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Chapter Author(s): Gershon Shaked

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## THREE KALIKES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MENDELE, AGNON, AND BASHEVIS

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Gershon Shaked

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A full understanding of the unique features of a literary work may depend on the comparison of such features with those in works of similar theme or form. This essay compares narratives of three major Jewish authors who depicted similar oppressed and miserable figures as symbols of the economic and social conditions of their societies: the bilingual writer Mendele Moykher Seforim; the Hebrew Nobel laureate, S. Y. Agnon, who wrote Yiddish stories, poems, and essays in his youth;<sup>1</sup> and the Yiddish Nobel laureate, Isaac Bashevis Singer.<sup>2</sup> The three narratives to be compared are Mendele Moykher Seforim's "Fishke der krume" ("Fishke the Lame"),<sup>3</sup> S. Y. Agnon's "Ovadia ba'al mum" ("Ovadia the Cripple"),<sup>4</sup> and Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Gimpel tam" ("Gimpel the Fool").<sup>5</sup>

The physical dismemberment in each story symbolizes both psychological and social impotence, and the characters are victims of social

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<sup>1</sup> Agnon published Yiddish stories and poems under his original name, Czaczkes, in Buczacz before he emigrated to Israel. See the introduction by Dov Sadan to Shmuel Yoseph Agnon, *Yiddishe verk* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1977), 7–55.

<sup>2</sup> Bashevis also published Hebrew stories (e.g., "Nerot behatser shel nokhrim" [1925]). He translated exotic Hebrew Palestinian stories with an Arab background by Moshe Smilansky in *Araber: folkshtimlikhe geshikhtn* (Warsaw: n.p., 1932).

<sup>3</sup> First written in Yiddish in 1869 and translated and rewritten in Hebrew by the author in 1909 under the title "Sefer haqabtsanim" ("The Book of Beggars").

<sup>4</sup> Published first in the American Hebrew periodical *Miqlat* 5 (44) (1921): 115–21. It was collected in S. Y. Agnon, *Al kapot hamanul* (1922) and in Agnon's collected works (1932).

<sup>5</sup> First published in Yiddish in the periodical *Yiddisher Kempfer* (1945) and in the collection, Isaac Bashevis, *Gimpel tam un andere dertseylungen* (New York: Tsiko, 1963).

repression in Jewish society and of the *condition juive* of the Eastern European *shtetl* in the nineteenth century. The character of Fishke seems to be the prototype for Ovadia and Gimpel. These characters are what Peter L. Hays calls “limping heroes,” emasculated, sterile figures who are literary expressions of the grotesque.<sup>6</sup> Hays likens the limping hero to an impotent helpless cuckold, pathetic and comic at the same time.

Fishke seems to be one of those nonpersons on the margin of society who have a name but no identity. They are components of the social mass repressed by society, but they are also a kind of synecdoche of the society in which they live. There is no possibility of personal choice for this group of social underdogs. The community handles them with indifference because they are not considered human beings. Pauperism in this work is a synecdoche of Jewish homelessness. It is a metaphor of a collective subconscious describing the repressed id in the society’s collective unconscious.

A wedding—the Jewish occasion for joy and restoration—opens the story. Fishke marries a blind beggar woman, because when the match between her and the original groom was canceled by his mother, the community did not want to waste the food:

Aller that work! Oh’ it’d be a terrible thing if the end we’d have naught to show for it. We couldn’t think what to do. So the whiles we are chawin’ the thing over like, the Gimper feller sudden come to mind. By golly! Fishker’s the thing can deliver ever’body outer this quandary. Why, he’ll do as crackerjack as any feller. For what difference it make, long as ther’s a bridegroom. And sure Fishker he won’t mind. Why ever should he for?<sup>7</sup>

Fishke and his “wife” join a group of wandering beggars, but she abandons him for the bastard Feivush, the aggressive leader of the group. A romantic affair develops between Fishke and Beila the hunchback, an abandoned child who was sold to this band of beggars. When she tells him the story of her life, she and Fishke speak in a romantic diction that is dissonant with their station in life:

“God is a Loving Father and He sees and hears everything. Silly! Think for a minute God don’t know about our misery? Oh He know all right.

