

becoming an ass; Shakespeare, in this transformation, was indebted perhaps to Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, but especially to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and clearly Kafka appropriated the Ovidian element in his own title. The shape-shifting is obviously comical and metaphoric, a bit like in Kafka's novella, albeit his effect is bitterer. The main difference, then, between Shakespeare and Kafka is that the latter dealt here more with satire. Yet, with both, in terms of sheer comedy, the same apothegm would apply: "What fools these mortals be!" Dickens, too, in his own borrowings from Shakespeare,¹⁶ was well aware of this maxim, reapplying it. But Kafka used it best.¹⁷

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16. See my *Dickens and Shakespeare: A Study in Histrionic Contrasts* (New York: Haskell House, 1965).

17. Hence my title. If Gregor cannot be taken seriously as a bedbug in the technical sense (*Cimex lectularius*), he still is, literally speaking, a bug in bed since he wakes up that way one morning. As with the narrator's finding himself arrested when he awakens in *The Trial*, the initial predicament has a metaphoric meaning which, sociologically speaking, pertains to the plight of the individual caught up in a world he does not fully understand. For the latest, somewhat extensive commentary on the Kafka-Dickens relation, see David Ball's review article of *La Maison d'Àpre-Vent; Récits pour Noël et autres*, trans. Sylvère Monod (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), in *Dickens Studies Newsletter*, 14 (1983), 105-10 (110n).

"GIMPEL THE FOOL": SINGER'S DEBT TO THE ROMANTICS

"Gimpel the Fool" is generally regarded as Isaac Bashevis Singer's greatest fictional masterpiece and for good reason. Its appeal to the reader is personal and immediate. Gimpel, the narrator-protagonist, represents that child-like quality in all of us which is the source of both our humanity and our vulnerability: the need to believe in the people around us and in the credibility of our own experiences. Singer's story is about Gimpel's search for manifest truth, or as Sol Gittleman declares, "for the nature of truth in reality."¹ While Gimpel's quest has obvious precedent in many literatures throughout the world, it has a special debt to the literature of the Romantic period. As I shall suggest, Singer's thematic concerns with disillusionment, the difficulty of belief, and especially with the relation of worldly experience to truth were clarified and shaped by the poetry of the Romantics. Finally, Singer may have incorporated at a focal point in his story the language and events described in Wordsworth's "Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known."

1. *From Shtetle to Suburbia: the Family in Jewish Literary Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 106.

At the heart of "Gimpel the Fool" lie the questions *what is truth* and *how is it to be known*. It is Gimpel's failure to pose these questions that results in his continued deception by the villagers of Frampol. An innocent, Gimpel at first is able to weather their humiliation through his simple faith in God and the Bible. When the townspeople declare, " 'Gimpel, the Czar is coming to Frampol; Gimpel, the moon fell down in Turbeen; Gimpel, little Hodel Furpiece found a treasure behind the bathhouse,' " Gimpel, in his own words, believes "everything" like a "golem," but adds, with the assurance of "the Wisdom of the Fathers," that "everything is possible."² Later, when the villagers confuse him to the point that he doesn't "know the big end from the small," he is sustained by the Biblical injunction that it is " 'better to be a fool all your days than for one hour to be evil' " (p. 5).

Gimpel continues in this way for twenty years, ignorant of his wife Elke's many infidelities. However, her death-bed confession, that none of his six children are really his, forces Gimpel into a spiritual crisis that signals his entry into a state of experience. Gimpel's realization that he has been systematically deceived, that he never really knew the truth, shatters his faith in God and humanity, causing his spiritual collapse into a Blakean condition of experience.

For at the root of Gimpel's desire for revenge on the people of Frampol is a self-concern and self-preoccupation that is his real crime and danger. Alienated from everyone around him, Gimpel self-exiles from the village of his youth, which signifies his loss of innocence. The Voice of Evil, therefore, really evolves from within and represents his own despair: " 'There is no God,' " it says, nor is there a " 'world to come' " (pp. 18-19).

Like Coleridge's ancient mariner, Gimpel's journey is archetypal and may be expiatory for the sin he committed in thought against the Frampol villagers. However, on a deeper level his journey represents a quest for answers to those questions he failed to ask in his youth, epistemological questions which the Romantic poets asked over and over again: what is the nature of truth, and what are its genuine sources. Before Elke's faith-shattering confession, Gimpel, like Blake's chimney-sweepers and black-boys, sustained himself through the power of faith alone. However, in order to transcend this world of treachery and deception Gimpel has to learn that faith must be accompanied by knowledge and understanding, and the acquisition of these latter is the real purpose of his journey-quest as I have suggested. The wisdom finally revealed to Gimpel is divulged at the story's conclusion and, as J. A. Eisenberg states, is Platonic in nature: Gimpel " 'simply *denies* the *ultimate reality* of the world of physical corruption.' "³ In Gimpel's own words, the world is "once removed from the true world" which is "real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception." It is a world where "even Gimpel cannot be deceived" (p. 21).

