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Isaac Bashevis Singer

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Introduction

Isaac Bashevis Singer (b. 1904 [or 1902; both dates can be found in various biographical entries]–d. 1991) was a Yiddish novelist, short-story writer, journalist, and critic born in Poland, who after his immigration to the United States became famous due to English translations of his works. He was born Yitskhok Zinger but used the pen name Bashevis, derived from his mother's name, to sign his works in Yiddish in order to distinguish himself from his older brother, Israel Joshua Singer (b. 1893–d. 1944), who was already an acknowledged writer in the 1920s when Bashevis made his debut. He adopted the name under which he is now widely known in the 1950s, when he started his career in English. His first novel, *Satan in Goray* (Yid. *Der sotn in Goray*), was serialized in 1933 in Warsaw in the *Globus* magazine and appeared in book form in Warsaw in 1935 (first English edition in 1955), the year in which Bashevis immigrated to the United States, where for most of his life he contributed his fiction and nonfiction to *Forverts*, New York's main Yiddish daily. He also used the pen names Yitskhok Warshavsky and D. Segal. Among his most important novels are *The Family Moskat* (1950; *Di familye Mushkat*, 1950), *The Magician of Lublin* (1971; *Der kuntsnmakher fun Lublin*, 1979), *The Manor* (1967), and *The Estate* (1969)—serialized in *Forverts* in 1953–1955 as *Der hoyf*. His collections of stories include *Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories* (1957; *Gimpl tam un andere dertseylungen*, 1963) and the autobiographical *In My Father's Court* (1966; *Mayn tatns bes-din-shtub*, 1979; *Mayn tatns bes-din-shtub: Hemsheykhim-zamlung*, 1996). In the mid-1960s he started writing stories for children. Most of his novels and stories take place in Poland in various historical periods, starting with pre-Christian times and ending with the outbreak of World War II, but there are also novels with an American setting; for example, *Enemies: A Love Story* (1966; *Sonim, a geshikhte fun a libe*, 1978), and *Shadows on the Hudson* (*Shotns baym Hodson*, serialized in *Forverts* in 1957), published posthumously in 1998. Singer often used supernatural characters and motifs, and some of his best works are short stories in the form of monologues both by human and demonic narrators. A number of his Yiddish works have never been published in book form and never translated into English. Singer's oeuvre is deeply rooted in the Polish-Jewish past; his favorite settings are Warsaw and *shtetlekh* in the Lublin region. Singer drew from the Yiddish tradition in his own highly individualistic and iconoclastic way, and he was treated as an outsider, especially by those Yiddish writers who were politically engaged on the Left. As a result, he presented two different personas depending on whether he addressed his Yiddish or English readers, and he has been perceived rather critically by Yiddish readers and scholars and enthusiastically by non-Yiddish ones. He is the only Yiddish writer awarded with the Nobel Prize (1978).

General Overviews

Among academic publications on Isaac Bashevis Singer, one can distinguish those in which authors base their research on English versions of his works and offer a reading of his fiction in the context of European literature, American literature, or both, as seen in Alexander 1980, Lee 1987, and Friedman 1988, and those that take into consideration the Yiddish originals and place the writer in the Yiddish tradition, as discussed in Shmeruk 1981. There are also studies by scholars who to a lesser or greater degree make use of the Yiddish originals, but usually they also concentrate on the texts translated into English, assuming that the best of Bashevis's oeuvre was translated and published in English. Schwarz 2012 perceives Singer's oeuvre as a bridge between the Yiddish literature created after the Holocaust and the rise of a new Jewish literary center in North America. Howe 1969, Miron 1992, and Stavans 2004 also place him both as a Jewish American and a Yiddish writer. Qiao 2003 explores Jewishness in Singer's works and his unique and yet ambiguous position in American Jewish literature. Ahlund 1978 is the first scholar who wrote a book study on Singer outside the English-language world.

