The Magician of Lublin, one of Singer's shorter novels, concerns the events of a brief period in the life of Yasha Mazur, a magician by profession. Hailing from the town of Lublin, Yasha manages to carve a place of importance for himself in the world of entertainment all over Poland, and even draws some attention abroad. He is a master of tricks, hypnotism and mesmerism. He attempts all sorts of difficult stunts, distinguishing himself by achieving the apparently impossible. He even dreams of executing somersaults on the tightrope. But in spite of his manifold achievements, Yasha fails due to his complicated relationship with women. As Irving Malin comments:

The magician is also caught by passion. He cannot stop pursuing women. He loves many at a time because he shuns formal commitment. But at the same time he feels oddly bound to his wife, Esther. Marriage or any lasting relationship - inhibits his freedom. Singer is, as usual, describing the imprisonment of self-love which destroys marriage, but he is perhaps more successful in presenting it here than in his comprehensive novels.¹

The women in the novel are brought together through their relationship with Yasha. They belong to diverse types,
with different social backgrounds ranging from that of the noblewoman Emilia to the vulgar world of Zeftel, a thief's deserted wife. In spite of their totally different outlook on life, Yasha provides their common meeting point. Their awareness of Yasha's shortcomings does not diminish their love for him. Each of them weaves her own dreams around the magician, thinking of a bright future where she can share his glory and fame. Even Halina, who is little more than a child, is no exception.

Esther, Yasha's wife, is presented as a simple and loving woman. Childless even after many years of marriage, she herself is like a child. She is a woman of wide abilities. She can do all that is necessary to run a household, and even more:

Esther grew her own vegetables ... could not conceive. In every other way she was a good wife; she knew how to knit, sew a wedding gown, bake gingerbread and tarts, tear out the pip of a chicken, apply a cupping-glass or leeches, even bleed a patient.  

Esther keeps herself busy in work; managing her small sewing business. Apart from providing her with a steady income, it keeps her occupied and enables her to forget her sorrow. Her youthful and jovial appearance is seen as a facade behind which she hides the void in her heart:

Esther was small and dark, had a youthful face, a straight nose, black eyes in which both joy and sorrow
were reflected. There were even times when those eyes would sparkle mischievously. When she smiled, her upper lip turned up playfully, revealing small teeth, and her checks dimpled. Since she was childless, she associated with the girls rather than with other married women. She employed two seamstresses with whom she was always joking, but it was said that when alone she wept (P.10).

Since Yasha's profession keeps him away from home most of the time, Esther is never at ease about him so far as his relationship with other women is concerned. There is apparently nothing suspicious about Yasha's behaviour, yet Esther cannot be sure of his constancy. She feels that it would have been better to have a husband with a steady job, but at the same time she cannot think of loving anyone but Yasha:

... the smile that she gave him was a mixture of affection and resentment. He could not be watched over like other husbands; he spent more time on the road than at home, met all sorts of women, wandered further than a gipsy ... But her love for Yasha persisted. He was both son and husband to her. Everyday she spent with him was a holiday (P.11).

Lovingly she observes his every move, thinking how different he is from other people, and at the same time how lovable. Since Yasha is the only object of her attention and
affection, she never gets tired of wondering about his activities. Yet, in spite of her close scrutiny. She is unable to understand his multifaceted personality. Deep in her heart she knows that Yasha holds innumerable secrets in himself.

Yasha, on his part, loves his wife dearly. In spite of all his escapades, he always returns to her and resumes the threads of life at home. He never conceals the fact that he is married, and can never really think of deserting his wife for another woman. He has an odd view of marriage. He breaks his marriage vows repeatedly, yet has no desire to break the marriage itself: " ... in some final sense his marriage had remained sacred to him " (P.14).

Although Esther is like a firm anchor holding his lawless life firmly in place, his latest adventure, i.e., his affair with Emilia, threatens to dislodge it. Unlike Magda or Zeftel, Emilia does not remain content with the prospect of becoming Yasha's mistress. She wants him to divorce his wife, convert to Christianity and marry her. She even asks him to leave his country and settle abroad. This puts Yasha into a dilemma where he is unable to choose between Emilia and Esther. Even while Emilia's Slavic appearance and aristocratic way of life attract him, Esther's steadfast devotion makes him painfully conscious of his own treacherous intentions: " Can I leave her? Yasha thought. During all these years she's been my only support. Were it not for her
devotion, I would have long since drifted like a leaf in a windstorm " (P.19). Besides, she is hardworking and a good housekeeper. Whatever prosperity Yasha enjoys is due to her. Yasha finds it strange that in spite of his unconventional style of living and his lack of faith, a respectable girl like Esther had fallen in love with him and had married him. With her patience and steady support she had inspired him to go on improving his art as a magician and to elevate his station in life.

Esther maintains a proper Jewish home like the other housewives around her. In spite of Yash's unorthodox ways, she observes all Jewish festivals and holidays according to traditional laws, and even makes Yasha say the benediction over the wine. Yasha takes time off from his wanderings to be home for the holidays. Sad as Esther's childless status makes her, she finds consolation in her husband:

Esther looked at her husband as he ate. Who was he? Why did she love him? She knew he led a wicked life. She did not reveal all she knew; only God knew how far he had fallen... But she could hold no grudges against him. Everyone vilified him and pitied her, but she preferred him above any man, no matter how exalted - even a rabbi (P.23).

