



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

The Shawl

by Cynthia Ozick



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“Just as you can’t grasp anything without an opposable thumb, you can’t write anything without the aid of metaphor. Metaphor is the mind’s opposable thumb.”

Preface

No event in modern history has inspired so many books as the Holocaust. This monumental atrocity has compelled thousands of writers to reexamine their notions of history, humanity, morality, and even theology. None of these books, however, is quite like Cynthia Ozick’s *The Shawl*—a remarkable feat of fiction which starts in darkest despair and brings us, without simplification or condescension, to a glimmer of redemption.

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you’re a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

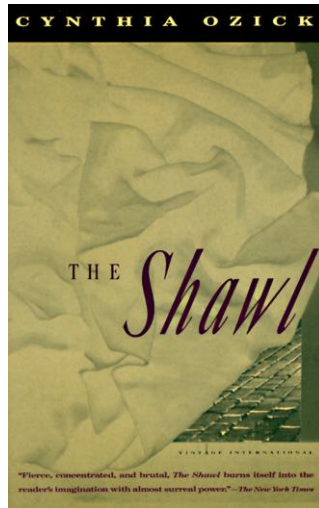
Readers should not be fooled by the slimness of Cynthia Ozick's award-winning book *The Shawl* (1989). The interlocking short story and novella pack enough punch for a book many times its length. Though set several decades apart and on opposite sides of the Atlantic, the two sections describe with heart-breaking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

Rosa Lublin

As a young woman, Rosa is raped by a German soldier, confined in the Warsaw Ghetto, and sent to a Nazi concentration camp in German-occupied Poland 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 concentration camp in Nazi German-occupied Poland 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 former NEA Chairman Dana Gioia

About the Author

Cynthia Ozick (b. 1928)

Cynthia Ozick was born in 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.



Cynthia Ozick (Copyright Nancy Crampton)

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 *heder*, 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. 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. 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 and was the first writer to be granted the Rea Award for the Short Story, given ever since to an author whose writing has made a significant contribution in promoting the short story as an art form.

An Interview with Cynthia Ozick

On August 9, 2007, Dana Gioia, former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, interviewed Cynthia Ozick in Washington, DC. Excerpts from their conversation follow.

Dana Gioia: What were the most important books of your childhood?

Cynthia Ozick: My mother would often tease me, "Is it *Little Women* again?" The fairy books were indispensable. I've never gotten over the fairy tales—never. I remember an engraving in one of the fairy books of a long avenue with cypress trees. It was so melancholy that it stayed with me forever, so that, whenever today I see a tall angular tree, that same feeling of strange melancholy returns from the fairy tales.

DG: Did you always want to be a writer?

CO: Always. It was a destiny that I never had any alternative to; or wished for any alternative. I simply knew it, always. But I never even thought of myself as a writer until I had published a certain basic body of work because it seemed to me that it was hubris. Who would take me seriously? So if someone asked, "What do you do?" it took me a long time before I could say, "I'm a writer."

DG: What is the difference for you between writing fiction and writing criticism?

CO: If you're going to write an essay, let's say, about Henry James, you have a subject, and you know something. If you're going to write fiction, you have nothing. You begin in chaos. You may have a smell, a scene, a word, an idea, an emotion. It seems to me that ideas and emotions are inseparable. Emotions may not always be ideas, but ideas are always emotions. In fiction you can come up with something that you never knew you knew.

DG: In *The Shawl* your main character, Rosa, is Jewish, but she is also very proud of being Polish. What can you tell us about her background?

CO: Rosa is a very deeply assimilated Polish Jew. She is so assimilated that her family has had an estrangement from their origins. When I was writing this, I can't say that I consciously knew what I was doing. But from my perspective now, perhaps unwittingly, I was making a point—from the Nazi point of view, it didn't matter how Jewish or Polish you were. There was no way out. You couldn't point out who

was a Jew. If you were completely assimilated, how would anyone know? So a badge had to be manufactured—hence the yellow star—which would point you out so that you could become a victim. What this demonstrates to us is that there were no loopholes.

