The Pagan Rabbi Study Guide

The Pagan Rabbi by Cynthia Ozick

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Introduction

"The Pagan Rabbi" was first published in the 1971 collection The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories, which garnered extensive critical acclaim for Cynthia Ozick. The book won the B'nai B'rith Jewish Heritage Award in 1971, The Jewish Book Council Award, and the Edward Lewis Wallant Memorial Award in 1972, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in 1973. It was also nominated for a National Book Award in 1971.

"The Pagan Rabbi" is told from the point of view of an unnamed narrator, who learns that Isaac Kornfeld, a renowned thirty-six-year-old rabbi with whom the narrator was acquainted, has committed suicide by hanging himself from a tree in a park. The narrator, seeking to understand Isaac's motive, first goes to see the tree from which he hanged himself, and then to see the rabbi's widow, Sheindal Kornfeld. The widow asks him to read the notebook and the letter found in the rabbi's pockets upon his death. The narrator and the widow discuss the meaning of the extensive musings of the rabbi, which address theological and philosophical questions regarding faith and the soul in relation to Nature. They conclude that the rabbi had secretly become a "pagan," seduced by a Creature that seemed to be a goddess of Nature.

This story addresses themes that appear in much of Ozick's short fiction, including the place of Judaism in secular America, idolatry, death, the soul, paganism, and crises in faith. It also addresses themes of marriage and family in relation to Jewish identity.

Author Biography

Known primarily for her short stories and novellas, Cynthia Ozick is one of the most celebrated Jewish- American writers of the century. She was born in New York, New York, on April 17, 1928. Her mother, born in the town of Hlusk, in the province of Minsk, Belarus, had escaped persecution of Jews there at age nine. Her father was also from Russia. Her parents owned the Park View Pharmacy, where she worked delivering prescriptions. In 1930, the family moved to what was then a rural area in Pelham Bay in the Bronx.

From 1942 to 1946, Ozick attended an all-girls high school at Hunter College in Manhattan. She attended college at New York University, graduating Phi Beta Kappa and cum laude with a major in English in 1949. She earned a master's degree in English from Ohio State University, with a thesis on "Parable in the Later Novels of Henry James." She attended a graduate seminar at Columbia University in 1951. From 1952 to 1953, she worked as an advertising copywriter for Filene's Department Store. Ozick was married in 1952 to an attorney by the name of Bernard Hallote, with whom she lived with her parents in New York City beginning in 1953. From 1964 to 1965, she taught freshman composition at New York University. Her daughter, Rachel, was born in 1965, the same year as the publication of *Trust*, Ozick's first novel, which had taken over six years to write. *Trust* received only lukewarm critical attention.

It was not until 1968 that Ozick began to receive recognition, both nationally and internationally, when she was made a fellow of the National Endowment for the Arts, and then invited to Israel to read one of her essays in 1970. In 1971, publication of *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories* brought her work extensive critical acclaim. It won the B'nai B'rith Jewish Heritage Award, the Jewish Book Council Award, the Edward Lewis Wallant Memorial Award, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award. Ozick is best known for her short story "The Shawl" (1981), in which a woman in a concentration camp hides her baby in a shawl for many months, until it is discovered and thrown against an electrical fence by the Nazis. Ozick has published many books of short stories and essays.

Plot Summary

In "The Pagan Rabbi," The narrator, an unnamed Jewish man in his mid-thirties, hears that Isaac Kornfeld, a childhood friend, has committed suicide at the age of thirty-six. The narrator's father, a rabbi, and Isaac's father, also a rabbi, had been friends as well as professional rivals. The narrator had been in rabbinical school with Isaac but had left while Isaac had gone on to become a renowned rabbi. The narrator had married Jane, a non-Jewish woman, and worked in her father's fur business. He later divorced, and began his own business as a bookseller. His store is called the Book Cellar. When he quit rabbinical school, the narrator's father had declared him dead, observed traditional Jewish mourning practices, and never spoken to him again. His father also had a disease of the throat that made speaking difficult and, eventually, impossible.

Upon hearing of Isaac Kornfeld's suicide, the narrator goes out to see the tree from which Kornfeld hanged himself. Although they were not friends, Isaac had, over the years, ordered all of his books from the narrator's bookstore, during which time they had exchanged brief notes to one another with each book order. Through this means, the narrator had learned that Isaac had seven daughters.

He then goes to see Sheindal, Isaac's widow. Having only met Sheindal once, at her wedding, the narrator finds that he "loved her at once." Sheindal was born in a concentration camp, where, as an infant she had been thrown against an electric barbed-wire fence by the Nazis, to kill her□but had been saved at the last moment when a liberating army cut off the electric current.