Time and again Yasha asks her hypothetical questions about the future. He talks of possible death or disability to himself, trying to find out Esther's reaction to such
situations. As he cannot talk directly to her about Emilia, Yasha takes the roundabout way of conditioning Esther to the prospect of life without him. All Yasha's bantering draws from Esther the steadfast avowal of her love for him. She would not care to live without him, whatever be the circumstances. Yasha even asks her in jest: "What would happen if I became an ascetic and, to repent, had myself bricked into a cell without a door like that saint in Lithuania? Would you remain true to me? Would you give me food through a slit in the wall? (Pp.24-25). Later on this fanciful banter comes true:

Outside his marriage, Yasha is simultaneously involved with many women, of whom one is a thief's deserted wife, living in Piask, known to all as a thieve's colony. Yet this does not diminish his affection and concern for his wife. At the time of his departure from Lublin, he playfully drives his wife back with a whip because he does not want her to walk back alone so far in the dark. She, on her part, is equally concerned about his safety. Although not in the habit of drinking, for some days after Yasha's departure, she drinks cherry-brandy in order to fight depression and loneliness. She remains moody and irritable, finding fault with the seamstresses very easily. This upsets the usual routine of her household.

Esther takes her religion seriously and is happy to share the religious ceremonies with others. She goes to the
synagogue for prayers during the hol 1days, prayer book in hand. She prepares the customary holiday meal, and in spite of Yasha's scant respect for religious practices, makes him take part in the rituals. She talks in a good natured manner about the gossip in the women's section, without any hint of sarcasm. Esther remains as a benevolent and helpful presence in the background of all Yasha's activities. In spite of his constant search for adventure, even daredevilry, it is her memory that ultimately prevents him from going downhill altogether. And at the end of all his adventures, even after the humiliation he faces in private and in public, it is to her that he returns in sorrow and repentance.

In the Epilogue to the story, which takes place three years after the principal action, the reader's attention is again drawn to Esther now ministering to Yasha in his lonely cell. Esther is presented in her everyday activity of making dresses, this time a wedding gown. She is a diligent worker, going about her business in a methodical manner, supervising the work of her assistants. It is only as we follow her look and her train of thought that we discover Yasha in his penitential cell away from the world where he had once earned so much of admiration and had enjoyed such adventures.

After his abortive attempt at burglary, Yasha finds himself at a dead end, unable to pick up the threads of his old life. While his career as a magician seems to be over due to an injured foot, his dreams of a life with Emilia
also acquire a mirage-like quality. Yasha suddenly finds himself a fugitive from the law. Added to it is his remorse over his personal degradation. This prompts him to seek refuge in a synagogue for some time. Strangely, this experience gives him a great sense of peace. Ultimately he decides to remove himself from worldly temptations by shutting himself in a small, windowless cell. Even if it is in his own garden, he has no contact with his home or domestic affairs except for the brief meetings with his wife. Yasha the magician thus becomes Yasha the penitent, who wants to see, hear, or do no evil. As in his days of prosperity, Esther stands by him as a solid support.

Esther not only earns her own livelihood and supports her husband, but also bears her loneliness bravely. In spite of her initial sorrow and resentment at Yasha's decision to isolate himself and thus leave her a deserted wife, she comes to accept the situation. She brings him food three times a day, and treasures every moment spent in his company. When Yasha suffers from severe cold in winter, she begs him to forsake his prison, and come back home, but her plea is not heeded. In spite of rain and snow, she rises early in the morning to prepare Yasha's food. She is terribly concerned about his dwindling health, yet she does not always complain against his eccentric behaviour. She can also be pleasant at times. She passes on harmless gossip about the workshop and the seamstresses, and tells him about her plans to have the house painted for the approaching
holidays. She brings in visitors and correspondence to Yasha, thus maintaining his slender link with the outside world. All this she goes on doing without grudge or grumble, and with little hope of any reward.

To all appearances, Magda is Yasha's assistant in his profession as a magician, but it is common knowledge that she is Yasha's mistress. She travels with him on his shows and helps him on stage. She can perform some tricks on her own, like turning a somersault, or rolling a barrel with her toes. Magda is neither good looking nor sweet tempered. She is described as swarthy, flatchested, even barely skin and bones, with high cheek bones and pimply skin, for which she had been nicknamed at school as 'the Frog'. She had never enjoyed life at the boarding-school as she had been surly, introspective, and furtive. But inspite of these short comings, the fact that she is unusually agile makes her fit to be a magician's assistant. Novak sees Magda as an example of the grotesque:

His helper is a polish girl, who leaps to life in a few lines through Singer's capacity to create a grotesque character: " She was in her late twenties but appeared younger; audiences thought her no more than eighteen, slight, swarthy, flat-chested, barely skin and bones, it was hard to believe she was Elzbieta's child. Her eyes were grayish green, her nose snub, her lips full and pouting as if ready to be kissed, or like those
of a child about to cry. Her neck was long and thin, her hair ash-colored, the high cheek bones roseola-red. Her skin was pimply; at boarding-school she had been nicknamed the Frog.\textsuperscript{3}

