



The Shawl **By Cynthia Ozick**

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Pages: 96p.

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Winner of the O. Henry prize

Summary

A short story and a novella intertwine to offer a study of the Holocaust and its aftermath as Rosa Lublin witnesses the brutal death of her baby daughter in a concentration camp and, thirty years later, must struggle to cope with her emotional devastation.

Synopsis

This short story and novella together create a picture of Rosa Lubin's life. The title story tells of Rosa's fifteen-month-old daughter's death in a concentration camp and the shawl that provided her daughter with satisfaction Rosa's breasts could no longer give.

"Rosa," the novella, takes place more than thirty years later in southern Florida where it is "Summer without end, a mistake!" Rosa was exiled to Florida after destroying her shop in Brooklyn; she had to leave the state or be put in a mental institution. With financial help from her niece, who Rosa thinks is evil, she is able to stay in Florida. She knows she can depend on her niece because Rosa saved her life in the concentration camp; Rosa knows too, that her niece was the cause of her daughter's death. Rosa lives in two worlds: she functions in one called earth, but to Rosa, the real world is where her long-dead daughter lives. In letters to her daughter, she comments about her niece: "Because she fears the past she distrusts the future - it, too, will turn into the past. As a result she has nothing." Rosa is a woman who, through the loss of her country, her family, and her daughter, lost herself. Cynthia Ozick's spare writing leaves a lasting image of Rosa and her life. People do get lost and are sometimes never found.

Reviews

Publishers Weekly

"The Shawl" is a brief story first published in the New Yorker in 1981; "Rosa," its longer companion piece, appeared in that magazine three years later. Each story won First Prize in the O. Henry Prize Stories in the year of its publication; each was included in a "Best American Short Stories" collection. Together, they form a book that etches itself indelibly in the reader's mind. "Lublin, Rosa" (as the main character refers to herself) has lived through the Holocaust; she resents being called a "survivor" because she is a "human being." Resettled in Miami in 1977 after years in New York, she does not have a life in the present because her existence was stolen away from her in a past that does not end. Like Bellow's Herzog, Rosa writes letters in her head; but Rosa's are to her dead daughter Magda, whose shawl she has preserved as both talisman and security blanket. Rosa periodically conjures Magda's life at different stages (as a teenager, as a doctor living in Mamaroneck); yet she is haunted by the reality of her baby's murder. Ozick carefully steers the reader through the mazes of Rosa's mind, rendering her life with unsparing emotional intensity.

Library Journal

This is actually a five-page prologue and an extended short story. Aside from that, Ozick gives us exactly what we expect: a meditation, in figurative language at times dense and shimmering, at times richly colloquial, of the consequences of the Holocaust. Accompanied by her niece and hiding her tiny daughter, Magda, Rosa stumbles toward a concentration camp, where Magda is to die, flung against an electrified fence. Years later, in America, we meet "Rosa Lublin, a madwoman and a scavenger, who gave up her store--smashed it up herself--and moved to Miami." She still writes to her dead daughter, whose shawl she covets. When Rosa meets brash, voluble Simon Persky at the laundromat, she resists his arguments that "you can't live in the past" with some persuasive arguments of her own. Indeed, the reader is uncertain to the end whether Rosa will bend--and whether she ought to. A subtle yet morally uncompromising tale that many will regard as a small gem

New York Times Book Review

In her remarkable new book, *The Shawl*, Ms. Ozick pulls off the rare trick of making art out of what we would rather not see. The experience of reading *The Shawl* is immensely troubling, especially if one pauses to think and feel and is not simply lulled by the pure pleasure that Ms. Ozick's wonderful sentences might otherwise occasion.



Biography

Long regarded as one of the country's foremost literary luminaries, CYNTHIA OZICK attracts as much praise for her morally rigorous essays as for her satirically witty fiction. Counted among her impressive works of fiction are *The Shawl* (1989), which won an O. Henry Prize for both short stories that comprise it. She is a Man Booker International Prize nominee as well as a National Book Critics Circle Award winner.

About the Author (from the Big Read website)

Cynthia Ozick was born April 17, 1928 on the Upper East Side of New York City. Her parents came to America as part of a mass exodus of Russian Jews escaping brutal state-sponsored attacks, or pogroms. Ozick's mother was nine when her family arrived; Ozick's father did not

immigrate until he was twenty-one. Facing conscription into the Tsar's army, he fled Russia and used the skills he had acquired through a formal education to open his own pharmacy in New York.

By the time Ozick turned two, her father had moved the business and his family to the Pelham Bay area of the Bronx. At five and a half, she entered *cheder*, small classes for religious instruction, but was turned away by a rabbi who did not believe in educating girls. Her maternal grandmother took her back the next day, insisting that the rabbi allow her to study.