Sheindal begins to question the narrator about the type of books Isaac had ordered from him. She asks if he ordered any books having to do with plants or farming or agronomy. Sheindal, who seems bitter about her deceased husband, tells the narrator of the strange behavior Isaac had been exhibiting before his suicide. He read books only about plant life, briefly joined a hiking group, and taken to bringing the family out to the country on picnics. Isaac began to tell the children bizarre and fantastical bedtime stories. He eventually took to leaving the house early in the morning and staying out late.

Sheindal gives the narrator the small notebook that was found in Isaac's pocket after his death. The narrator returns to the tree in the park where Isaac had hung himself to read the contents of the note book. What is written in it seems unremarkable— the notes of a scholar regarding passages of literature and philosophy. The narrator feels that Sheindal meant to "punish" him for "asking the unaskable"—why Isaac had committed suicide.

Feeling angry and "cheated," the narrator returns to Sheindal's house to give back the notebook. Sheindal asks the narrator to read a "love letter" Isaac left before his death. The letter had been set between the pages of the notebook, but fallen out before the narrator left. The narrator is at first stunned by the idea that Isaac would have been carrying on an affair. He is reluctant to read it, but Sheindal insists upon reading it aloud

to him. The letter is addressed to a "Creature," and contains philosophical and theological musings on Nature and the soul. The letter then describes a mythical Creature, Iripomonoéià, that emerges from Nature in the park by the tree where he eventually hanged himself, and with whom the Rabbi claims that he copulated.

The rabbi's letter expresses a crisis in faith, documenting the struggle between his rabbinical orientation and his discovery of a "pagan" worship of Nature. Sheindal expresses disgust that her husband was secretly a "pagan." The narrator is more sympathetic to the deceased rabbi's philosophical musings upon his "soul." He advises her to forgive Isaac, but she is full of spite and bitterness. While the narrator had at first secretly intended to woo and marry Sheindal, her inability to appreciate the rabbi's crisis in faith leads him to change his mind about her. He leaves, advising her that her "husband's soul is in that park." He goes home and flushes his three houseplants down the toilet.

Summary

"The Pagan Rabbi" is Cynthia Ozick's short story of a well-respected rabbi who hangs himself and the nature of his inner conflict of religion versus nature, which is revealed in a letter found after his death.

An unnamed narrator learns that his longtime acquaintance, a thirty-six-year-old rabbi named Isaac Kornfeld, has hanged himself in a public park. The narrator is a childhood friend of Isaac's, and he visits the park in the hopes that something might exhibit itself and provide some clues as to why Isaac ended his life there.

Isaac and the narrator attended rabbinical school together, and Isaac went on to become an esteemed rabbi, while the narrator dropped out of school to work at various jobs such as a fur coat salesman and most recently, the owner of a bookstore. Isaac was a voracious reader and purchased most of his books from his old friend. Their relationship continued in this way for several years.

While Isaac established the iconic Jewish lifestyle, complete with a wife, Sheindel, born in a concentration camp, and seven beautiful daughters, the narrator married and subsequently divorced a Protestant woman much to the chagrin of his father, who disowned his son for his apparent failures.

The narrator was always attracted to Sheindel and visits her at her apartment one day under the pretense of talking about Isaac. Sheindel knows that Isaac purchased books from the narrator's store and wonders if Isaac was interested in any books on the subjects of botany, plants or agronomy. The narrator cannot recall any specific books and can only tell Sheindel that Isaac had a passionate interest in many topics over the years.

Sheindel reveals that Isaac joined a hiking club and went out at night, sometimes staying out all night on hiking trips. The hiking eventually exhausted Isaac, who resigned from the club and began to write fairy tales. This new avocation delighted his daughters but concerned Sheindel because of Isaac's abrupt change from academia to fantasy.

The narrator cannot provide any clues that will help Sheindel understand Isaac's uncharacteristic behavior, but he takes Isaac's notebook when Sheindel suggests that if he reads it, something might occur to him. Returning to the park where Isaac hanged himself, the narrator begins to read the contents of the notebook.

Unfortunately, the notebook offers up no content of immediate value, simply some musings, random thoughts and bits of poetry. It includes a verse from Tennyson, "And yet all is not taken. Still one Dryad flies through the wood, one Oread skims the hill; White in the whispering stream still gleams a Naiad; The beauty of the earth is haunted still."

The narrator is embarrassed for Isaac. He finishes reading the notebook's contents and returns it to Sheindel soon afterwards. When the narrator arrives at Sheindel's apartment, she tells him that a letter has fallen out of the notebook and that the narrator must read it to fully understand her dilemma regarding Isaac's mental state at the time of his suicide. Sheindel tells the narrator that the letter is a love letter written by Isaac. The narrator is uncomfortable reading it, so Sheindel begins to read it aloud.