Magda makes no secret of her relationship with her master. On his way to Warsaw Yasha stops at Magda's house so that she can accompany him. He is welcomed warmly by her mother Elzbieta, who thinks of Yasha as a son-in-law. His visit cheers her up because of the gifts he brings her and also because of his pleasant company. She plies him with delicacies and unburdens her heart before him, narrating all her experiences, real and imaginary. Whereas her own son Bolek has no patience for her rambling tales, Yasha always listens patiently, making appropriate responses from time to time. In spite of the neighbours' criticism of her conduct, Elzbieta thinks that Magda's present position is better than sending her to a factory or, worse still, to a brothel. On Yasha's arrival, she looks triumphantly at Magda, but the latter appears hardly interested: "... her daughter, proud as ever, remained impassive, although her mother well knew that she was inwardly delighted. Yasha was both lover and father to the girl. Who else would bother with such a dried-up snip ... ? (P.30). Magda feels ashamed of her mother as she goes on telling her stories late into the night, each time giving a different version of the same incident.

Bolek, Magda's brother, resents the Jew's intrusion into
and intimacy with his family, but is forced to tolerate it because of his own financial needs. Yasha brings him things he can ill afford for himself, as he does not earn much, and drinks a lot and gambles. Thus, he has no choice but to accept the situation although he had earlier sworn revenge. Yasha is aware of his own precarious condition: "Funny, but he, Yasha, lived his whole life as if walking the tightrope, merely inches from disaster, one false move on his part, and Bolek would plunge a knife into his heart" (P.34). Magda, so dull-looking and sour-tempered, becomes completely transformed by her love for Yasha. She grows wildly passionate and starts babbling in rustic Polish, swearing fidelity unto death. This proves to be prophetic. Her relationship with Yasha ends only with her death when, heart broken at his desertion of her, she commits suicide.

Yasha's innate love of adventure leads him into involvement with several women at the same time—women belonging to different strata of society. Thus while dreaming of a settled, respectable life with Emilia as his partner in marriage, he carries on an affair with Zeftel, a thief's deserted wife, who lives in the disreputable locality of Piask. Even among the thieves, Zeftel is regarded as something less than normal:

Zeftel, the deserted wife, lived on a hill behind the slaughter houses. Her husband, Leibush Lekash, had, some time ago, escaped from the yanov prison and his
present whereabouts were unknown .... The couple had been childless. Zeftel, who was not a local girl, came from somewhere on the other side of the Vistula. Usually, the wives of imprisoned thieves conducted themselves honorably, but Zeftel was considered suspect. She wore jewellery even on week days, kept her head uncovered, and cooked on the Sabbath. Any day now her allowance would be cut off (P.37).

She is good-looking as well as cunning and calculating. Even as Yasha is drawn to her, his better judgement tries to deter him from such a reckless adventure:

It was madness. He had a wife. He had Magda, he was wildly infatuated with Emilia what was he looking for on top of this dung-heap? He had repeatedly decided to break off, but whenever he came to Piask he was again drawn to her.

For a man of his skill and reputation, such an alliance is a definite degradation, yet he cannot resist going to her. To avoid recognition, he moves through bylane and back alleys. The risk involved in the adventure adds to its attraction for him.

Yasha's relationship with Zeftel is a mixture of excitement and humiliation. Although Yasha is irresistibly drawn to her, he finds it terribly embarrassing as he is forced to listen to her unrefined conversation. Zeftel is vulgar, self-centered, and deceitful - Even her references to her lost husband reveal her lack of sincerity. She goes
on complaining about her lot, criticizing the very community that supports her. While her weekly allowance is insufficient for herself, her social position is not happy either, since all the women, according to her, are her enemies. Her contact with Yasha makes her more ambitious. She wants to go to Warsaw, to be constantly with him, and to become part of the sophisticated world of the city. She even talks of supplanting Magda as Yasha's assistant. Yasha recognizes all this to be just meaningless chatter as Zeftel is not cut out to be an acrobat. Her conduct even rouses his suspicion as, in spite of her talk of poverty, her house is better maintained than the others in the brotherhood.

Zeftel is a person to whom Yasha can talk without any reservation. He tells her about his love for Emilia and even discloses his future plans regarding her: "He needed to talk to someone. With Zeftel, he felt as uninhibited as with himself. He fearer neither her jealousy nor her wrath" (P.40).

Because of his evident social and intellectual superiority, Yasha feels no inhibition while talking to Zeftel. He can even talk to her crudely, at her own level, without any fear of offending her. Whereas he has not been able to speak to Esther about Emilia, he does not hesitate to discuss with Zeftel all his plans including conversion to Christianity. Zeftel listens patiently, but at the same time tries to win Yasha's sympathy by speaking of her loneliness.
and depression. She talks of leaving Piask and moving to Warsaw to earn her livelihood as a servant. In keeping with her generally unrefined behaviour, Zef tel is indiscreet in the matter of love, while Yasha tries to keep their relationship a secret, in order not to invite criticism, she reveals it and displays the presents she has received from Yasha. For her, acquiring a lover like Yasha is an achievement to boast of.