<sup>6</sup> Peter L. Hays, *The Limping Hero: Grotesques in Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), especially 63ff.

<sup>7</sup> “Fishke the Lame,” trans. Ted Gorelidk and Hillel Halkin, in Dan Miron and Ken Frieden, eds., *S. Y. Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher Seform): Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler* (New York: Schocken, 1996), 71–72.

You bet! Why lookit the moon up there. See it? Well that is God's moon which she look down upon us here' even inside of this house from all wet up to the sky. Why it is a sin to be talking so, silly. . . ." Well she give me such a fiery a look then, and tears were come to her eyes which they sparkle like diamonds in the moonlight. No, I shan't ever forget them eyes of hern, nor that look she give me then, not ever!<sup>8</sup>

For the booksellers, to whom this story is nominally addressed, these sentiments are not appropriate to this class; for them the reality of the lower classes is sex and lust and not spiritual love. Even if love occurs among the destitute, it is not regarded as a reality according to the expectations and social norms of what may be the intellectual lower middle class of the *shtetl* as represented by the booksellers.

Fishke and Beila are victims of the sexual sins of their fathers. Fishke is an orphan and the victim of the *shtetl* community, which serving as his parent has married him to an inappropriate woman. Beila is the victim of her father, who divorced her mother for a younger woman, and the lust of her mother, who abandoned Beila for a lover. The main parallel subject of the novel is the destruction of the personal life of the members of the society through the economic and social practices that characterize this materialistic, down-to-earth community.

The indirect narrating filter, the interplay between *sujet* and *fabula* in the frame story, gives this novel the ambiguous state of mind of a satiric interpretation of a basically melodramatic plot and the ambiguity of the tragicomedy of the destruction of human beings by their biological progenitors and spiritual parents. The mixture of ambiguous fragmentary comic forms with a sentimental social subject conveys the grotesque mood of a social problem that has no solution. Beila still remains the victim of Feivush, the leader of the beggars, who represents the unconscious greed and lust of the fathers. In abandoning their children they take away their identity, and these children, losing their social status, become part of the what Mendele called the infantry or cavalry of paupers.<sup>9</sup> In this symbolic reading sexual lust and material greed distort the life of the younger generation. The children become cripples, sacrificed by their

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 196–97. The translation does not convey the biblical connotations found in the Hebrew version more than in the Yiddish version, which create a much higher register in the discourse of the two lovers.

<sup>9</sup> See Gershon Shaked, "A Groan from a Broken Heart: Mendele Mokher Seforim's 'Fishke the Lame' As a Demand for Responsibility," in S. Rimmon-Kenan, L. Toker, and S. Barzilai, eds., *Rereading Texts/Rethinking Critical Presuppositions: Essays in Honor of H. M. Daleski* (Berlin, Bern, New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 177–96.

biological as well as their social parents represented by the community. The implied author believes that their homeless wandering and mutilation are the consequence of domestic corruption. The rescuing father is Mendele the narrator, who, while he cannot change their social status, can be a witness to the cul-de-sac where the beggars find themselves and tell the audience that they are the real sinners, that it is their fault that all this happened. The story is an indictment of the morals, manners, and norms of the Jewish social entity that is responsible for its own sufferings. The destitute masses of paupers are the alter ego of their society. The gross instinct suggested by Feivush's attempts of rape and robbery symbolizes the unconscious nightmares of their society.

Agnon's story "Ovadia the Cripple"<sup>10</sup> was published approximately twelve years after the Hebrew version of "Fishke the Lame." It tells the story of an errant maidservant, Shayne-Seril, betrothed to Ovadia, a miserable cripple.<sup>11</sup> After a flirtation with the son of her employers, she becomes pregnant from another servant. Meanwhile, Ovadia is hospitalized after having been tormented by a group of young men who break his crutch (a phallic symbol). This is not merely the story of a couple who have been overwhelmed by the hypocrisy of bourgeois society; it goes beyond the exposure of the victims and the victimizers. In the final passage of the story we read:

