

Example of the evolution of yentl the yeshiva boy essay

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



Isaac Beshavis Singer's short story "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" tells the tale of a young woman in 19th-century Poland who, in her desire to study the Torah, dresses up as a man and calls herself Anshel when she moves to a yeshiva. While there, Yentl wrestles both with her feelings for a fellow student, Avigdor, and the morally gray nature of what she is doing. Singer's tale shows the complexities of gender politics in the typically-conservative Hasidic Jewish society, the nature of religion, and interesting questions of identity through Yentl's journey. The evolution of Yentl as a character is very fascinating, as is her impact on the community - Singer shows a woman whose own distaste for women leads her to separate herself from that identity, though she can never really shake the guilt she feels at her deception.

When we first meet Yentl, she is an extremely independent woman, someone who values her own strength and intelligence. In the world of 19th-century Jewish culture, this is something that is unheard of - the sexes are strictly segregated by Jewish law (referred constantly throughout the story as 'The Law') and societal expectations of gender roles. Men are the ones allowed to study the Torah, while women are merely cooks and cleaners who await arranged marriage to a good Jewish boy. Yentl seems to not want to participate in any of this: "Inside her, a voice repeated over and over: 'No!'" to any of the arranged marriages placed at her feet (p. 149). Yentl had a very strong connection with her father, which cultivated both her love for the study of the Torah and her preference for masculine traits over feminine ones. Singer repeatedly mentions that "Yentl knew she wasn't cut out for a woman's life" and that she has "the soul of a man" (p. 149). In essence,

Yentl rejected Jewish culture, to a great extent; as she preferred the activities of men to the activities of women, it was not just that she did not want to be a woman, but rather a woman given the restrictions of Jewish society. Yentl wanted to do more, and so she chose to escape the confinement women endured by pretending to be a man.

Yentl's transition into a man is fairly simple, as she already "looked like a dark, handsome young man" (p. 149). In order to change her appearance, she cuts off her braids, a very symbolic move made in order to reject womanhood as she understood it. In fact, the changing of her braids to the sidelocks of a Jewish rabbinical student demonstrates her desire to focus on the study of the Torah as opposed to the duties expected of women in Polish society. This emphasis of her faith over gender is one of Yentl's more interesting developments and aspects. She is openly distasteful of the behavior of women and much preferred the intelligent discourse that took place among the learned: "How different their talk was from the jabbering of women" (p. 150). The rabbis in Bechev "could pose ten questions and answer all ten with one proof," much to Yentl's delight, providing an example to follow of the kind of simple intelligence she wished to pick up (p. 151). The central figure in Yentl's evolution and development as a character over the course of the short story is Avigdor, the fellow yeshiva she falls in love with (and whom is clueless about her true identity). At the beginning of her search for a yeshiva, she is fairly shy and doesn't know what to do with herself; she is called "A violet by the wayside" (p. 150). However, with her rescue from a few harassers by Avigdor, she strikes up a friendship that turns into so much more. Avigdor himself is a melancholy figure, a man

plagued by both the rejection of his lady love Hadass and the suicide by hanging of his brother. He is often very curt and quite succinct; he usually answers questions with a strict 'yes' or 'no.' Oddly enough, this is similar to Yentl's previous cry of 'No!' to marriage; in this way, she finds a kindred spirit in Avigdor, and is convinced by him to go to Bechev.

Though Yentl despises the tendencies of women, and works to be a man in order to avoid them, she is still concerned with her appearance and matters of love. Despite her focus on having a manly appearance, Yentl can be vain sometimes as well, particularly when attempting to gauge the interest of Avigdor; after he mentions Hadass' beautiful blond hair, Yentl says "Brunettes can be good-looking too," to which Avigdor curtly responds "No" (p. 151). Still broken up by his rejection by Hadass' family, his melancholy continues: "Well, what of it. I'll become a recluse, that's all" (p. 152).