Sitting among a group of thieves and their wives, Yasha suddenly feels ashamed of his association with them. It seems a terrible downfall from Emilia's exalted company. There is a wide difference between the topics he discusses with Emilia and with the thieves. Yet he cannot give up either of the two. He feels that it is due to his complicated personality: "... that's how he was. There was always another role for him to play. He was a maze of personalities - religious and heretical, good and evil, false and sincere. He could love many women at once" (P.51) He sticks to this role for as long as he can not giving up any of his women. On the road to Warsaw, he resumes his air of easy familiarity with Magda, deriving comfort from her company. Sitting close to her in the wagon, Yasha starts daydreaming, and even sees himself in Europe with Emilia and Halina. Magda, on her part, seems content just to be with him. She humbly accepts his changing moods, and in spite of her knowledge of his other amorous affairs, scarcely offers
any criticism. She tries to treasure their moments of togetherness, not demanding much from Yasha. She has a keen eye for the sights and sounds around them "Magda cuddled next to him, silently. It seemed as if her peasant's eyes saw things a city dweller could not see" (P.53). While riding in the direction of Warsaw with Magda at his side, Yasha's mind is full of thoughts of Emilia, Esther, and his own future course of action. He is torn between his longing for Emilia and loyalty to Esther: "The important thing was to make up his mind about Emilia. Was he truly prepared to forsake Esther and go to Italy with Emilia? Could he treat Esther so cruelly after her many years of devotion and loyalty"? (P.54) Whereas Magda keeps her knowledge of Yasha's affairs to herself, Yasha himself is fond of boasting about them. But being frivolous by nature, he goes on promising eternal love and faithfulness to all the women in his life. When Magda asks him about Zeftel and Emilia, he brushes it aside as inconsequential. For the time being she has to remain content with his avowal of love, in spite of her misgivings.

In addition to being Yasha's assistant as well as mistress, Magda is a good housekeeper. As soon as they reach Yasha's Warsaw apartment, she immediately begins to sweep and scrub and cook. She also looks after the animals: "Scrawny though Magda was, she promptly began to scrub the floor. From generations of peasants she had inherited her strength along with her servility" (P. 62). After their long
tiring journey from Lublin to Warsaw, Yasha rests in bed, but Magda goes on putting the house and their belongings in order. She does it all of her own accord, without waiting to be told.

Magda understands Yasha very well, and can even read his secret thoughts. Thus when Yasha thinks of visiting Emilia the day after his arrival in Warsaw, Magda is aware of his plans, and even helps him in his toilet. She brings him hot water and soap, and gives him a good bath. She teases Yasha about his relationship with Emilia, but hardly expresses resentment. Apparently a fool, she is intelligent enough to interpret Yasha's behaviour. Such is her relationship with him that she is a willing slave to all his wishes. She listens without protest to Yasha's promises of everlasting love for her, and his commands, reasonable or otherwise. He can even mesmerize her and give her orders for some later date. Asleep or awake, she follows his wishes like an automaton. Thus it is that even while knowing his intention of marrying Emilia and settling abroad, she does not complain or demand an explanation. There is something animal like in her dumb acquiescence:

He had such power over her that he could put her to sleep in a minute.... He had performed innumerable experiments upon her .... He had already begun to prepare her for the time when he would go away with Emilia. Magda heard him out, smiled tacitly with...
peasant slyness. She understood all his wiles but at the same time acquiesced neither capable nor desirous of opposition. At times her mein and grimaces reminded him of the parrot, the monkey, or the crow (P.65).

If Magda is Yasha's link with the peasant class, Emilia is the one redeeming feature in his ordinary, work a day existence. Yasha feels that in her he has found the passport to the superior world of intellectuals and gifted artists. Whereas in spite of all his skill and courage, he receives very little recognition in his own country Emilia constantly speaks to him of the acclaim and money he would earn outside Poland, Yasha, too, feels that he can elevate himself only by giving up the lowly company he has been keeping all along:

Having surrounded himself with a low class of people, his reward now was to be treated like one of them. Emilia was the only miracle in his life, his only hope of salvation from the pit he had dug for himself (P.63).

In retrospect, his encounter with Emilia seems mysterious and pre-ordained. Although he had come across her accidentally, he had been unable to forget her, and they had sought each other out as if by telepathy. So sure of himself at other times, Yasha feels diffident in Emilia's presence and behaves like an awkward boy visiting his first love. At
the same time he reasons that an experienced man of the world like him should not feel so inferior to a poor widow. He also argues that in spite of the difference in background, there is really no difference between Zef-tel's love for him and Emilia's.

The combination of opposites in Emilia fascinates Yasha. Her appearance has elements of the more beautiful aspects of Slavic and Jewish races. She is shy, yet at the same time inviting. But her respectable upbringing prevents her from surrendering to Yasha's desires altogether. Thus she insists on a Christian wedding, and Yasha agrees to it in order to please her. She takes pride in his achievements, and shows her admiration openly. She can discuss with Yasha questions that interest her: Clairvoyance, mind-reading, and communicating with the spirits of the dead. Emilia's temperament displays two contradictory aspects:

The mysticism had through some strange fashion blended within Emilia with skepticism and a quiet sense of humour. She ridiculed Yadwiga and the Egyptian book of dream interpretations which the servant kept under her pillow - yet she, Emilia, believed in dreams herself (P.68).

