

Rocío Guenther

Dr. Victoria Aarons

Jewish Literature

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Protection & Survival as a Motive for Selfishness In Cynthia Ozick's "The Shawl"

Cynthia Ozick's harrowing story titled, "The Shawl," showcases the importance of highlighting a single story in order to show the extensive horror of the Holocaust. Ozick tells the story of three females—a mother Rosa, her fourteen-year-old daughter Stella, and her infant child Magda—who all live in a concentration camp. The piece is titled "The Shawl," as the garment is used to symbolize warmth, shelter, and hope and it binds them together in the narrative. Through elaborate word choice and lyrical description, Ozick enhances the magical nature of the shawl and places it as a pivotal element of survival. More importantly, Ozick's careful descriptions of Stella's feelings toward infant Magda bring to light the dehumanizing consequences the Shoah had on its victims. Additionally, through intricate descriptions of the natural world, Ozick sets the mood for the development of Stella's inevitable and instinctual selfishness due to the deplorable living circumstance. Furthermore, the importance placed on the shawl creates an expression of the courageous will to survive in the direst of circumstances.

As the story commences we get a very powerful line, which sets the scene for the coldness of the Nazi's and the eventual coldness that will provoke Stella to steal the shawl. Ozick opens the story with, "Stella, cold, cold, the coldness of hell" (Ozick, 219). Through polyptoton in the sentence and the repetition of the word "cold," Ozark places nature as complicit with the Nazi soldiers and the overall atmosphere of the camp. Hell is usually linked to fire and heat, but here the harsh weather is a cold hell on its own, the

weather bringing even more misery to these campers. The mention of “cold hell” enhances the rupture in the narrative, how the circumstances are askew. This paradoxical phrase highlights the unthinkable atmosphere, which has stripped the victims of their humanity. The further emphasis on coldness is enhanced later when Stella uses the phrase, “I was cold,” (Ozick, 221) as the explanation for stealing Magda’s shawl. Stella, in the story, becomes one with the coldness of nature, her heart hardens, and she herself becomes a “cold” person. We get clues of Stella’s barbaric transformation when Ozick writes, “Stella wanted to be wrapped in a shawl, hidden away, asleep, rocked by the march, a baby, a round infant in arms” (Ozick, 219). Stella wants that protection and innocence that Magda has, which only comes with being an infant. Here we see the hints of jealousy starting to show up, as Stella wishes to have a haven from the horror, just like Magda does in the shawl.

The shawl that comforts Magda becomes a symbol for warmth, safety and survival. The garment protects Magda from discovery; it is called “magical” due to the benefits it provides the infant. Ozick writes, “It was a magic shawl, it could nourish an infant for three days and three nights. Magda did not die, she stayed alive, although very quiet” (Ozick, 220). The child sucks on the shawl, as her mother does not have sufficient breast milk. The shawl becomes a form of protection for the child, from discovery as well as death. Ozick continues to call Magda, “a squirrel in a nest, safe, no one could reach her inside the little house of the shawls windings” (Ozick, 219). Ozick’s use of metaphor serves to explain the detachment of the child from the horror outside the barracks. The shawl is what is keeping Magda from view, and it has become a home, a hiding place. When Stella steals the shawl, it provokes Magda’s discovery and death. In a very animalistic gesture, Stella has ravenous thoughts against her sister and she decides to take the magic shawl away.

The animalistic descriptions peppered throughout the story, such as the description of Stella's elbows as "chicken bones" (Ozick, 219) and the mention of her "gazing at Magda like a young cannibal" (Ozick, 220) give the piece a barbaric undertone. Ozick's descriptive choices reveal Stella's inhumanity towards her own sister. The conditions of the camp have made the idea of family loyalty meaningless, and Ozick uses these stylistic tools to also push forward the idea that the malnourished victims of the Shoah began to think only of themselves after such extremes. They became animalistic, their survival instincts their sole motivation for making decisions. Ozick shows this cruel consequence through Stella's actions in the story. Both Rosa and Stella have been stripped of pity, and the nature of the camp has changed Stella forever. Ozick emphasizes, "And afterward she was always cold, always. The cold went into her heart: Rosa saw that Stella's heart was cold" (Ozick, 221). The cold weather introduced at the beginning of the story comes full circle to this moment; it shows the complicit natural environment as a motivator for the barbarity on Stella's part. Stella's jealousy hardens her heart; she becomes focused on herself and has been reduced to basic instincts for her own survival. In a similar way, Magda's protective nature over the shawl mirrors this as well.

In the same way that Stella only thinks of herself, Magda is very protective of her garment. She becomes very territorial of her shawl, and this is further emphasized as her eyes are compared to those of a tiger. Ozick writes, "Magda's eyes were always clear and tearless. She watched like a tiger. She guarded her shawl. No one could touch it; only Rosa could touch it. Stella was not allowed" (Ozick, 221). Tigers are predators, but they are extremely territorial animals as well. Ozick's mention of the tiger shows Magda's stubborn determination regarding her ownership of the shawl. Magda too has been reduced to a basic instinct for survival and the garment is what is keeping her alive,

thus, she is very protective of it and wants it only for herself. Magda “guards” her shawl like a tiger, in a very selfish way. Ozick continues, “The shawl was Magda’s own baby, her pet, her little sister” (Ozick, 221). The shawl has become the only intimate connection Magda makes in this world, it is the only thing she cares about above all else, it has become an obsession due to the instinct of survival. The repetitive mention throughout the narrative of the infant’s blue eyes shows the piercing determination of the infant. The concentration camp is like a jungle, everyone strives for survival and they are in away transformed into animals, acting on selfish instincts and desires. The shawl binds these women together, but it also makes them barbaric and instinctual. They have been reduced to pitiless, selfish beings that are close to dying at any moment.

