oyzer-Dovidl is exempted from any empathy or sympathy. Oyzer-Dovidl refuses to accept that he has a problem and fails to try to break his habits. When Oyzer-Dovidl is told that Nechele has run away with the pig butcher's son,[37] there is no sympathy for him, and no judgement placed on Nechele. This is a situation that he put himself in and the reader understands that no one else can be blamed.

While both stories revolve around the barrenness of a character or couple, the way in which each character places responsibility for their barrenness and their sexuality is how Singer builds two different messages regarding sexuality. When her impediment to childbirth was solely biological, Taibele neither punished herself nor her husband. Instead Taibele continued to run her shop and tend to her household duties. When her husband abandons her, she does not blame her misfortune on a curse, she simply continues working and taking care of herself. [38] Because Taibele does not place the blame for her misfortune on anyone else, even when she is facing the

[34] Singer, "The Riddle," 164-166.
[35] Ibid, 166, 254.
[36] Ibid, 164.
[37] Ibid, 254.
[38] Singer, "Taibele and Her Demon," 131.

consequences of being childless, the audience can feel sympathy for her and understand the necessity of her relationship with Hurmizah. If published in *Playboy*, this message would not have been understood so clearly. The issue of the *agunah* while not exclusively Jewish, is not so prevalent in secular American society. This societal difference would diminish the impact of Taibele's status drawing attention instead to the trickery committed by Alchonon. Focusing on Alchonon's mischievousness reverses the approval of Taibele and Hurmizah's relationship because the lack of informed consent. Oyzer-Dovidl blames his childlessness on a curse, while never working to stop admiring after the women of the village. Even more, he then accuses Nechele of being crazy and the potential source of this curse.[39] This is a narrative that works for a secular audience because American society as a whole values responsibility for one's actions. It is Oyzer-Dovidl's misplacement of responsibility that condemns him while tolerating Nechele's affair. This difference between Oyzer-Dovidl and Taibele is the key to the varying message on extramarital sexuality. Singer illuminates the importance of responsibility, suggesting that no matter your misfortune one must take responsibility for one's actions.

Phallocentric Masculinity

Singer also manipulates the barren women motif in Jewish tradition with the commandment of procreation incumbent upon men, integrating sterile men and articulating phallocentric fears that are illustrated in Freud's theory of castration anxiety. "Short Friday" is a folktale about an older couple, Shmul-Leibele and Shoshe, who live life together piously although childless. Singer states in the beginning that it is known that Shmul-Leibele is sterile, just as his brother is.[40] This stands out within a tradition that assumes the woman to be

[39] Singer, "The Riddle," 253.
[40] Singer, "Short Friday," 188-189.

"defective" if barren.[41] Singer also emphasizes that despite their childness they still hold a deep love for each other and are permitted, if not encouraged, to continue to act as if they could procreate, that is have sex. The night of Shabbat, Shmul-Leibele and Shoshe begin to have sex when Shoshe interrupts them out of guilt.[42] Despite knowing that she is not to blame for her barrenness, she still feels the guilt perpetuated in the Jewish narrative.[43] However, Shmul-Leibele comforts Shoshe and when she is calm, they continue. Singer than employs erotic language infused with their notable love for each other,

> He knew the law, one dared not surrender to lust for pleasure. But somewhere in a sacred book he had read that it was permissible to kiss and embrace a wife to whom one had been wed according to the laws of Moses and Israel, and he now caressed her face, her throat and her breasts.[44]

Not only does this quote describe the passion expressed by Shmul-Leibele, it also emphasizes the permissibility for this barren couple to make love engage in foreplay. By inciting this text, which was probably the *Iggeret Ha-Kodesh* as it is cited within popular representations of traditional Judaism,[45] Singer articulates that the erotic acts between Shmul-Leibele and Shoshe are permissible because they are married "according to the laws of Moses and Israel," despite Shmul-Leibele being unable to fulfill the commandment "be fruitful and multiply."[46] From "Short Friday" Singer advocates for passionate sexual relationships when in the context of a traditional, monogamous, heterosexual Jewish marriage.