Though Pelham Bay was a diverse community of immigrants, Ozick was ostracized because of her Judaism. When she attended public grade school, classmates taunted her with religious slurs because she would not sing Christmas carols. She read books from the traveling library that arrived on Friday afternoons. Each child was allowed two books and a magazine. Usually by sunset, Ozick—who knew from early childhood that she would be a writer—had devoured her quota for the week.

Acceptance to Hunter College High School in New York City, at the time an all-girls school for intellectually gifted students, bolstered her academic self-confidence. She attended New York University, then headed to Ohio State for her master's degree in English literature. She married Bernard Hallote in 1952 and, after graduation, moved back to New York. Ozick did not publish her first novel, *Trust*, until 14 years later.

She has since written acclaimed novels, short stories, essays, and literary criticism. Ozick's fiction and essays are often about Jewish American life, but she also writes on a broad range of topics including politics, history, and literary criticism. Furthermore, she has written and translated poetry. She lives in Westchester County, New York.

Four of her stories have won the coveted O. Henry Prize. The recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, she was honored by the American Academy of Arts and Letters with the Mildred and Harold Strauss Living Award. In 1986, she was selected as the first winner of the Rea Award for the Short Story. Ozick was on the shortlist for the 2005 Man Booker International Prize, and in 2008 she was awarded the PEN/Malamud Award established by Bernard Malamud's family "to honor excellence in the art of the short story".

Lengthy Biography at Jewish Virtual Library
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Ozick.html>

Link to December 2008 interview with Ozick
http://www.bookslut.com/features/2008_12_013769.php

Bibliography

Novels

- [*Trust*](#) (1966)
- *The Cannibal Galaxy* (1983)
- *The Messiah of Stockholm* (1987)
- [*The Puttermesser Papers*](#) (1997)
- *Heir to the Glimmering World* (2004) -- (published in the United Kingdom as *The Bear Boy* (2005))

Shorter Fiction

- *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories* (1971)
- *Bloodshed and Three Novellas* (1976)
- *Levitation: Five Fictions* (1982)
- *Envy; or, Yiddish in America* (1989)
- [*The Shawl*](#) (1989)
- *Collected Stories* (2007)
- *Dictation - A Quartet* (2008)

Essays

- *All the World Wants the Jews Dead* (1974)
- *Art and Ardor* (1983)
- *Metaphor & Memory* (1989)
- *What Henry James Knew and Other Essays on Writers* (1993)
- *Fame & Folly: Essays* (1996)
- *Quarrel & Quandary* (2000)
- *The Din in the Head: Essays* (2006)

Drama

- *Blue Light* (1994)

Miscellaneous

- *A Cynthia Ozick Reader* (1996)
- *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel* (introduction 2001)

From the NEA Big Read Reader's Guide

<http://www.neabigread.org/books/theshawl/readers02.php>

Introduction to the Novella

Readers should not be fooled by the slimness of Cynthia Ozick's award-winning book *The Shawl* (1989). The interlocking short story and novella pack enough punch for a book many times its length. Though set several decades apart and on opposite sides of the Atlantic, the two sections describe with heart-breaking empathy the life of one woman.

The title story, "The Shawl," introduces us to Rosa, the mother of a baby girl hidden within a tattered cloth, and her fourteen-year-old niece, Stella, as they attempt to survive the horrors of life in a Nazi death camp. Cold, exhausted, starving, they live in "a place without pity" where the struggle for the most basic necessities can have terrible consequences. When Stella warms herself with the shawl, she unwittingly begins a chain of events that leads to her infant cousin's death.

In the novella, set almost four decades later, Rosa and Stella are refugees in America. Though they left Poland long ago, neither can escape memories of the Holocaust. Stella copes by attempting to forget and build a new life in New York; Rosa cannot. Unable to relinquish the past, Rosa destroys her New York store and moves to a cheap Miami hotel. Adrift in a world without companionship, Rosa relies on financial support from her niece.

In spite of her pain, Rosa makes fumbling attempts to tell the story of her suffering, to warn others of man's capacity for unspeakable evil. In Simon Persky—a flirtatious, retired button-maker—Rosa finds a willing listener and perhaps someone who can understand the hurt that can never, and should never, be forgotten.

Full of beautiful imagery and finely crafted sentences, *The Shawl* is a tour de force that portrays not only the characters' grief, guilt, and loneliness but also their hopes and dreams. It's a novel about the importance of remembering, of bearing witness, and of listening to the lessons of history with our ears and our hearts.

Major Characters

Rosa Lublin

As a young woman, Rosa is raped by a German soldier, confined in the Warsaw Ghetto, and sent to a Polish concentration camp with her niece, Stella, and her infant daughter, Magda. Almost four decades later, Rosa lives in Miami, haunted by the memory of her daughter's death.