The indecision that had been there in Yasha's mind is suddenly swept aside as he declares his intention of marrying Emilia. He tries to justify it by calling it the decree of fate. Yet he cannot silence his conscience which
reminds him of his injustice to the other women in his life:

With those few words to Emilia, he had just about sealed his destiny. But what would become of Esther now? And Magda? And where would he get the money he needed? And was he truly capable of changing his religion? I cannot live without her! He replied to himself (P.70).

It is characteristic of Yasha's wild nature that while proposing marriage to the mother, he also tries to win the daughter's love. Halina, in her teens, is excitable by nature. She is full of curiosity about life, and admiration for Yasha's magical skill:

Halina appeared in the doorway: fair, suddenly tall for her fourteen years, with blonde pigtails, light blue eyes, a straight nose, full lips and the transparent paleness of skin peculiar to those afflicted with anaemia and weak lungs... She looked at Yasha, pleased and confused at once. Halina took after her father - she had the mind of a scientist. She yearned to understand everything.... She was an avid reader, collected insects, could play chess, write poetry (P.72).

Compared to such intelligent and aristocratic ladies, Esther certainly stands at a disadvantage. Whereas Yasha finds his conversation with his wife restricted to topics
related to their domestic affairs or to her sewing business, with Emilia and Halina he can discuss subjects like hypnotism and mesmerism. Their open admiration for him boosts Yasha's ego. He thinks of himself as very powerful:

They are hypnotized anyway, he thought. Love is based entirely on hypnotism. When I saw her for the first time, I hypnotized her. That is why she was waiting for me that night on Marshalkowska Boulevard. They are all hypnotized: Esther, Magda, Zeftel. I possess a power, a tremendous power (P.76).

Yasha is well aware that his entanglements are leading him to a situation beyond his control. Even while toying with the idea of marrying Emilia, he had not been able to take a bold decision on it earlier. But elated by the admiration of both mother and daughter, he suddenly announces his intention of an early marriage. This brings him only a brief respite from tension and uncertainty. Very soon he is assailed by guilt over deserting Esther:

... how could he inflict such an outrage against Esther? For so many years she had shown him a rare devotion. She stood beside him through all his difficulties, helped him in every crisis; her tolerance was the kind that the pious attributed only to God. How cold he repay her with a slap? She would not live through the shock. Yasha knew she would wither and flicker out like a candle (P.78).
While Esther had accepted Yasha's protestations of eternal love with the benefit of doubt, Magda is more perceptive. Either due to her peasant background or due to close association with his professional life, she sees through his subterfuge and apprehends his leaving her for Emilia. Even as Yasha thinks of ways of preparing her for his departure, she has already started getting restless and irritable, as if she is able to sense the trouble lying ahead. She remains taciturn, hardly talking to him, and with a look of reproach in her eyes whenever she looks at him. The tension affects her physically too. She becomes unsure of herself, having frequent accidents inside the house. She even appears uglier than before, with the pimples spreading over her body. Her frigidity and silence affect Yasha more deeply than any loud accusation. Moreover, the thought that a break between him and Magda would deal a death blow to Elzbieta dampens his spirit. As he sees it, money appears to be the only possible solution to the problem, as it would soften the blow to some extent. Yet the necessity of theft that it involves makes him rebellious.

While sitting with Emilia at the theatre, Yasha is repelled by the way the people, Emilia herself included, seem to enjoy the immoral behaviour presented on stage:

He held Emilia's hand but anger burned in him. He could neither desert Esther, convert, nor suddenly turn thief on account of Emilia. He glanced sideways at her. She
laughed less than the others, probably to avoid appearing vulgar, but also seemed to enjoy Povolsky's serpentine antics and two-edged bonsmots .... They're all the same. Each of them a spider! (P.82-83).

In spite of his involvement with all these women, he is hurt by their callousness and selfishness. He is sure that the moment he loses his skill and fame, none but Esther would stand by him: "He had wrestled with these problems even before he had met Emilia. He lusted after women, yet hated them as a drunkard hates alcohol .... Esther grumbled frequently that he worked only for the Devil" (P.83). Where he to leave his profession of magician, he would lose his importance in the eyes of the other women, but Esther would be glad that he had come back to a respectable way of life. Thus he is conscious of her superiority over the others. Yet Emilia's proximity soon puts an end to all such reflections. He is so drawn towards her that he all but seduces her. Of course the attraction is mutual, and it is only by a supreme effort that they avoid committing a sin.

Magda, in spite of her short comings, is a faithful and tireless worker. She gets up early in the morning and works throughout the day, cooking, mending, and looking after the flat, the animals, and also Yasha's personal comforts. That her services are neither recognized nor rewarded makes her unhappy:
Magda had one remedy for all sorrows—work.... It was always necessary to pick up after him, to wash, polish, sew. His animals also required care: the horses in the stable, the monkey, the parrot, the crow. She was a everything to him: a wife, a servant, a stage assistant—and what did she get? Nothing—a crust of bread (P.89).