Surely Singer's imaginative interpretation of empirical reality owes something to the visionary philosophies of the Romantics, who also be-

2. In *Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957), p. 4. All further references are to this text.

3. "Isaac Bashevis Singer: Passionate Primitive or Pious Puritan?" in *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969), p. 55.

lieved truth to reside in a world apart from organic nature. And from the beginning to the end of the Romantic period, each writer proclaimed his commitment to this belief. While Blake, in the *Songs of Experience*, emphatically declared his freedom from the world of concrete fact, that is, from "Generation" and "Mortal Life,"⁴ Keats at the close of the period unambiguously pronounced his faith in the "truth of Imagination" exclusively: "What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth," he says, "whether it existed before or not."⁵ All the Romantics believed that as the mind approached truth its independence from physical nature necessarily increased. Finally, Shelley's declaration in "Adonais" that this world affords only transient visitations of truth or Intellectual Beauty, that we must first pass through death in order to be at one with that which is perfect and unchanging, exactly parallels Gimpel's own metaphysics and his belief in the glory of the afterlife: "The One remains, the many change and pass," Shelley writes, "Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly . . . Die/If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek."⁶

Surely, Singer's imaginative metaphysics were clarified, perhaps shaped, by the epistemological concerns of the Romantics, and Singer's possible indebtedness in his short story to Wordsworth's well known poem "Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known"⁷ substantiates this. Like Singer's work Wordsworth's lyric poignantly illustrates the fallibility of mortal experience and the theme of deception which constitutes "the leitmotif of Gimpel's story."⁸ The narrator's concluding disillusionment in "Strange Fits" corresponds to Gimpel's despair before leaving on his journey, with the falling moon in the former and Elke's confession of her infidelity in the latter representing parallel points.

"Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known" deals with the same problems as "Gimpel the Fool": with disillusionment, the difficulty of belief in this world of imperfection, and with the relation of worldly experience to truth. It also poses the same questions asked by Singer and stated at the outset of this paper: what is truth, and what are its genuine sources. Like Singer, Wordsworth declares that truth lies apart from the world of mortal imperfection, implicitly suggesting that truth can only be apprehended by the imagination. Significantly, one of the focal events narrated in "Gimpel" repeats in detail the journey described in "Strange Fits." Returning home unannounced after having changed his mind about divorcing his wife, Gimpel immediately focuses on the *moon*, the central metaphor for vision in "Strange Fits." "The moon," Gimpel says, "was full" (15), and as in Wordsworth's poem it becomes an emblem of the strength and intensity of

4. See "To Tirzah," in *Blake: Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966).

5. *The Letters of John Keats: 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), I, 184.

6. *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson and G. M. Matthewes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), II, 460-65.

7. *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. DeSelincourt, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944). All references are to this edition.

8. Sanford Pinsker, *The Schlemiel as Metaphor: Studies in the Yiddish and American Jewish Novel* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 69.

Gimpel's love. Despite the fact that the "shutter was closed" when Gimpel arrives home — a condition probably referring to Elke's own condition of experience and self-enclosure — "the moon forced its way through the cracks" (15). Even the increased pounding of Gimpel's heart ("thump! thump!") seems to echo the "quickenning pace" of the speaker's horse in Wordsworth's poem as the narrator draws closer to Lucy. Finally, upon discovering Elke in bed with the apprentice, Gimpel expresses his disillusionment in language almost identical to that of Wordsworth's narrator. While the latter says, "down behind the cottage roof/At once, the bright moon dropped" (23-24), Gimpel declares that "The moon went out all at once" (15).⁹

Singer's indebtedness to Romantic epistemology, but particularly to Wordsworth's "Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known," is clear; nor should this surprise us. Just as Irving Howe says of Singer, that "no other living writer has yielded himself so completely and recklessly . . . to the claims of the human imagination,"¹⁰ so may we say of the Romantics, in no other literary period was man's sense of his own worth so imaginatively conceived and defined. For at the bottom of Singer's conception of life is a firmness of faith and strength of vision that inevitably would find reaffirmation and inspiration in the literature of the Romantic period. Indeed, Romanticism was the last literary epoch in which nearly all its major writers unambiguously upheld the existence of a transcendent reality and of values that are absolute. In fact, Gimpel is a kind of latter-day Romantic hero whose quest for truth has antecedence in "Endymion," "Alastor," and in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," to name just a few. Truly, we must include the Romantic period as one of Singer's primary sources and influences.

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9. Because I use the English translation of Singer's story, his incorporation of Wordsworth's language into the original Yiddish is debatable, for it depends on the literal accuracy of Saul Bellow's translation. However, the real issue of Singer's indebtedness resides more importantly in his exploration of an identical theme through an identical situation. First, both narrators journey toward falsely perceived ideals: two mortal women, their lovers. Second, both questing narrators are disillusioned in identical ways. While Elke's fallen stature results from her discovered infidelity, Lucy's suspected death is more accurately interpreted as a metaphor for her potentially fallen ideality. While Wordsworth never says that Lucy's death is really a moral one, this implication within the poem's context is clear. Finally, both writers use the same metaphor (the moon) to symbolize an ideal perceived by the creative or transcendent imagination.

10. Introduction to *Selected Short Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (New York: Modern Library, 1966), p. vi.

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