

Reading Guide for “Little Shoemakers” Isaac Bashevis Singer, 1957

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BACKGROUND

Born in Poland in 1904, Isaac Bashevis Singer immigrated to America in 1935, just a few years before the Nazis invaded Poland. Although he had dedicated himself to a career in writing while in his native country, Singer gained renown for his work only after he settled in the United States. Today his writing is accessible in English (as well as many other languages), but he wrote only in native Jewish language, Yiddish. A path-breaking and highly prolific writer, IB Singer received a Nobel Prize for his expansive literary oeuvre in 1978.

The story “Little Shoemakers” is among many that he wrote about the Jewish culture and society in Eastern Europe into which he was born, and which was catastrophically and brutally destroyed by the Nazis during World War II. The themes of home, loss, migration and rebuilding are all prominently featured.

TERMINOLOGY

- **Abba:** The name of the main character (as well as his ancestor) means “father” in Hebrew
- **Shuster:** The main character’s last name. The word means “shoemaker” in Yiddish.
- **synagogue:** Jewish house of worship
- **Torah:** Jewish sacred text. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible.
- **The Patriarchs:** According to the Torah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were the progenitors of the Jewish people
- **Days of Awe:** This 10-day period begins with the Jewish New Year (**Rosh Hashanah**) and ends with Yom Kippur (also referred to as the **Day of Atonement**). This period is considered a time of introspection and reflection.
- **cheder:** small traditional school where students primarily studied Jewish religious texts
- **challah:** bread prepared for the Sabbath
- **Israel:** Used here, the term “Israel” does not refer to “State of Israel,” but instead to the “People of Israel” (a synonym for “Jews”)

- **phylacteries** - ritual object that contains sacred texts, and is used for prayer. See [here](#)
- **mezzuzah** - ritual object that contains sacred texts, and which is placed on the doorpost of one's home

METAPHORS

Several of the items that are integral to the story's narrative also serve to symbolize some larger ideas. For instance, Abba's "house" can be understood simply as the place where he eats and sleeps. But it also serves as his home, the place where he belongs, the place of his ancestors, the center of his universe. As you read, take note of some of the other objects that serve as metaphors. What do they represent?

- shoes
- the train that takes Gimpel away
- the seven sons
- Abba himself

KEY SECTIONS - pay attention!

There are a few key sections in the story that convey dense meaning. Pay close attention to them:

- The sections in which Abba imagines himself inside the Jews' sacred history as they are told in the stories of the Torah. Identify these parts of the story, and think about what the narrator is working to convey here.
- How does TIME work in the story?
 - How and when is the reader alerted to the passage of time?
 - When is it clear that the narrator is speaking about historical events (that happened during certain identifiable dates), and when does time appear mystically unmoored from any "real" historical chronology.
- Abba's trip from his hometown Frampol to New York is very dramatic. Indeed, the passage is not simply a trek between distant territories, but a metaphor to convey some larger ideas. What might they be? As you think about this question, pay close attention to the imagery Singer uses to describe the trip.