THE MAGICIAN OF LUBLIN

by Isaac Bashevis Singer

AUTHOR’S BIO

Isaac Bashevis Singer immigrated to the United States in 1935, which was the year of his first novel *Satan in Goray*. Since then, he wrote in Yiddish more or less exclusively about the Jewish world of pre-war Poland, or more exactly, about the Hasidic world of pre-war Poland, into which he was born, the son of a rabbi, in 1904.


In 1978, Singer received the Nobel Prize in Literature. The citation praised him for his art in narrative and noted that although the background of his works was the Polish-Jewish tradition, they revealed the human condition, which transcends cultural barriers. In his acceptance speech, Singer commented on the values that he had learned from the humble people whom he had known in childhood, who spoke in a vanishing tongue, the language of a people in exile.

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Magician of Lublin  Written in 1958, serialized in 1959, and published in English in 1960, The Magician of Lublin also deals with human passions, but it is not overcast with the gloom of past events. It reflects an expansiveness often missing in Singer’s works. Its focus is not on the Jewish community itself but on the individual in a timeless context. Singer’s magician-protagonist is well cast. On a literal level, he is representative of the artist. On a symbolic level, every person may be seen as a magician, living life, like Yasha Mazur, the novel’s protagonist, “as if walking the tightrope merely inches from disaster.” The variegated personality of the hero, “religious and heretical, good and evil, false and sincere,” and the lack of dates in the work lend themselves to a symbolic interpretation. Singer focuses on the single individual and the choices he or she makes. In Satan in Goray, historical events negate options. In The Magician of Lublin, Singer removes the encumbrances of history and allows his hero to make conscious decisions that determine the progress of his life.

Yasha Mazur is a complex person, vital, exuberant, intense — above all, a man with a personal destiny. Unlike Jacob, the protagonist of The Slave, for example, who is a good person, motivated to do right no matter what the circumstances are, Yasha has an intricate personality. It engages him constantly in a struggle of opposing forces. In Satan in Goray, the opposing forces are presented as two distinct elements within the community. The triumph of one necessitates the removal of the other. When evil was victorious, Rabbi Benish Ashkenazi had to leave Goray. In The Magician of Lublin, however, these forces exist within the individual, enduring aspects of human nature. Yasha Mazur’s entire life is a battle. He can never conquer the evil drive. He can only negotiate with it, appease it, or in some other way deal with it, so that it remains dormant. He never knows, however, when it will awaken to begin another round.

Yasha Mazur was reared in a pious Jewish home, studied the Talmud until his father died — his mother died when he was seven — and then joined the circus. He maintains a home in Lublin with his wife, Esther, but roams the Polish countryside as a “circus performer and hypnotist.” As an artist or magician, he moves in various worlds, assumes various guises or personalities, and has a different mistress in each world. He aspires to higher things: He is a successful artist and would like to perform in Warsaw, in the summer theater of the prestigious Saxony Gardens. He is barred from doing so because he is Jewish. The closest he comes to achieving this goal is at the apartment of the middle-class Gentile Emilia, located on a street opposite the Saxony Gardens. Yasha’s relationship with Emilia focuses the tensions of the work. He thinks he is in love with her, but she refuses the role of mistress. She wants to be his wife. To marry her, Yasha would have to divorce Esther, convert to Christianity, and procure great wealth to maintain the facade he has established in his courting of Emilia. These are formidable decisions that will determine his future.
Singer establishes the dichotomy of predestination and free will early in the work in the contrasting attitudes toward life represented by Yasha and his wife. Esther is a religious woman, married twenty years to Yasha; they have no children. Her entire life consists of making a home for a husband who returns to it only on holidays. She loves him but regrets, at times, not having married someone more stable. The thought of changing her life, however, never crosses her mind. She is a strong believer in Providence and accepts her fate as a lonely woman.

Yasha, although he says that “everything is fate,” realizes that he shapes his own destiny in all his choices. He is a magician who consorts with thieves, but he refuses to use his powers for evil purposes. He will not become a thief. When he finally attempts it, out of a desperate need to support Emilia, he fails and injures himself. The man who is so agile that he can walk a tightrope to the awe of his audience becomes a shlemiel and bungles a simple act of burglary. Although he is Jewish by birth, he is a nonbeliever — or says he is — by choice. He does not pray, because God does not answer the prayers of his supplicants: his “gifts” are “plagues, famines, poverty, and pogroms.” Nevertheless, to become a Christian for Emilia is a difficult choice for him. He is a libertine, yet he considers the institution of marriage sacred and cannot easily make the decision to break up his home for his new infatuation. He is faced with the dilemma of choosing “between his religion and the cross, between Esther and Emilia, between honesty and crime.” These choices will “seal his destiny.” He finally chooses to remain with his own religion and decides also that traditionalism is more meaningful than assimilationism.

Yasha is aware that life is the most powerful seductress. He returns to his home and builds for himself a doorless brick prison, which frees him from temptation and allows him to meditate on his past actions, yet he discovers that as long as he is alive, he cannot shut out the world. As an artist or a magician, he went out into the world, succumbing to carnal pleasures, drinking, eating, loving unrestrainedly. Having come to the realization that “there must be discipline,” he undergoes the transformation from sinner to saint. As an ascetic, in the confines of his self-imposed banishment, considered by all a “holy man,” the world comes to him. Even his past love writes him a letter. Yasha’s imprisonment has been only partially successful. He has turned his intense feelings in another direction, moving from the sensual to the spiritual. In this work, Singer suggests that people cannot escape their essence: They and their passions are one. The Magician of Lublin presents a positive outlook even though it concludes (as does Singer’s novel Shosha) in a dark cell or room.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Many of Isaac Bashevis Singer’s novels and short stories have been classified as tragicomedies. How does The Magician of Lublin blend the elements of comedy and those of tragedy?

2. Describe Yasha’s character. Do you think that the loss of a sense of community was a major obstacle to his happiness? How is the theme of alienation reflected in this book?

3. Yasha was not a traditional Jew, describe his religious beliefs. Some of Singer’s characters who say they no longer believe in God often feel guilty. Why?

4. In your opinion, why did the Holocaust cause many Jews to lose their faith?

5. What is the role of magic in this book?

6. It’s possible to see a kind of spiritual autobiography in the story of Yasha’s plight: Singer himself wrestled with the pleasures and perils of sexual liberation, and he married four times. Singer’s compassion for Yasha is evident: What is a man to do with his own, sadly limited will? Can a good artist be a good person, and if not, should he still try?

7. How should anyone go about designing and enacting a useful, happy life? Should Yasha leave his wife? Should he be happy with what he has and force himself to surrender his destructive, delightful, maddening sexual freedom? Is freedom a curse or a blessing?

8. What does Singer see as the major problems in male-female relationships? What are the problems in marriage? What is a man’s obligation to the people he loves?

9. What did your learn from this book that you did not know before?