Singer also articulates a preference for traditional, monogamous Jewish marriages in *Playboy* with "A Tale of Two Sisters." Upon finding Dora's sister, Ytta, Leon and Dora marry

[41] De-Whyte, "Wom(b)an: An Introduction," 12.
[42] Singer, "Short Friday," 194-195.
[43] De-Whyte, "Wom(b)an: An Introduction," 12.
[44] Singer, "The Short Friday," 195.
[45] Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 35a.
[46] Genesis 1:28.

although they live together with Ytta as if it were a polygynous marriage. Leon celebrates this, as he describes himself as being like Jacob who married both Leah and Rachel.[47] This idealization is destroyed when Leon is visited by a ghost and is forced to fight this specter. Leon is ultimately defeated when the ghost "jammed it [Leon's penis] so deep into [him] that it had formed an indentation negative rather than positive."[48] The result of this fight is a play on Freud's castration theory where he suggests that circumcision provides a reason for young boys to hate Jews and for young Jews to face anxiety out of a fear of castration that is triggered by circumcision.[49] Leon faces this fear and in searching for a reason behind this punishment he points to his marriage with Dora and Ytta. Leon expresses a sense of guilt for his marriage which, although similar marriages are included in the *Tanakh*, is prohibited in a *takkanah* from Rabbeinu Gershom ben Judah.[50] Leon's guilt is expressed by contextualizing this event within rumors he had heard about "Arab lands" where "such things happen to men, especially to those who keep harems."[51] Leon thus copes with his guilt and anxiety by condemning his own marriage and leaving the two sisters.[52] This ending expresses Singer's preference for monogamous Jewish marriages, as Leon is clearly punished for his polygyny.

In both his traditional stories and in *Playboy*, Singer articulates a preference for monogamy by using male sterility and castration anxiety but framing each story differently. "Short Friday" is explicit in its approval of erotic actions within the monogamous marriage of Shmul-Leibele and Shoshe, while "A Tale of Two Sisters" serves as a warning against polygyny.

[47] Singer, "A Tale of Two Sisters," 114.
[48] Ibid, 136.
[49] Eliza Slavet, "Circumcision: The Unconscious Root of the Problem," in *Racial Fever: Freud and the Jewish Question*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 115.
[50] "Encyclopedia Judacia: Bigamy & Polygamy," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed July 14, 2019, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/bigamy-and-polygamy.
[51] Singer, "A Tale of Two Sisters," 136.
[52] Ibid, 136, 154.

Both marriages are not fruitful, but one is condemned by playing on fears of castration that has greatly impacted Jewish history, according to Freud.[53] Leon is forced to face both the sinfulness of his marriage and the implications of his refusal to have children with either sister,[54] when his penis is "jammed in" and could prevent, or at least implicate in this moment, an inability to have children. This shakes Leon, as it would many Jewish men, because it is men who are commanded to have children, not women,[55] and thus his negatively indented penis threatens his masculinity and his Jewishness. This presentation contrasts with Shmul-Leibele's sterility in "Short Friday" where both partners express a desire for children. Despite being barren, their sexual relationship is rewarded when ultimately the couple dies and is brought to Heaven.[56] This dichotomy in presentation suggests the awareness Singer had of his two different audiences. "Short Friday" can serve to assure childless Jewish couples, that their marriage is still *kiddushin*, sanctified, to those who may be focused on their inability to fulfill the first commandment of the Torah. "A Tale of Two Sisters" is a cautionary tale regardless of religious affiliation. Within his theory of castration anxiety, Freud suggests that Jewish circumcision also serves as a reminder to gentile men that their penis could potentially be removed.[57] Thus, while having specifically Jewish implications, also serves to warn a secular audience the consequences of polygamy within a context of free love and the sexual revolution that is perpetuated by *Playboy*. Thus, Singer accomplishes expressing the same message to two different audiences through a Freudian fear of castration and its implications on masculinity.