Ahlund, Knut. *Isaac Bashevis Singer: Hans språk och hans värld.* **Uppsala, Sweden: Brombergs, 1978.**

This book, written by a Swedish literary scholar and member of the Swedish academy who was instrumental in the choice of Singer for the Nobel Prize in 1978, is the first serious study of Singer's work in a language other than English.

Alexander, Edward. *Isaac Bashevis Singer.* **Boston: Twayne, 1980.**

One of the first book monographs on Singer. Readable but limited to the English-language versions of his works. Singer is treated as a Jewish writer, but not a typical Yiddish writer. Slightly dated, and not including works that were published after Singer won the Nobel Prize.

Friedman, Lawrence S. *Understanding Isaac Bashevis Singer.* **Understanding Contemporary American Literature. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988.**

Resembles Alexander 1980, but it covers more novels and stories published in the 1970s (e.g., *The Enemies: A Love Story* and *Shosha*). Due to its implied audience, it is fairly basic in its analyses and suitable for beginners rather than graduate students or scholars. It contains an annotated bibliography.

Howe, Irving. "I. B. Singer." In *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer.* **Edited by Irving Malin, 100–119. New York: New York University Press, 1969.**

A classic essay by one of the first of Singer's critics and editors.

Lee, Grace Farrell. *From Exile to Redemption: The Fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer.* **Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.**

An eloquent study on Singer's spirituality as represented by Jewish mystical motifs. Not always well grounded; sometimes Lee's interpretations are subordinated to a dominant Kabbalistic paradigm, in that she perceives the motif of exile in Singer's works as rooted in the Lurianic Kabbalah.

Miron, Dan. "Passivity and Narration: The Spell of Bashevis Singer." *Judaism* **41.1 (1992): 6–17.**

An erudite, somewhat commemorative essay by a recognized scholar of Yiddish literature, published soon after Singer's death. Discusses the reasons for Singer's popularity both among Jewish and non-Jewish readers, the "spell" that he casts on his readers by his deceptively simple narrative art, and states that his stories will live long literary lives. Does not contain any documentation.

Qiao, Guo Qiang. *The Jewishness of Isaac Bashevis Singer.* **Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2003.**

A Chinese scholar's analysis of Singer's English work, originally written as a doctoral dissertation. The author discusses Singer's works in the context of Judaism, Jewish history, and philosophy, as well as the questions of identity and assimilation. Singer's Jewishness is juxtaposed with that of major American Jewish writers (Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth) in terms of Jewish identity and Jewish historical consciousness.

Schwarz, Jan. "'Nothing but a Bundle of Paper': Isaac Bashevis Singer's Literary Career in America." *Jiddistik Heute = Yiddish Studies Today = Leket: Yidishe Shtudyes Haynt* **(2012): 189–205.**

The author takes a balanced view at Singer's two corpora, Yiddish and English, and states that it is necessary to view the Yiddish and English versions as belonging to one corpus, without a priori privileging the original Yiddish versions. Points at gaps in bibliographical sources and the great number of never-translated works still buried in the Yiddish press.

Shmeruk, Chone. "Bashevis Singer—in Search of His Autobiography." *Jewish Quarterly* **29.4 (1981): 28–36.**

An excellent discussion of Singer's autobiographical fiction from the years 1955 to 1980, characterized by Shmeruk as the "autobiographical obsession." Only some of this fiction was published in English in the form of the three-part autobiography *Love and Exile*.

Stavans, Ilan, ed. *Singer: An Album.* **New York: Library of America, 2004.**

A photographic guide to the life and work of Singer, published on the occasion of his centennial. It traces the writer's career from its beginnings in Poland to the Nobel Prize. It contains a biographical commentary by James Gibbons; short statements by more than a dozen critics, writers, and publishers, including Joyce Carol Oates, Cynthia Ozick, Morris Dickstein, and Robert Giroux; and a roundtable discussion on the achievements of Singer.

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