Ovadia's mouth was open, his tongue like an immovable rock, and the sweets in his hand kept melting and melting. The baby suckled with pleasure at his mother's breast, with a small voice. Ovadia took the candies with his right hand and the crutch with his left. The baby stretched and removed one hand from the teat, and Shayne-Seril's anger was still not appeased. Ovadia feared to give her the candies and bent down and laid them on the infant's palm.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The character of the orphan, the helpless creature without the security of a family, appears quite often in Hebrew and Yiddish literature. Thus, no outside influence for this figure needs to be sought. Nevertheless, Agnon and Bashevis were both probably influenced by the Norwegian neoromantic writer Knut Hamsun, whom Bashevis translated into Yiddish in the late 1920s. Hamsun had an enormous impact on such Second Aliyah writers in Jaffa at the beginning of the century as Agnon, Reuveni, Kimchi, and Arieli-Orloff. Like Ovadia and Gimpel, Minutte, the antihero in Hamsun's novel *Mysterien* (1892) is a victim of cruel maltreatment and abuse at the hands of his society.

<sup>11</sup> Gershon Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 212–17.

<sup>12</sup> S. Y. Agnon, *Al kapot hamanul* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1953), 428.

The reader might have expected that Ovadia would turn on his heels and leave the mother and her child to their sighs. But Ovadia does not. Agnon turns the moral tables: he creates an effect of moral deautomatization that is also an effect of literary deautomatization.<sup>13</sup> The child, according to Agnon's view, need not be ostracized. Although he is not the biological father, Ovadia gives the child the candies, thereby accepting moral responsibility for the child's welfare. In contrast to the bourgeois morality based on genetic rules and regulations, a humanistic ethos is promoted, based on relationships of grace, mercy, and responsibility—all of which contrast with conventional bourgeois values. At the end of the story, a deep power of humanistic responsibility dominates. The hero has overcome the sins of a tempting and enticing bourgeois social environment that seduced his fiancée and the benevolence of the welfare society's hospital that tempted him to escape the hard facts of life. In the end he heroically faces his human responsibilities.

The heroes' weddings in "Fishke the Lame" and in "Gimpel the Fool" are an interesting point of departure as we seek to compare the two stories of physical *kalikes* (cripples) with the story of the mental *kalike*, Gimpel.<sup>14</sup> The idea of "let him be the groom" starts Bashevis's short story, as it is the point of departure of Fishke's bad fortune. The description of Fishke's wedding<sup>15</sup> is paralleled by the description of Gimpel's wedding: "It so happened that there was a dysentery epidemic at the time. The ceremony was held at the cemetery gates, near the little corpse washing hut."<sup>16</sup> The personal life of both characters was determined by

<sup>13</sup> *Deautomatization* is a concept of the Russian formalists, which refers to changing accepted conventions of form that usually create automatic reactions. I use it here also metaphorically to describe a revolutionary response to conventional moral norms.

<sup>14</sup> In his translation of "Gimpel the Fool" into English, Saul Bellow attempts to adjust the text for a non-Jewish or assimilated American Jewish readership. Literal translations of two passages from the Yiddish original read: "She had her hair put up in braids and pinned across her head like a *shikse*," and "That was how it was; they argued me dumb. But then, who really knows how such things are. They said that Jesus never had a father." In the English translation the negative allusions to non-Jews are omitted: "She had her hair put up in braids and pinned across her head," and "That was how it was; they argued me dumb. But then, who really knows how such things are." The change in the target audience brought about a change in the text by omitting references to Jewish-gentile relations as reflected in *shtetl* mentality.

<sup>15</sup> See the pages cited in note 7 above.

<sup>16</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories* (New York: Noonday Press, 1957), 7–8.

the decision of the community to sacrifice to the “gods” the poor and destitute as scapegoats of their society. In the world of high mimetic mode kings and aristocrats are sacrificed; in the world of the ironic anti-heroic mode the victims are the poor, the lame, and the fools.<sup>17</sup>