[53] Slavet, "Circumcision," 100.
[54] Singer, "A Tale of Two Sisters," 128, 136.
Notably, Leon admits that he has refused to have children with either sister but also accuses the sisters of being barren themselves.
[55] BT Kiddushin 35a.
[56] Singer, "Short Friday," 197.
[57] Slavet, "Circumcision," 115.

"These are the Ways in Which They are Like a Man"[58]

In the folktale "Yentl The Yeshiva Boy," direct references to Kabbalah and descriptions of body dysphoria are employed to portray Yentl/Anshel as non-binary. Yentl grows up learning Torah and Talmud with her single father. When Yentl's father dies, she decides to leave her hometown and join a yeshiva by presenting as a man named Anshel. The folktale immediately begins with how Yentl fails to meet the requirements of a women as entailed in Mishnah Ketubot 5:5. Yentl does not want to get married and cannot make clothes or cook[59], both of which are requirements of a wife in Judaism.[60] Meanwhile, Anshel does encapsulate the definition of masculinity, self-control via studying Torah and Talmud[61] but, is still not accepted as a "man" due to their physical attributes (lack of beard).[62] Yentl/Anshel feeling such a draw to the texts depicts that something about Yentl/Anshel's personality is masculine in the Jewish sense.

Singer states multiple times that Yentl has "the soul of a man and the body of a woman" either in a direct statement, conversations between Yentl and their father or Anshel, both spoken and in their thoughts, and Avigdor, or through Yentl/Anshel's dreams and actions.[63] By enhancing this gap between soul and body Singer builds a sense of sympathy for Yentl/Anshel. As an audience, it is understood that Yentl has no control over their desires due to events that took place within the divine. These events are enumerated in the Kabbalistic idea of how souls are distributed and that when there is sin on Earth, the *Shekhinah* either does not split the soul evenly or places the soul in a body whose sex does not correspond with the souls gender.[64] The

[58] Mishnah Bikkurim 4.
[59] Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," 149.
[60] Mishnah Ketubot 5:5.
[61] Satlow, "'Try to Be a Man,'" 20.
[62] Singer, "Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy," 164.
[63] Signer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," 149, 153, 154, 155, 160, 165, 166.
[64] Charles Mopsik, "The Masculine Woman," in *Sex of the Soul: The Vicissitudes of Sexual Difference in Kabbalah*, ed. Daniel Abrums (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2005), 43.

repetition of the explanation that their soul does not match their body suggests that something happened to upset the *Shekhinah* that would have caused it to either split the soul unevenly and Yentl/Anshel has a mix of feminine or masculine qualities. While presenting themselves as Anshel, they have a dream in which they are neither a man nor a woman. This is followed by the feelings of body dysphoria that Anshel experiences in which they do not feel like a man nor like a woman.[65] By using a first-person narrative, Yentl/Anshel's struggle of understanding their physical self, of feeling insufficient in the world of both men and women, brings the audience to feel sympathetic to Yentl/Anshel's struggle while understanding the explanation found in Jewish tradition.

In contrast the *Playboy* story "A Party in Miami Beach" presents an argument of sympathy for a gender queer character, but constructs both this character and the argument for sympathy using the more universal memory of the Holocaust. "A Party in Miami Beach" is the introduction of Max Felderbush, an older man who is successful in the United States, as he tries to convince the narrator to ghost-write his memoir. Max tells the story of his time hiding in a cellar with five other men and one woman.[66] By invoking images of the Holocaust, especially hiding in the cellar, appeals to the collective horror of the events of the Holocaust, drawing similarities to Max's time in hiding to Anne Frank and her family in the Annex. This connection pushes the audience to feel sympathetic towards Max and those in hiding with him as he narrates the relationship this group had with one another.