"Rosa Lublin, a madwoman and a scavenger, gave up her store—she smashed it up herself—and moved to Miami. It was a mad thing to do. ... Her niece in New York sent her money and she lived among the elderly, in a dark hole, a single room in a 'hotel.'"

Stella

Teenage Stella's theft of the shawl leads to her cousin Magda's death. As an adult, Stella provides Rosa with financial support, but she cannot understand her aunt's inability to let go of the past.

"Stella liked everything from Rosa's junkshop, everything used, old, lacy with other people's history."

Magda

A baby hidden in her mother's shawl, Magda survives infancy in a Polish concentration camp but is murdered by a guard at fifteen months old.

"The face, very round, a pocket mirror of a face: but it was not Rosa's bleak complexion, dark like cholera, it was another kind of face altogether, eyes blue as air, smooth feathers of hair nearly as yellow as the Star sewn into Rosa's coat. You could think she was one of their babies."

Simon Persky

A retiree whose wife is hospitalized in a mental institution, Simon is a comic character in a tragic situation. His persistent kindness begins to break through some of Rosa's barriers. "Two whole long rows of glinting dentures smiled at her; he was proud to be a flirt."

How The Shawl Came to Be Written

"*The Shawl* began with a line, one sentence in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* by William Shirer. This one sentence told of a real event, about a baby being thrown against an electrified fence. And that stayed with me and stayed with me, and that was the very explicit origin of *The Shawl*.

"It began with those very short five pages. We read now and again that a person sits down to write and there's a sense that some mystical hand is guiding you and you're not writing out of yourself. I think reasonably, if you're a rational person, you can't accept that. But I did have the sense—I did this one time in my life—that I was suddenly extraordinarily fluent, and I'm never fluent. I wrote those five pages as if I heard a voice. In a sense, I have no entitlement to this part because it's an experience in a death camp. I was not there. I did not experience it.

"I wrote the second half because I wanted to know what happened to Rosa afterward. I was curious to enter the mind of such an unhappy, traumatized person and see how that person would cope with the time afterward—rescued, saved, safe, and yet not rescued, not safe, not normal, abnormal." —Excerpted from Cynthia Ozick's interview with NEA Chairman Dana Gioia

Historical Context (from The Big Read guide)

http://www.neabigread.org/books/theshawl/shawl03_context.php

Late 1920s

Cynthia Ozick is born on April 17, 1928, in New York City.

The stock market crashes, beginning the Great Depression, October 29, 1929.

1930s

Franklin D. Roosevelt is elected president, 1932.

Adolf Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany, first concentration camp, Dachau, 1933.

Germany invades Poland, starting World War II in Europe, 1939.

1940s

Japan bombs Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. Germany and its Axis partners declare war on the U.S. less than one week later.

U.S. and British troops land at Normandy, June 6, 1944; the Germans launch a final offensive, the Battle of the Bulge, December 1944.

Hitler commits suicide, April 30, 1945.

World War II ends. More than 6 million Jews are dead as a result of the Holocaust, 1945.

The Nuremberg war crime tribunals begin, November 20, 1945.

Ozick graduates from New York University, 1949.

1950s

The United States enters a period of sustained prosperity and economic growth.

Egypt denies access to the Suez Canal, 1956; Israel then occupies the Gaza strip for four

months.

Ozick marries Bernard Hallote, 1952.

1960s

The Berlin Wall splits the city in two, 1961.

John F. Kennedy is assassinated, 1963.

Ozick publishes her first novel, *Trust*, 1966.

In response to Egypt's alliance with Syria, Jordan, and Iraq, Israel launches an attack known as the Six-Day War, 1967.

1970s

Ozick publishes *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories*, 1971.

Eight Palestinian terrorists murder eleven Jewish athletes at the Munich Olympics, 1972.

Syria and Egypt launch a surprise attack against Israel known as the Yom Kippur or Ramadan War, October 1973.

Ozick publishes *Bloodshed* and *Three Novellas*, 1976.

1980s

Pope John Paul II, a native of Poland and witness to the Holocaust, visits Rome's Great Synagogue to help repair the relationship between Catholics and Jews, 1986.

Ozick publishes *The Shawl*, 1989.

1990s

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is dedicated in Washington, DC, 1993.

After filming *Schindler's List*, Steven Spielberg establishes a nonprofit organization to document the experiences of Holocaust survivors, 1994.

Blue Lights, Ozick's stage version of *The Shawl* premieres off-Broadway, 1996.

2000s

Ozick publishes her fifth novel, *Heir to the Glimmering World*, 2004, and her fifth collection of essays, *The Din in the Head*, 2006.

Israel celebrates 60th anniversary, 2007

The Holocaust and World War II

The "Holocaust" is the name commonly given to the state-sponsored program of mass murder by the Nazis and their collaborators during World War II. The term derives from the Greek words *holos*, meaning "completely," and *kaustos*, a burnt sacrificial offering. Many Jews prefer the Hebrew word "Sho'ah" (which means "catastrophic upheaval" or "calamity").