If there is any real literary source for Gimpel the Fool, it is not the Shakespearean jester, Dostoyevski's Mishkin (*The Idiot*), or the archetype of the holy fool,<sup>18</sup> but the schlemiel of Yiddish literature.<sup>19</sup> The world of Gimpel the orphan has made him the permanent victim of a practical joke. His wedding, like Fishke's, is the climax of the joke. In contrast, Ovadia escapes from the abuses of his society into the open possibilities of the welfare system of the Western world, represented by the hospital. Agnon is very humanistic in his moral judgment: the escape has made Ovadia responsible for the sins of the woman that was supposed to be his future fiancée. “Gimpel the Fool” is based on the conventions of the *Commedia d'ell Arte*. Gimpel is a Pantalone and/or an Arlequino and, in Northrop Frye's nomenclature, Alazon and Bomolochos, the cuckold-husband and the victim of his society. He is the practical joke of his society because he is ready to believe whatever he is told: “When the pranksters and leg-pullers found that I was easy to fool,” he states, “every one of them tried his luck with me.”<sup>20</sup>

The deautomatization of the conventional plot derives from the depiction of the consciousness of the main character. He is one of the first to know that his wife has betrayed him, and the more she cheats the more he accepts the facts of life. He loves her even though he has never consummated their marriage. There are different stages in the discovery of his destiny. He marries her and is told that her son is her younger brother. This child is born four months after the wedding, but Gimpel is ready to believe that the birth was premature—that the child is actually his. After he finds his wife in bed with somebody else, he, like a real comic Alazon or Pantalone, finds it outrageous but does not act. He speaks to the wise man of the clan, the rabbi, who advises him: “You

<sup>17</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

<sup>18</sup> Paul N. Siegel, “Gimpel and the Archetype of the Wise Fool,” in Marcia Allentuck, ed., *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 159–73 (especially 160).

<sup>19</sup> Ruth Wisse writes, “The transplantation of the figure from Europe to America could be symbolized by the story ‘Gimpel the Fool’ written by the Yiddish master Isaac Bashevis Singer.” See Ruth R. Wisse, *The Schlemiel As Modern Hero* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 60.

<sup>20</sup> Bashevis Singer, *Gimpel the Fool*, 4.

must divorce her at once. Let her go, the harlot and her brood of bastards with her."<sup>21</sup>

After a while, the rabbi changes his mind and persuades him to return to his torturing wife and accept the idea that whatever he has seen are hallucinations. At the last stage, he finds his wife in bed with his apprentice and is again comforted by the notion that he had experienced a hallucination. Gimpel is ready to live with the conditions of his marriage for twenty years. Only when his wife Elka confesses on her deathbed that she has cheated him all her life is he ready to be seduced by Satan to take revenge and to punish the society that has made him a comic scapegoat.

Actually, Gimpel's denial of reality can be seen by the reader as a survival technique in a society that has pushed him into the state of the holy cuckold. He has become an ascetic holy comic man who accepts the prostitute as if she were a holy woman, like Jesus marrying Mary Magdalene and consenting to have her continue working in the oldest profession. Gimpel falls in love with the woman he was married to by the community that wanted to get rid of both the naïve village scapegoat and the local prostitute.

Gimpel's wife, Elka, has the daemonic power of the *femme fatale*, a character that appears quite frequently in Bashevis's works.<sup>22</sup> In describing her qualities, Gimpel states, "Pitch and sulfur that's what they were full of, and yet somehow also full of charm. I adored her every word. She gave me bloody wounds.... I thieved because of her and swiped everything I could lay hands on."<sup>23</sup> She responds to his love sadistically: she will not let him sleep with her, and she tortures him physically and spiritually. The more she tortures him the more he loves her and is fascinated

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>22</sup> The relationship between the two resembles the relationship in "The Riddle" between Oyser Dovidl and his wife Nechele, who leaves him with Bolek, the son of the pig butcher. See Isaac Bashevis Singer, *A Friend of Kafka and Other Stories* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1970), 144. Hodke, the daughter of Lipa the rag picker in "The Gentleman from Cracow," is one of those daemonic women like Elka with whom Singer is fascinated: "[Hodke] was in truth Lilith, and the host of the nether world had come to Frampol because of her." See Bashevis Singer, *Gimpel the Fool*, 44. These daemonic women are not only representatives of the vicious aspects of their society but there is something realistic in them as figures from the underclass. Their social status is always a metaphor for their psychological status, and they are from the daemonic underworld of the collective unconscious.