In addition to Yasha's casual attitude towards her, she also has to bear the neighbours scorn and jeers. Although she is officially registered as Yasha's house servant, her real relationship with him is no secret to others in the neighbourhood. So, in order to stop evil tongues from wagging, she feels compelled to lend them small things like vegetables whenever they ask for it. Moreover, she feels generous towards them, being better off than they are. In spite of this, at times she is tormented by the men and women of the neighbourhood. This hurts her deeply, and makes her irritable. Yet such is her devotion that all her ill humour vanishes at a kind look or word from Yasha:

Magda, like any other woman, longed for a child. She was prepared to bear Yasha an illegitimate one. But he robbed her even of that. He, himself, wanted to be the child. Magda bathed him, petted him, caressed him. He wronged her more than her worst enemy, but when he spent a few hours with her and showed that he needed her, her love for him became more ardent than before (P.90).
She remains bound to him even while knowing well that in spite of her long and close association with him, she would never really understand him. He would always remain an enigma to her.

Zef tel's sudden appearance in Warsaw poses new problems for Yasha. As he stands wavering between his desire to start a new life with Emilia and his aversion for theft, Zef tel brings in fresh complications by appearing before him with her long tale of woes. Whereas Yasha, in his typical fashion, had forgotten her very existence, she had kept her promise and had come to Warsaw looking for him. For all her talk of finding work as a domestic servant, it is quite clear that she is not really interested in such work. Thus, with a little persuasions, she finds her way to a pimp's house, ostensibly with the hope of travelling to America where she can find her long-lost husband. She appears unsure of exactly what she wants, and is ready to accept an easy solution to her problems, when it is offered to her. The moment she sees Yasha, she tries to establish her claim on him, talking to him of Piask, and the way she had been ill-treated there. In spite of her attempt at sophistication, she appears to be what she is: a woman belonging to the lower social order:

She was standing before the gate, beneath a lamp post, a shawl draped across her shoulders. The street lamp cast a radiant glow across her face. She seemed exactly what she was: a provincial woman, freshly arrived in
Warsaw. She had arranged her hair in two buns, one on each side, an obvious attempt to appear younger. There hovered about her the transitory air of those who, having torn up their roots, feel alien even to themselves (P. 94).

Her readiness to fall a prey to a pimp quite naturally angers Yasha, and in spite of his desire of not getting involved, he is drawn into her affairs. Setting aside his dinner engagement with Emilia, he goes out with Zef tel to see for himself her living quarters and her associates. In doing so he also upsets Magda who has cooked a nice meal for him. As his interest is aroused by the words and actions of the sharp-witted Herman, he stays on, risking Emilia's displeasure. In the end Zef tel ends up as Herman's mistress, thus moving out of Yasha's life altogether.

Magda's reaction to Yasha's condition after his attempt at burglary reveals the depth of her love for him. Loving him with her whole being, she cannot bear his humiliation and degradation. She is capable of inferring that Yasha's present condition is the corollary of his involvement with some lady. Her sorrow at the sight of his condition is expressed in the form of anger. Looking at Yasha, she bursts into tears, shed both in self-pity and also pity for Yasha who is wasting his talents in running after women. Still she goes on serving him:

... the door opened as Magda came in carrying a basin
of water and a napkin to be used as a compress. She glared at him spitefully.

"Magda; I love you, he said:

"Scum! Whoremaster! Assassin!"

She burst into tears again (P.139).

Her peasant-like habits serve Yasha well in ordinary times, as she is capable of hard work and unquestioning loyalty. But they prove irksome when he wants to make a quick escape out of the house in order to visit Emilia:

Magda has a habit of hiding things. Each time she cleaned up, something else was missing. She was capable of concealing a tie in the stove, slippers under a pillow. Always the peasant! Yasha thought... Magda even tucked money away in odd places where it would turn up months afterwards (P.140).

In a moment of utter frustration she starts calling him names and announces her intention of going home the very same day, but she suffers all the while, and becomes sick.

Emilia, too, reacts strongly to Yasha's accident. She is concerned about his condition and adopts an indulgent tone. Eager for his appreciation of her taste in dresses, she dutifully exhibits her new dress before Yasha. She also makes an open avowal of her love for him:

She studied him, her face expressing curiosity, resentment, devotion. Through some imperceptible power
( or omen) he knew that she regretted having repulsed him the other night, and that she was now prepared to rectify her error. She wrinkled her brow as if trying to fathom his thoughts. He studied her and it seemed to him that she had aged not by days but by years, as sometimes happens to a person who has suffered a grave illness or a deep sorrow (P.145).

She claims to have some sort of telepathic contact with him, so that she is able to guess the time of his accident. Even while expressing sympathy for him, she talks of her own insecure condition and her need of him, imploring him to give up his present way of life and accompany her to Europe. She even starts doubting his honesty in the matter. She talks of his childless marriage to Esther, suggesting that it is an incomplete marriage, and therefore, should not be difficult to break. Such as open discussion of his affairs forces Yasha to reveal that he is virtually without money. Thus immediate marriage has to be ruled out. This disclosure brings about a sudden, though not unexpected, change in Emilia's attitude. Although a moment before, she had been pouring out her emotions, now she exhibits the more practical aspect of her nature:

You mustn't think my feelings towards you have changed because of this. But our plans obviously can not remain the same. Halina can't remain at home forever. A girl her age must go to school. Besides, you and I cannot be
together here ... You have a family and who knows what else. As it is I am losing sleep because of the sympathy I feel for your wife, but if I were to leave the country, she would seem remote. To steal a husband from a wife and take a chance that she might come crying to me would be too much! (P.149).