Avigdor's sullen personality is something that seems to intrigue Yentl - he is world-weary, broken and handsome, and because of her newfound identity as a man she can get closer to him than she ever really could as a woman. The mirroring between Yentl's identity as a man and a woman is played with heavily by Singer. In the beginning, he refers to her as Yentl by name, and uses pronouns like 'she' and 'her.' However, once she starts settling into her newfound identity, Singer refers to her as Anshel, and uses masculine pronouns like 'him' and 'he.' This change in gender for the all-knowing narrator shows the blur between genders that Yentl wrestles with; she truly absorbs herself into the role of man, and it seems to honestly surprise her when her feelings for Avigdor keep cropping up. As the story continues, Singer switches between masculine and feminine pronouns to refer to

Anshel/Yentl to further show this shift she experiences within herself. Often, when dealing with Avigdor, she will be more feminine, as she is dealing with her heterosexual feelings for a man.

One of the recurring themes in the story is the conflict between law and human nature - Yentl's whole gender-swapping scheme is based on the notion that women are not allowed to study the Torah in this fashion, and are restricted by Law to only fulfill certain roles. The overly restrictive society they live in dramatically limits behavior even for men as well, as shown by Hadass' family successfully driving away Avigdor as a suitor because of perceptions about him and his brother's suicide. Even he has notions of bucking these societal norms: " Don't you have evil impulses?" (p. 152). At the same time, Avigdor is lost without Hadass - " I'd marry a she-goat," he says at one point to clarify his resignation to follow societal traditions and marry, even if it is to the undesirable Peshe (p. 154). Both Avigdor and Anshel work to rebel against this rigid system, Anshel through her crossdressing and Avigdor through his scheme to get closer to Hadass through her marriage to Anshel.

There are most certainly homosexual undertones in both Anshel's and Avigdor's relationships; Avigdor wrestles with his feelings for Anshel, who is a man as far as he knows. " Avigdor grew more and more attached to this boy, five years younger than himself, whose beard hadn't even begun to sprout" (p. 153). He will often complain that Anshel is like the male version of his perfect lover, often comparing him/her to Hadass: " Why can't a woman be like a man" (p. 153). At the same time, Anshel herself finds a certain attraction to Hadass, thinking to herself " a pity I'm not a man" once when

seeing her (p. 154). The confusing and fluid nature of their relationship causes them to think very odd thoughts; Avigdor seems open about his complete and utter affection for Anshel despite thinking he is a man. Meanwhile, even Anshel is absorbing herself into the role of a man well enough that she starts harboring feelings for Hadass - whether or not this is indicative of any real lesbian feelings is ambiguous, as they are never really followed up on. While she marries Hadass, she seems to do it as a subtle romantic gesture to Avigdor, as a way to bring him closer to her. It is clear that Anshel admires Avigdor not just for his attractiveness, but for his purity of spirit and their like-mindedness: "There was no one in the yeshiva who could take Avigdor's place. All the others were small, in body and in spirit" (p. 155). To that end, Avigdor fulfills Anshel's spiritual advancement as well as her romantic needs, making him the perfect mate for her.

One of the most interesting dimensions to Yentl/Anshel during her deception is the psychological toll it takes on her. She starts having dreams that exemplify the internal conflict that rages inside her: "In her dream she had been at the same time a man and a woman, wearing both a woman's bodice and a man's fringed garment" (p. 155). Her conflict ties back to the aforementioned theme of the conflict between societal expectations and individual wants; she wants to do what she wants, but that can only happen through a lie. At the same time, she hates the lie she has to tell, and thinks herself sinful for betraying these principles: "Only nobody" (p. 155 M). These ruminations on how her soul is possibly confused plays into Yentl's conflict as a character; is she doing the right thing by following her dreams, or is she just betraying the people who place trust in her? The question

bothers her greatly, but she feels the need to continue: " She knew very well she was getting entangled in evil, but some force kept urging her on" (p. 156). She switches between arrogant loathing of the people she can successfully trick (" The public are fools") and hating herself for actually doing it in the first place (p. 157). Yentl is effectively lying to herself and others, but she feels it is the only way she can survive and thrive in this restrictive society. She is committed to following through with her actions at the same time, no matter how much pain it brings her: " Once you say ' A,' you must say ' B.' Thoughts lead to words, words lead to deeds" (p. 158). Yentl's dedication to her ideals and desires, no matter what questions she has about them along the way, demonstrate her strength as a character and as a woman.