<sup>23</sup> Bashevis Singer, *Gimpel the Fool*, 10.



by her. In his role as the village fool he understands that he is a victim and a cuckold, but he accepts the situation because he is satisfied with their sado-masochistic relationship.

Bashevis ironically portrays Gimpel as having no choice but to like playing his role in this tragicomedy. In contrast, by the end of the story, Agnon presents a humanistic undermining of the irony of Ovadia's situation. Agnon's Ovadia is a victim of cruel torture, but he hates his role as victim and finds in his hospitalization a legitimate psychological escape from that role. Ultimately, Ovadia takes moral responsibility for his psychological and physical inability to hold on and "to take arms against a sea of troubles."

Gimpel's behavior and the behavior of the community do not fit the moral norms of any Jewish community. Bashevis signals what the real norms of this society should be. The rabbi is the mouthpiece and *raisonneur* of the desired norms, declaring:

It is written, better to be a fool all your days than for one hour to be evil. You are not a fool. They are the fools. For he who causes his neighbor to feel shame loses Paradise himself.<sup>24</sup>

Yet even this justification of the fool and the indictment of the community put forth by the rabbi is ironically undermined by the implied author as the rabbi's own daughter joins the ranks of Gimpel's victimizers:

Nevertheless the rabbi's daughter took me in. As I left the rabbinical court she said: "Have you kissed the wall yet." I said. "No, what for?" She answered, "It's the law; you have got to do it after every visit."<sup>25</sup>

The daughter of the rabbi represents the antinorm to which the rabbi refers, and while this distortion of the norm undermines the power of the rabbi in his own house, it remains the dominant norm of the larger society.

It seems to me that, as he did in many of his works, in "Gimpel the Fool" Bashevis created a fictitious Jewish community that engaged in a degree of sinfulness that is not based on historical reality.<sup>26</sup> This approach creates a permanent tension between the irrational and the rational, the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Micha Yosef Berdyczewski depicts in his Hebrew short novels *Under the Thunder*, *Inhabitants of the Street*, and *You Will Build a House* a Sodom-like sinful community. For Berdyczewski the creation of a fictitious sinful community was the best way for the reevaluation of all values (*Umwertung aller Werte*).

instincts and repression. The story attempts to come to terms with the repressions of its readers as it portrays an exotic world that according to convention should have been religiously restricted but is entirely corrupted and perverse. Some of the religious and intellectual leaders even use the holy scriptures for their practical jokes, and the *melamed* (schoolmaster) teaches Gimpel a midrashic lesson that interprets the scriptures according to the distorted norms of this community:

[B]ut when I talked it over next day with the schoolmaster he told me that the very same thing happened to Adam and Eve. "Two they went up to bed, and four they descended. There isn't a woman in the world who is not the granddaughter of Eve," he said.<sup>27</sup>

Parodying Jewish cults and ceremonies is one of the major literary strategies of Bashevis. The manners, morals, and rituals of this society are depicted as false and phony, and those who are naïve are sacrificed on their altars. They are the Isaacs of the cults of their community, and there is no ram to rescue them from their torturers. Like Mendelev and Agnon, Bashevis depicts the *shtetl* community as a sadistic-daemonic social group where sexual debauchery and maltreatment are rampant and many Jews mistreat the naïve victims of their society.<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, the uncorrupted outsider of this community is supposed to be a fool: he is not accepted by the community because his naïveté is the source and subject of social irony and of the ambiguous evaluation of the implied author. On the other hand, the *shtetl* community not only accepts Elka's sexual debauchery, but an unknown number of men participate in her sexual orgies, and when she dies she leaves behind several children with unknown biological fathers.