For Halina, Yasha is the symbol of perfect manhood. Apart from being a substitute father figure, he stands for everything that is glamorous and exciting. Yasha, with his fame as magician, can perform unbelievable feats. This appeals strongly to Halina's romantic bent of mind. An only child who has lost her father early in life, Halina lives more in her imagination than in the world of reality. She constantly talks of dreams, of fantastic things, and pesters Yasha for information about subjects like mesmerism and hypnotism. She even deliberately talks nonsense in Yasha's presence, knowing fully well that her mother does not approve of such behaviour. Her fondness for secrets makes her mother feel perplexed:

There are times when I regret not having had a son instead of a daughter. A boy isn't home as much nor does he mix into his mother's affairs. I love her but sometimes she upsets me. You must keep in mind that she's a child, not a grown up (P.154).

Side by side with her observation that Yasha is spoiling her daughter is the apprehension that he may be putting into
her head ideas much beyond her age. Yasha tries to dispel it in a lighthearted manner.

Emilia's sharp, practical turn of mind makes her inquisitive about the thief and his possible motive. From a discussion of the theft, she moves on in the same breath to the question of passions in general. She considers them either completely foolish, or completely wise, since they cannot be judged by the yardstick of ordinary experiences. In spite of Yasha's repeated assertion that he was the thief trying to steal Zaruski's money, she is not prepared to believe it. While on the one hand, it may be due to her faith in Yasha's integrity, on the other hand it may be due to her feeling that such an accomplished artist like Yasha would not have left the task unfinished and messed up. Once she is convinced of Yasha's guilt, she severs all ties with him then and there. She pictures herself as the central character of a Greek tragedy, who is drawn into misfortunes in spite of being forewarned:

... you stem from offal and you are offal. Pardon my harsh words, but I am only stating a fact. The blame is mine alone. I was aware of everything, actually you concealed nothing, but in the Greek drama, there is a sort of fate - no, it has another name - wherein a person sees everything that will befall him but must fulfill his destiny nevertheless. He sees the pit but falls into it anyhow, (P.156).
Yasha's affair with Emilia ends as suddenly as it had begun. The moment Yasha admits his guilt, he knows that he has lost Emilia forever. While her love for him had kept her looking youthful, now she appears strangely old and tired:

In a few seconds, Emilia had changed. Pouches had appeared beneath her eyes. She resembled someone who had just awakened from a short, deep sleep. Even her hair was disarranged. He detected wrinkles on her forehead and white in her hair. As if this was a fairy tale, she had cast off some spell which had kept her eternally young. Her voice, too, had grown dull and listless (P.157-158).

If Yasha's accident has put an end to his own dreams of grandeur, it has also taken off the veneer of glamour and sophistication from Emilia.

On coming back home, Yasha encounters the gruesome sight of Magda hanging from the ceiling. Sure of having lost his love, she finally yields to frustration and ends the show. It is possible that with her deep-rooted peasant instinct, she has rightly foreseen that Yasha has already reached the end of his career, that he has no further use for herself or for his pet animals. Hence she has put all three to death before committing suicide. Just as Yasha's attempt at burglary separate him from Emilia, so it also takes Magda away from him. If one marks the end of his dreams of becoming a nobleman, the other marks the end of
his career as a magician. Even in death, Magda seems to accuse him of injustice:

He did not find Magda but an image moulded of some lifeless substances, wax or paraffin - nose, mouth, features all unfamiliar .... Her lips were silent yet she was screaming - a cry such as no mortal could long endure. Swollen and cracked, the mouth shouted, look what you have done to me! Look! Look! ... Presumably, this was the same Magda who had quarreled with him that very morning, ... but that Magda could be asked forgiveness and mollified. This one, lying here limp on the bed, had passed into eternity, cutting herself from good or evil (P.168).

Irving Malin observes:

Magda's death is symbolically related to the motif of movement. She dangles, as did Yasha before he gave himself to his religion, and her lifeless movement appropriately suggests his former life. He feels guilty, realizing that for every commitment - as in this case his need to give up his assistant (and his talent itself) - there is destruction: Indeed, this is the tightrope: We walk between two stations, once we move towards one, we, of course, relinquish the other.

Yasha's involvement with women comes to an end with ZefTel's desertion of him. While once Yasha had found it difficult to maintain a balance between all the women
attached to him, now he finds himself all alone. Shaken and remorseful after the death of Magda, Yasha, goes to visit Zeftel, only to find her with Herman. Evidently, Zeftel has found a fresh love, in spite of all her protestations of eternal loyalty to Yasha. Her adulterous behaviour is no less painful to Yasha than Magda's death:

It was not unlike the feeling he had experienced a few hours earlier when he had discovered Magda dead .... He had looked upon the faces of death and lechery and had seen that they were the same .... He had seen the hand of God. He had reached the end of the road (P.181).