The institution of marriage as a social structure in Polish/Jewish society is shown to be almost hilariously exact in the story, with laws and procedures for every step of the process. While Anshel believes she can just do what she wants because she is, for all intense and purposes, a man - " With girls I can play as I please!" - there are customs that the families involved insist upon (p. 156). Marriage brokers and matchmakers are constantly mentioned as people who must be talked to in order to start the process of courtship, particularly when Anshel announces his interest in Hadass. The intrusion of the Jewish community into a relationship and marriage is made clear when, after the night of marriage, the in-laws sneak into the marriage chamber during the day and check the bedsheets for blood to make sure that the couple has had sexual intercourse. This, in addition to the seven-day wait Singer mentions after the first night of sex, are further evidence of the iron

grip that Jewish society places over people's behavior (which Yentl's crossdressing is a direct resistance to). The intrusiveness of the people of this community is played up for comedic effect when people try to figure out Anshel's secret upon his departure from the town; traditional Jewish communities are obsessed with knowing everything about each other, according to Singer, and Yentl's ability to keep this particular secret is a great feat.

Once Yentl is married to Hadass, she hates herself even more for keeping up the deception; now there is a human price, as Hadass is truly in love with Anshel despite not knowing their true nature. Yentl starts feeling incredibly guilty for this: " She was entangling both Hadass and herself in a chain of deception and committing so many transgressions that she would never be able to do penance" (p. 160). She considers her deception " more the work of an imp than a human being" and concludes that " She had turned into a sprite brought into the world to mock people and trick them" (p. 160). The innocence of Hadass and her simple desire to be married to a man she loved tore Yentl apart inside, making her conflicted between her dedication to the ruse and her compassion for a perfectly nice human being. The good intentions of her actions do not make up for the uneasiness she feels about the deception: " The lie was swelling like an abscess and one of these days it must surely burst" (p. 162).

Anshel's eventual reveal as Yentl to Avigdor is a powerful scene for the character, as she finally decides to entrust the man she loves with her deepest, darkest secret. The question Avigdor asks her, interestingly enough, links her love for Avigdor to her search for greater religion: " How

could you bring yourself to violate the commandment every day: ' A woman shall not wear that which pertaineth to a man'?" (p. 164). By asking this, Avigdor notes that her scheme violates the very religion that she wishes to learn more about; the Torah is the basis for the restrictive Jewish society she so rebelled against. Because of that, Yentl is caught between conflicting wants; she loves Avigdor, but she also loves God and wants to learn more about him. The very religion she wishes to educate herself in is the same one she openly violates by wearing men's clothing, and its followers are the people she is deceiving. It is an answer that is never satisfactorily given by the story, but that is the point: there is no clear answer, and the story simply serves to raise these questions and show the complexities of these issues. The tale of Yentl in " Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" is both a story about the conflict between gender and sexuality and the problems that come with a restrictive Jewish Orthodox society. The irony of her successful ruse in such an intrusive society is stated by Singer: " How can you keep secrets in a little town where everyone knows what's cooking in everyone else's pots?" (p. 167). Yentl is forced to become a man in order to do what she wants and defy the Laws she is forced to endure; even men like Avigdor are punished simply for being melancholy or having bad events happen to them. Yentl's act of resistance both rips her apart for being deceitful and rewards her for exposing her to greater study of the Torah and her relationship with Avigdor. The story itself ends on a very ambiguous note, as Anshel simply divorces Hadass so that Avigdor can marry her, and she leaves without so much as a whisper back to her old life. None of the major conflicts are resolved, except that Avigdor is with the love of his life now. At the same time, Yentl proves successful in not

letting the restrictions of Jewish society determine her behavior – she still does what she wants, even though she feels guilt for having to deceive others to do it. That being said, they would likely have not accepted Yentl as herself performing these actions, and so the ruse was necessary.

Singer writes, “ It is a general rule that when the grain of truth cannot be found, men will swallow great helpings of falsehood”; this seems to be one of the major morals of the story and of Yentl’s journey (p. 169). The deception she goes through allows her to fulfill her dreams, and the other people living in Bechev simply find ways to let the narrative adjust to make events make sense, even if it is not true. As far as they know, Anshel simply did not consummate his marriage with Hadass, they fell apart, and Anshel left. Only Avigdor knows the truth, and this is why he names his son Anshel – to keep that amazing figure he fell in love with alive. Yentl, over the course of the story, turns from resentful woman to successful man to incredible influence on the man she loves, which is about as much influence as one could expect to have in such a restrictive culture.

References

Singer, I. B. (1983). *Yentl the yeshiva boy*. Farrar, Staus and Giroux.