The woman, Hilda, was married *and* had a lover in the cellar (who is later revealed to be Max) *and* "satisfied the others as best she could."[67] This already points to Hilda being like a man

[65] Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," 157.
[66] Singer, "A Party in Miami," 202.
[67] Ibid, 202.

in this polyandrous relationship. While polygyny appears in numerous occasions within the *Tanakh* and is normalized in Jewish tradition, polyandry is not included in the *Tanakh* and is generally understood as prohibited.[68] By being the woman in a polyandrous relationship, Hilda takes a role that is only normalized for men within Jewish tradition. However, unlike Leon in "A Tale of Two Sisters," the case for sympathy under the historical circumstances is so strong that Hilda is excused from punishment and maybe even praised for them (at least by Max). Hilda takes an authoritative role as the only woman in this group. She treats Max and the other men like children,[69] when traditionally it would be the man of a sexual relationship who has that authority over his partner. By maintaining this authority, Hilda takes the role of a man in terms of power dynamics. Hilda can then be understood as a man within this unique relationship and still the audience is compelled to feel sympathy for Hilda's situation in hiding.

Singer builds a case supporting gender queer expressions through sympathy for each character's situation. Sympathy is felt for Yentl/Anshel because of the detailed, personal descriptions of gender dysphoria and the understanding of the spiritual circumstances of Yentl/Anshel's existence that requires a specific Jewish lens. In Hilda's case, there is a sense of sympathy for her situation while actively hiding from Nazis. Hilda's situation resonates with the popular understanding of the Holocaust. This case is more apt for a secular audience as the narrative of hiding in a cellar or attic is a canonized aspect of the collective memory and history of the Holocaust. However, by placing Hilda's gender-queer expressions within the time of the Holocaust it is understood, or expected, that her queerness is a moment rather than an identity

[68] Elliot Dorff, Daniel Nevins, And Avram Reisner, "Rituals and Documents of Marriage and Divorce for Same-Sex Couples," Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, 2012.," 4.

[69] Singer, "A Party in Miami," 204.

and that she will return to womanhood once safe.[70] This makes the queer nature of Hilda's gender more palatable to an audience who cannot understand the Jewish explanation of a gender-queer identity like Yentl/Anshel's. Singer recognizes that without the knowledge of *Kabbalah* the circumstances that Yentl/Anshel faces are not understood by a secular audience, and therefore would not communicate the same message of acceptance for gender-queerness under complicated circumstances. Thus, in applying gender-queer identity, Kabbalah, and gender roles into his stories, Singer understands the different positions needed to communicate this tolerance to a Gentile audience.

Maintaining Monogamy

In the folktale "The Destruction of Kreshev" Singer includes a queer, non-monogamous couple and invokes *halakhah* and tradition to portray the destructive nature that Singer argues non-monogamy can have. "The Destruction of Kreshev" is about Lise, an educated and pious, girl and her new marriage to Shloimele, an unsightly scholar. Shloimele continually asks about the possibility of Lise sleeping with someone else and after meeting Mendel, the family's servant, convinces Lise to sleep with him. When Lise does, Shloimele takes pleasure in hearing the descriptions of Lise and Mendel's lovemaking. The following summer Kreshev is hit with a plague of locusts,[71] an allusion to the plagues of the Exodus[72] and communicates that Shloimele, Lise, and Mendel's unusual relationship would not just harm themselves, but the whole town. This theme is not new in Jewish tradition as in Leviticus 18 there is a connection made between the sexual sins of a few and the entire community being "spewed" from the land.[73] Singer uses

[70] Which is ultimately what she does, when Hilda remarries following the war.
Singer, "A Party in Miami," 204.
[71] Singer, "The Destruction of Kreshev," 97-98, 119.
[72] Exodus 10:14.
[73] Leviticus 18.

the concept that sexual sin and impurity is connected to the land and the wellbeing of the people to explicate the severity of non-monogamy.