Fixler comments on the impact of this realisation on Yasha:

... the climax of The Magician of Lublin .... deals with the dramatic conversion of an amoral libertine to the medieval ascetic. " Twice in one day ", Yasha Mazur realises, " there had been unveiled to him things which are best concealed. He had looked upon the faces of death and lechery and had seen that they were the same" .... This marginal Jew, equally at home and equally an alien in both the Jewish and gentile worlds, grasps the insight with the intensity of a Faust or of a Don Juan. Like them he turns from the quest for knowledge and mastery in all conceivable experiences of the body and mind to the realization that the quest had been an error.
The end of the road for Yasha leaves him utterly alone, with only occasional contacts with the external world through his wife. Yet, in spite of his resolve to become a total recluse, Yasha cannot forget the world altogether. He is plagued by temptations, and has to be constantly on his guard against them. Irving Malin observes:

It is revealing that Yasha does not entirely remove himself from other men. He looks with love at Esther when she brings him food. He listens to her gossip. ... He is self-contradictory. This quality not only demonstrates that he still needs an audience - Esther is a spectator of his actions (at least part of the time) - but it also humanizes him. He often remembers the past, and his own irresponsible behaviour which had brought sorrow to others around him. Emilia, Magda, Zef tel; he remembers them all, and his own role in upsetting their lives. Thus, even long after they are out of his life, they continue to live in his memory. Being human, Yasha cannot get rid of his past altogether. As Ben Siegel comments:

More deadly than external threats is the evil lurking in his own brain and heart. Yasha's redemption is more an act of human will that divine grace. He continues to lust, question, and doubt. But unceasing battle is as much as he, or any man, can expect ... His single consolation is that God, being merciful and compassionate,
will assure good's ultimate triumph in the next world.

Speaking of the women characters in the novel, Morris Golden points out their wide variety:

Yasha Mazur plays a variety of roles and is responsive to a great variety of other people .... And his harem tempts him in suitably varied ways; his wife, to the domestic Jewish idyll of 'Short Friday', Magda, the peasant, to the civilising and dominating fantasies of The Slave; Zefitel the whore, to modern revelry in depravity, the ultra-popular delights of Singer's Warsaw crowd scenes; and the intellectual Polish noble woman Emilia to the great danger of Moskat and The Manor, conversion from the faith to assimilation and secular prominence. Ironically, she is the concluding commentator ... 

At the height of his achievements, Yasha moves with ease from one to the other of this heterogeneous group:

Yasha is as much Western picaro as Yiddish folk hero... moves convincingly into the non-Jewish world and back. Singer thereby introduces a theme long popular among American-Jewish novelists: the love of their Jewish heroes for gentile women, who symbolise not only sexual taboo but a world of social gentility too foreign to be entered successfully.

For a while, Yasha is successful in striking a balance.
between the divergent elements, but ultimately it proves to be his undoing:

... Yasha's crisis occurs during his trip to Warsaw and is precipitated by his romance with a gentile woman; and his wife, Esther, bears the name of the Hebrew queen who saved her people from a gentile plot to exterminate them. Yasha reenacts the historical myth of a chosen people who repeatedly turn away from God at the cost of terrible suffering, but who are preserved through the covenant until they return to the law. For all her irony, Emilia exclaims to Yasha as he confesses his attempted theft: "You must have some sort of covenant with God since he punished you directly on the spot."  

Defeated on all fronts, the lonely and remorseful Yasha can look for consolation only in religion. Hence his journey from the glamorous world of entertainment and affluence to the solitary, windowless cell where he chooses to keep himself confined. Paul Kresh finds such a movement typical of the Jewish consciousness:

... the more Jews try to flee from their faith and their Jewishness, the more worthless they find their freedom. Life, to be fulfilling, must have boundaries which only traditional Judaism can satisfactorily supply for Jews. In The Magician of Lublin the hero is
to find consolation from the life of a libertine in confinement as a penitent."

The novel ends with Emilia's letter to Yasha. While she had summarily rejected Yasha after the incident of the attempted burglary, now it is she who highlights his virtues and expresses her admiration for him. It appears that in the course of the intervening years, she, too, has had time to repent:

Only after you left did I realize how badly I had behaved. I knew you had a wife. I drove you to this affair so I am morally responsible. ... The story in today's paper, describing how you have imprisoned yourself in store, how you have become a holy man and how Jewish men and women wait at your window for your blessing, has made an indelible impression upon me. I was unable to continue reading because of my tears. I have often cried over you but these were tears of joy (P.200).

Although she is well settled in life, having a new husband, a healthy and grown daughter, and an affluent status, she has not been able to forget Yasha. Her letter ends with her declaration of eternal devotion to him.

Thus, in The Magician of Lublin, Singer makes effective use of the women characters to provide a suitable backdrop for projecting the hero. As the author himself remarks:
When I wrote a family novel, like The Family Moskat The Estate or The Manor, my goal was to recreate an epoch, not just a single human being. But when I wrote a novel such as The Magicians of Lublin or The Slave, I tried to concentrate on a single character. The shifting focus on the women characters underlines Yasha's periodic success and failure, his faith and faithlessness. Yasha's contact with one or other of these women illuminates some particular facet of his complex personality. In the end, when he has cast off all complications, he still remains attached to Esther thereby providing the superiority of virtue and steadfastness over selfish interests.

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NOTES