The Nazi Party, officially named the National Socialist German Workers Party, came to power in 1933 when German President Paul Von Hindenburg appointed rival Adolf Hitler Chancellor of Germany. After Von Hindenburg died the following year, Hitler assumed the powers of the presidency and created a dictatorship.

The Nuremberg race laws of 1935 deprived Jews of citizenship under the Third Reich, the name given to the German empire. The racism of the Nazi regime included boycotts of Jewish businesses, as well as legislation limiting the rights of Jews and other targeted groups. Using anti-Semitic propaganda, the Nazi government promoted the idea that Jews were "subhuman" enemies of the German state. The Nazis also declared as "inferior" Gypsies, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Poles, Russians, those with disabilities, and others, for their behavior, ethnicity, or political affiliation.

Based on the ideology of German racial superiority, the Nazi Party began to fulfill Hitler's ambition of acquiring more territory in Europe. World War II began September 1, 1939, when German forces invaded Poland. Britain and France declared war on Germany two days later. Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Canada followed suit but, by the end of September, the Polish army lay defeated, the country's land divided between Nazi Germany and their temporary ally, the Soviet Union. Over the next two years Germany defeated and occupied Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Yugoslavia, and Greece.

At first, Jews and other Nazi "enemies" were imprisoned in ghettos, transit centers, forced labor camps, and concentration camps. The Nazis used the rail system to transport Jews from their homes all over Europe to these facilities. Many died of exposure, exhaustion, and starvation.

By 1941, the Nazis had decided to implement "The Final Solution," the complete extermination of all European Jews. Extermination camps designed for effective mass murder were constructed primarily in Poland, the country with the largest Jewish population. While concentration camps served as labor camps and detention sites, extermination camps were death centers with gas chambers intended to make killing both efficient and impersonal. Victims killed in the death camps were usually incinerated in massive ovens constructed to dispose of the bodies, and with them the evidence of the Nazis' elaborate system of genocide.

"When I had my store I used to 'meet the public,' and I wanted to tell everybody—not only our story, but other stories as well. Nobody knew anything. This amazed me, that nobody remembered what happened only a little while ago. They didn't remember because they didn't know." —Rosa Lublin in *The Shawl*

Resources about the Holocaust

Bachrach, Susan D. *Tell Them We Remember: The Story of the Holocaust*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1994.

Landau, Elaine. *The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. New York: Macmillan, 1992.

Meltzer, Milton. *Never to Forget: The Jews of the Holocaust*. New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1977.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum - The Web site of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum offers educational material, photo archives, interviews with survivors, and more

Discussion Questions (*from The Big Read guide*)

After witnessing Magda's murder, Rosa shoves the shawl in her own mouth to stifle her scream rather than make a sound and risk being shot by the camp guards. What does this scene reveal about Rosa? How does this scene repeat later in the novella?

Do you agree with Cynthia Ozick's interpretation that Stella is "an equal victim with Rosa" and that "Stella has become a ghost or a phantom of all of Rosa's fears and terrible traumatic memories?"

Why is Rosa so upset when she loses her underwear at the laundromat? Do you find the situation humorous? Why or why not?

Why does Rosa decide to trust Simon Persky? Is his occupation significant to his character?

What does Rosa mean when she tells Persky, "Your Warsaw isn't my Warsaw." How are their backgrounds different? How are they similar?

How does Stella's life mirror Rosa's? How is it different? What does this suggest about their relationship?

What role does Dr. Tree play in the novella? Are there people today who might act like Dr. Tree? Can you sympathize with Rosa's hatred for him?

Why does Rosa reject labels like "survivor" and "refugee" in favor of "human being?"

What does the shawl symbolize to Rosa? To Magda? To Stella?

Discuss some Jewish symbols and imagery in the novella. How might these demonstrate that—even thirty-nine years later—Rosa's thoughts are never far from the concentration camp?

In your experience, does the book reinforce or shatter stereotypes of Jewish American experience? Why or why not?

By telling the story of Magda's death and of Rosa's survival, what does the book reveal about Rosa's personality and her will to live

For Further Reading

Saul Bellow *Ravelstein*

Tadeusz Borowski *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*

John Boyne *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*

Ida Fink *A Scrap of Time and Other Stories*

Anne Frank *The Diary of a Young Girl*

John Hersey *The Wall*

Thomas Keneally. *Schindler's Ark*

Primo Levi *The Drowned and the Saved*

Lois Lowry *Number the Stars*

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and *Maus II*

Elie Wiesel *A Beggar in Jerusalem*

Elie Wiesel's *Night*

Jane Yolen *The Devil's Arithmetic*

Jane Yolen *Briar Rose*

Markus Zusak *The Book Thief*