The question of life and death is present throughout “The Shawl,” as the preoccupied Rosa constantly fears for the climactic day when Magda will die. She accepts that it will happen, but the question is when. The author foreshadows not only the death of Magda, but of her whole family. Ozick mentions the word “angel” or “angelic” several times to accentuate the delicate veil of imminent death that looms over the concentration camp victims. Ozick writes, “Rosa did not feel hunger; she felt light, not like someone walking but like someone in a faint, in trance, arrested in a fit, someone who is already a floating angel, alert and seeing everything, but in the air, not here, not touching the road” (Ozick, 219). Rosa, is already partially dead due to the horrible life she leads in the camp. She has been stripped of so many things such as pity, strength, and hope, that her life does not hold the same meaning it once did. Life is very delicate in the camp; the victims are riding down a thin line of morality.

The thin line that Ozick draws makes the camp a transitional place between life and death. Ozick’s word choice emphasizes the fragility of life experienced by all the victims in the camps, especially that of Rosa and her children. Words such as “light,”

“faint,” and “air” give the readers a sense of fleetingness, of a life no longer completely grounded in this world. Similarly, in a later part of the text the author says, “Rosa and Stella were slowly turning into air” (Ozick, 221). The repetitiveness of the word “air” suggests that these women are dying. Their souls are on the brink of leaving their bodies, their essence turning into “air” as they are on their way to another world—an afterlife. When describing Magda’s mouth, Ozick specifies: “One mite of a tooth tip sticking up in the bottom gum, how shining, an elfin tombstone of white marble gleaming there” (Ozick, 220). Ozick’s choice of the word “tombstone” to describe the protruding part of Magda’s tooth foreshadows her inevitable death in the camp. Tombstones house the dead, and the tooth emerging is like Magda’s death coming closer and closer. The readers know it is impossible for the infant to survive, they know she will eventually die in the camp, so this description echoes the inevitable fact even more.

When Magda finally dies, a soldier discovers her and throws her toward the barbed-wire fence. Ozick deftly describes, “She looked like a butterfly touching a silver vine. And the moment Magda’s feathered round head and her pencil legs and balloonish belly and zigzag arms splashed against the fence, the steel voices went mad in their growling” (Ozick, 223). Magda’s legs are constantly described as “pencil legs” to tug at the reader’s emotions, to show the malnutrition that Magda has suffered. Even during her death, these physical details are emphasized, for Ozick wants the reader to remain aware of the mangled body. The physical fragility enhanced by the detailed images gives the death even more impact, as the infant is thrown violently and her delicate body cannot survive the impact. In the passage the fence is growling, it has also become animalistic and complicit with everything else. Ozick mentions the “butterfly” previously, as Rosa is retrieving the shawl: “The sunheat murmured of another life, the butterflies in the summer. The light was placid, mellow” (Ozick, 222). This is moments

before Magda's death, so the image underlines the idea that outside of the camp there is life, inside the walls only death. Butterflies are representative of spring, and they morph from caterpillars into something new. Ozick is hinting at Magda's passing to another world, through her death. The author romanticizes Magda's death, when really it is the complete opposite, gruesome and violent. Ozick does so in order to continue the theme of rupture and otherworldliness that the conditions of the Holocaust brought forth. Ozick uses very concrete language to humanize and dehumanize her characters, especially in the ending of the story.

After Magda's death Rosa is completely shattered, but has to control her emotions, and Ozick shows this clash of emotions through the use of the shawl. The author says, "...she took Magda's shawl and filled her own mouth with it, stuffed it in, and stuffed it in, until she was swallowing up the wolf's screech and tasting the cinnamon and almond depth of Magda's saliva" (Ozick, 223). Rosa sucks the shawl to stifle her pain. She tastes her daughter's saliva, which increases her pain. The shawl is now protecting Rosa, like it protected Magda from death. Ozick describes Rosa sucking on the shawl because she is controlling her screams, if she does anything or reacts to what the soldier did, it could mean her own death. The shawl has now become Rosa's own personal protective haven against discovery, which is now keeping *her* alive. This is a clear parallel between her and Magda, as well as her other daughter Stella; they have all needed the shawl for specific purposes. The magical shawl is an emblem of survival for the females, but it also becomes a symbol of selfishness and suffering. The explicit ending in combination with the powerful symbolism of the garment intensifies Rosa's pain and desperation at not being able to save her daughter.

Works Cited

Ozick, Cynthia. "The Shawl." *America and I: Short Stories by American Jewish Women Writers*. By Joyce Antler. Boston: Beacon, 1990. 219-23. Print.