DG: The most brilliantly unexpected thing in *The Shawl* is Mr. Persky. What would you tell us about this almost comic figure?

CO: Mr. Persky as opposed to Rosa gives us an important difference: the differences between immigration and refugee status. An immigrant never wants to go back. He doesn't want to go back. He's come to America for the future, for opportunity, for life, for health, for children, for everything positive. He has left the negative behind. A refugee is full of longing. A refugee wants to go back to the good times. A refugee has never left home.

DG: The shawl itself is more than an image. It is the novel's central symbol. How do you see its significance in the book?

CO: The shawl is a symbol, and it has many meanings. It suggests terrible danger. It means you will be murdered if you are deprived of it, as Magda was. It also means infinite shelter. It represents the violence of rape, because we are given to understand that Magda is the result of something like an SS brothel. It represents degradation. At the same time—it's so contradictory—it represents life. But actually, what is it? It's an old rag. And so it seems that in despair, we can take an old rag and turn it through imagination into a living child. That's what Rosa does.

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Cynthia Ozick

Late 1920s

- 1928: Cynthia Ozick is born on April 17 in New York City.
- 1929: The stock market crashes on October 29, beginning the Great Depression.

1930s

- 1932: Franklin D. Roosevelt is elected president.
- 1933: Adolf Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany, establishes the first concentration camp, Dachau.
- 1939: Germany invades Poland, starting World War II in Europe.

1940s

- 1941: Japan bombs Pearl Harbor on December 7. Germany and its Axis partners declare war on the U.S. less than one week later.
- 1944: U.S. and British troops land at Normandy on June 6; the Germans launch a final offensive, the Battle of the Bulge in December.
- 1945: 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.
- 1949: Ozick graduates from New York University.

1950s

- The United States enters a period of sustained prosperity and economic growth.
- 1956: Egypt denies access to the Suez Canal, 1956; Israel then occupies the Gaza strip for four months.
- 1952: Ozick marries Bernard Hallote.

1960s

- 1961: The Berlin Wall splits the city in two.
- 1963: John F. Kennedy is assassinated.
- 1966: Ozick publishes her first novel, *Trust*.
- 1967: In response to Egypt's alliance with Syria, Jordan, and Iraq, Israel launches an attack known as the Six-Day War.

1970s

- 1971: Ozick publishes *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories*.
- 1972: Eight Palestinian terrorists murder eleven Jewish athletes at the Munich Olympics.
- 1973: Syria and Egypt launch a surprise attack against Israel known as the Yom Kippur or Ramadan War in October.
- 1976: Ozick publishes *Bloodshed and Three Novellas*.

1980s

- 1986: 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.
- 1989: Ozick publishes *The Shawl*.

1990s

- 1993: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is dedicated in Washington, DC.
- 1994: After filming *Schindler's List*, Steven Spielberg establishes a nonprofit organization to document the experiences of Holocaust survivors.
- 1994: *Blue Light*, Ozick's stage version of *The Shawl*, premieres off-Broadway.

2000s

- Ozick publishes *Heir to the Glimmering World* (2004), *The Din in the Head* (2006), and *Foreign Bodies* (2010).
- 2007: Israel celebrates 60th anniversary.

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.

Other Works/Adaptations

Ozick and Her Other Works

Even as a young girl growing up in the Bronx, Cynthia Ozick knew she wanted to be a writer. An uncle's success as a Hebrew poet inspired her, as did stories told by her maternal grandmother, who lived with the family and often cared for Ozick while her parents spent long hours running their pharmacy. At five Ozick began writing simple poems, by eight she was experimenting with short stories, but not until she was an adult, and a mother herself, did publication and literary acclaim finally arrive.