When Lise eventually falls in love with Mendel, Shloimele confesses to the town. For their sins, all three would be publicly humiliated, Lise and Shloimele would divorce, and Lise would not be permitted to Mendel. Despite Mendel taking an equal part in the act of adultery and Shloimele instigating and facilitating the relationship, Lise is treated the worst. Lise was tortured, dressed as a witch, and while being humiliated, the town played the wedding march.[74] This suggests that despite the reality of the situation, the communal and societal norm is to place blame for a sexual sin onto the woman. This is enforced by the Burial Society dressing her as a witch because witches have historically served as scapegoats for natural disasters (the locusts) and accused of luring innocent men with their sexuality.[75] However, Singer recognizes the injustice of this, acknowledging the cruelty that Lise faced, compared to the others. In describing Lise's punishment Singer explains that "the ladies of the Burial Society had toiled with diligence to cause the daughter of a noble and wealth home to suffer with the highest degree of shame and degradation." [76] This acknowledgement of the injustice indicates that Singer does not feel this cruelty is warranted in this case, but that the reality of society is to blame the privileged woman more than any other involved party.

A different sort of queer couple is presented in the *Playboy* story "The Bitter Truth," the marriage of a tailor's assistant, Shmerl, and a former prostitute, Ruchele. Shmerl and Ruchele's marriage while non-normative in Jewish tradition, is presented positively as both find comfort in

[74] Singer, "The Destruction of Kreshev," 125-126.
[75] Selma R. Williams and Pamela Williams Adelman, *Riding the Nightmare: Women & Witchcraft from the Old World to Colonial Salem* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1978), 11, 17.
[76] Singer, "The Destruction of Kreshev," 125-126.

one another. Shmerl had previously expressed disgust from shameless prostitutes, but he did not know that Ruchele was "one of the most sought after harlots" in the brothel.[77] The audience is informed about Ruchele's previous life from the narration of Zeinvel, an old friend of Shmerl's from the tailor shop, who often frequents brothels. Despite feeling anxiety about this relationship, Zeinvel decides not to say anything upon hearing of how happy Shmerl is. [78] Allowing the couple to live happily married suggests that Singer intends to convey acceptance of non-normative relationships if the partners are happy.

Unlike "The Destruction of Kreshev," there are no divine or concrete repercussions for the marriage of Shmerl and Ruchele, pointing toward a preference of monogamy. According to Singer, if we compare these two stories, only non-monogamy will negatively affect one's community. If one were to exist in a monogamous although unconventional marriage, it is acceptable to the divine will. While Shmerl and Ruchele are living together as man and wife no one is actively breaking with tradition and thus there would not be a risk of being "spewed from the land."[79] It is the risk of broader consequences outside of the non-normative relationships that causes the condemnation of Lise, Shloimele, and Mendel. The community of Kreshev is motivated by a fear of being removed from the land, a fear relevant to the Jews of Eastern Europe at this time. Here we see how tradition has to be maintained where it concerns the community, in order to avoid instability and danger.

Conclusion

[77] Singer, "The Bitter Truth," 66.
[78] Ibid, 138.
[79] Lev. 18.

Singer uses Jewish elements such as Jewish mythical entities, the barren women motif, Freud's theory of castration anxiety, *kabbalah*, and rabbinic gender norms throughout his works. This gives both his folktales and *Playboy* stories their Jewish character. Additionally, he uses these elements to discuss themes of responsibility, conservation of tradition, and sympathy. These themes are universal. The fact that Singer focused on such universal themes allowed him to publish what are essentially Yiddish folktales into *Playboy*, which caters to a secular audience. Singer was a strong contributor to Jewish culture through his folktales, which brought a sense of the old world of Ashkenazi Jewry to a society grappling with the tragedy of Russian pogroms and the Holocaust. His greatest contribution though, is dispersing this culture to the non-Jewish audience. Singer was an ardent anti-assimilationist and he describes the assimilated Jew as one who hides his Jewishness because he is ashamed.[80] In presenting his work to the general public, Singer poses himself as the antithesis to the assimilated Jew. His *Playboy* stories are nearly indistinguishable from his folktales, and he makes no attempt to hide his Jewish roots even in a context as surprising as *Playboy*.

[80] Singer and Burgin, *Conversations with Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 63.

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