The end of "Gimpel the Fool" is quite surprising. It seems to change from a social melodrama to a poetic manifesto. The cuckold and scapegoat becomes a *poet dolorosa*. There are even signals that the implied author identifies with Gimpel, when he concludes that "there were really

<sup>27</sup> Bashevis Singer, *Gimpel the Fool*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> This we can even see in some social stories by the neoromantic writer Isaac Leib Peretz. Based on my reading of "Gimpel the Fool," the interpretation by several critics of Gimpel as representing the figure of the Holocaust victim is at least questionable. Edward Alexander, for instance, maintains: "Gimpel never takes the analogy a step further to say that the Jewish people have been far more faithful to their God than He to them, but in the aftermath of the Holocaust there are few Jewish heads through which that thought will not at least momentarily flit when they read this passage." See Edward Alexander, *Isaac Bashevis Singer* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), 144.

no lies."<sup>29</sup> When Gimpel relates the stories he tells others in his wanderings, they remind us of stories composed by Bashevis:

Going from place to place, eating at strange tables, it often happens that I spin yarns—improbable things that could never have happened—about devils, magicians, windmills and the like. The children run after me, calling "Grandfather tell us a story."<sup>30</sup>

The man who tells stories about devils (as Bashevis did in *Satan of Goray*), magicians (as he did in *The Magician of Lublin*), and windmills (the storyteller as Don Quixote) is Bashevis's image of the storyteller. The storyteller, according to Bashevis, has to be the scapegoat and victim of his society and endure the sufferings of the naïve in a world of sexual and social sophistication in order to become somebody who knows that everything is possible and that there is no gap between grotesque fantasy and grotesque reality: "No doubt the world is entirely an imaginary world, but it is only once removed from the true world."<sup>31</sup> From Bashevis's point of view, there is no redemption for human beings in the true world; the only way to survive is to imagine the world as an image (*Vorstellung*), the only way open is to ignore reality and to approach it as hallucination. According to this story, resignation and acceptance of destiny shape the storyteller, the victim of his society who tells the story of his victimization by the magicians and Satans of his community. He, the stepson of mother community, the naïve outcast, may tell the story of his deception and victimization. He, the great sufferer like Oedipus in Colonos, has the holy power of the muses, but he knows very well that he has escaped from the world of reality into the world of fantasy. The only redemption from the tortures of this world is "the Other World":<sup>32</sup> "Whatever may be there, it will be real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception. God be praised: Gimpel cannot be deceived."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Bashevis Singer, *Gimpel the Fool*, 20.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 21

<sup>32</sup> I prefer this reading of the text to the reading of Paul Siegel: "Is Gimpel's foolishness then, really limitless, and is his final assurance that he will attain the world of reality after death either another self-deception or the continuation of an endless deception practiced upon him by malevolent Higher Powers? Will death, instead of blissful certainty, bring him either nothingness or another world of dreams and deception?" See Siegel, "Gimpel and the Archetype of the Wise Fool," 173.

<sup>33</sup> Bashevis Singer, *Gimpel the Fool*, 21.

Mendele's Fishke and Beila are victims of the disruption of social norms in a society in which the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge. The sons and daughters are the sacrificial victims of their parents, who at the last moment are ready to repent (e.g., Beila's father, Alter). Agnon's Ovadia is the victim of a bunch of rascals and of the social order, which establishes the relationship between the employer and his servant. Gimpel is the victim of his own masochistic readiness to be tortured and to survive by believing that there are no limits between fantasy and reality.

One of the main differences between the ways that Agnon and Bashevis portray the social underdog (the fool, the poor man, the mental or physical cripple) is in their approaches to the issue of responsibility. For Bashevis I would call it genetic responsibility: Gimpel is born a fool, and the facts of life neither change him nor change the responsibility of a cruel society represented by the monstrous woman to whom he is married. He is partly redeemed by the power of fantasy he acquires when he closes his eyes to the brutal realities of his life.

All three stories about the limping hero are based on a sterility myth. The three main characters have no children of their own, and none of them, it would appear, ever has sexual relations with his spouse. Mendele's story ends with the separation of the two miserable lovers. The only chance to reverse the chain of events from sterility to fertility would be if Alter, Beila's father, would rescue her from the brutal, impersonal world of the beggars. Ovadia overcomes his own impotence and sterility by acknowledging his illegitimate child as his own, because unconsciously he was responsible for his birth. Gimpel accepts all of Elka's children, even though he knows that they were only hallucinatory offspring and that after twenty years he is in fact as sterile and limping as he was before he married. Nevertheless, Gimpel transforms physical sterility into spiritual fertility. Although he will pass away childless, the children who have heard his stories inherit the products of his imagination. Their attentiveness makes the sterile, limping hero a productive storyteller.