Trust, published in 1966—the year after the birth of Ozick's daughter Rachel—is the story of a young woman's epic quest for the elusive father she has never known. Ozick's next three books were story collections and novellas: *The Pagan Rabbi* (1971), *Bloodshed* (1976)—which contains "Usurpation," the first of her four O. Henry Award-winning short stories—and *Levitation* (1982). These books firmly established the themes of Jewish identity that pervade Ozick's fiction.

Writing book reviews led to Ozick's first collection of essays, *Art and Ardor* (1983), the same year her second novel, *The Cannibal Galaxy*, hit the shelves. Four years later, she published another full-length work of fiction, *The Messiah of Stockholm*, a tale of intrigue surrounding the paternity of a Jewish book critic who claims he is the son of a Polish writer killed by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

The novel *The Puttermesser Papers* (1997) tells the story of Ruth Puttermesser, a smart Jewish working woman in New York City whose life is filled with disappointment. *Quarrel and Quandary* (2000), a collection of essays, brought Ozick a National Book Critics Circle Award.

Ozick's 2004 novel and a Today Show book club selection, *Heir to the Glimmering World*, is the story of Rose Meadows, a young woman who finds employment with a family of German Jews living off the generosity of James A'Bair, the adult son of a famous children's author. In 2006, Ozick published her fifth collection of essays, *The Din in the Head*. A writer of wit and intelligence, Cynthia Ozick's crystalline prose and beautiful imagery bring to life characters and ideas that remain with the reader long after the book is closed.

Selected Works by Cynthia Ozick

- *Trust*, 1966 (novel)
- *The Pagan Rabbi*, 1971 (stories)
- *Art and Ardor*, 1983 (essays)
- *The Cannibal Galaxy*, 1983 (novel)
- *The Messiah of Stockholm*, 1987 (novel)
- *Metaphor and Memory*, 1989 (essays)
- *The Shawl*, 1989 (novella)
- *Fame and Folly*, 1996 (essays)
- *The Puttermesser Papers*, 1997 (novel)
- *Quarrel and Quandary*, 2000 (essays)
- *Heir to the Glimmering World*, 2004 (novel)
- *The Din in the Head*, 2006 (essays)
- *Foreign Bodies*, 2010 (novel)
- *Critics, Monsters, Fanatics and Other Literary Essays*, 2016 (essays)

Discussion Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?"
3. Why is Rosa so upset when she loses her underwear at the laundromat? Do you find the situation humorous? Why or why not?
4. Why does Rosa decide to trust Simon Persky? Is his occupation significant to his character?
5. What does Rosa mean when she tells Persky, "Your Warsaw isn't my Warsaw." How are their backgrounds different? How are they similar?
6. How does Stella's life mirror Rosa's? How is it different? What does this suggest about their relationship?
7. 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?
8. Why does Rosa reject labels like "survivor" and "refugee" in favor of "human being?"
9. What does the shawl symbolize to Rosa? To Magda? To Stella?
10. 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?
11. In your experience, does the book reinforce or shatter stereotypes of Jewish American experience? Why or why not?
12. 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?

Additional Resources

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](http://www.ushmm.org/)
The website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum offers educational material, photo archives, interviews with survivors, and more.
<http://www.ushmm.org/>

If you want to read more about the Holocaust:

- Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, 1947
- Elie Wiesel's *Night*, 1958
- Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and *Maus II*, 1986; 1991
- Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved*, 1988

If you want to read works that have enriched Cynthia Ozick, you might enjoy:

- George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, 1876
- Henry James's *The Beast in the Jungle*, 1903
- Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*, 1910
- Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein*, 2000

Credits

Works Cited

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Friedman, Lawrence S. *Understanding Cynthia Ozick*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991.

Ozick, Cynthia. Interview with Dana Gioia for The Big Read. 9 August 2007.

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Acknowledgments

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Arts Midwest promotes creativity, nurtures cultural leadership, and engages people in meaningful arts experiences, bringing vitality to Midwest communities and enriching people's lives. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six non-profit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest's history spans more than 30 years.



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