Addressed simply to "Creature," the letter poses Isaac's questions regarding the issues of faith versus reality and the probable futility of religion. Therefore, he is questioning his entire existence up to this point. Isaac's crisis in his faith sends him to commune with nature, where he is able to encounter pagan creatures, one in particular named Iripomonoeia, with whom he engages in a sexual relationship.

Iripomonoeia shows Isaac her immortal life as part of nature, as opposed to Isaac's doomed mortality because he chooses a faith-based life. Iripomonoeia allows Isaac a vision of his soul in the shape of an exhausted old man doomed to a bitter demise, an image which ultimately pushes Isaac to take his own life.

As Sheindel finishes the letter, Isaac's words bid farewell to the creature as he says, "see how I am coiled in the snail of this shawl as if in a leaf. I crouch to write my words. Let soul call thee lit, but body... body... fingers twist, knuckles dark as wood, tongue dries like grass, deeper now into silk... silk of pod of shawl, knees wilt, knuckles wither, neck..."

Sheindel is outraged at Isaac's entrye into the pagan world, and she denounces her husband for his betrayal to the Jewish faith. This inability to appreciate Isaac's state of mind convinces the narrator that Sheindel lacks the compassion he seeks for himself, and he determines not to pursue a relationship with her.

The narrator advises Sheindel to visit the park where Isaac died in order to find some understanding, but she has no interest in searching for her husband's soul in a city park. The whole experience has shaken the narrator, and upon arriving home, he immediately flushes his houseplants down the commode and ultimately back to nature.

Analysis

The story is told from the first person limited perspective, which means that the reader knows only what the narrator experiences and thinks. The author does not provide insight from any other character, other than direct actions and written words. For example, there is much more information provided about the narrator's life with Isaac through the narrator's memories than is presented through the limited view of Sheindel's life with Isaac, known only by her brief interaction with the narrator after Isaac's death.

The author begins the story in the present and then moves to the past as experienced through the narrator's thoughts and memories. The story ends in the present with the narrator's visits with Sheindel.

The author uses the literary techniques of symbolism and metaphors to add dimension and interest to the story. For example, when the narrator first visits the city park to view the tree where Isaac hanged himself, he notes that the "tree lay back against the sky like a licked postage stamp. Rain began to beat it flatter yet. A stench of sewage came up like a veil in the nostril." This imagery is much more descriptive of the sensory attributes of the situation than if the author had said that the tree looked flat against the sky and a smell rose up.

The author uses many such examples throughout the story, but the most poignant and graphic one is the mention of Isaac "coiled in the snail of this shawl as if in a leaf... fingers twist, knuckles dark as wood, tongue dries like grass, deeper into the silk... silk of pod of shawl, knees wilt, knuckles wither, neck..." Isaac was found hanging from a tree, his neck wrapped in his silk prayer shawl, and the author poetically melds this symbol of Judaism with his obsession with nature by giving the shawl leaf-like or pod-like characteristics as he dies.

There is no happy ending or hopeful moral to this story, but the author does propose the idea that perhaps Isaac's rejection of faith was valid. Sheindel completely rejects any redemptive thoughts about Isaac and withdraws unconditional love once she realizes that Isaac had a crisis in his faith, which is counter to Isaac's belief system as to what religion should represent. The narrator is far kinder to Isaac's plight and state of mind, and even though he left active practice of the Jewish faith, he emerges as the hero of the story for his faithfulness in the human condition.

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Characters

Iripomonoéià

Iripomonoéià is the "Creature" Rabbi Isaac Kornfeld addresses in the "love" letter found in his pocket after he hanged himself from a tree in a park. She seems to be a sort of pagan goddess of Nature, who seduces the rabbi into the "pagan" worship of Nature over his Jewish faith.

Isaac and Sheindal's Daughters

Isaac and Sheindal have seven daughters, including Naomi, Esther, Miriam and Ophra. Isaac announces each new birth to the narrator in brief notes that they exchange with each book the rabbi orders from the bookseller. As the rabbi's preoccupation with Nature becomes more extreme, his bedtime stories to his daughters become more fantastical and disturbing.

Isaac Kornfeld's Father

Isaac Kornfeld's father, a rabbi, was both friends and enemies with the narrator's father, also a rabbi. The two fathers shared a professional competition in their rabbinical work and prestige.

Jane

Jane is the narrator's former wife. As she is non-Jewish, his marriage to her represents a rebellion against his father, who is a rabbi. The narrator worked in Jane's father's fur business while married to her, but left the business when they divorced.

Isaac Kornfeld

Isaac Kornfeld is the "pagan rabbi" of the story's title. He is a renowned rabbi who commits suicide by hanging himself from a tree in a park at the age of thirty-six. The story centers on the narrator's attempts to understand the motivation and meaning of the rabbi's unexpected suicide. He learns, through a letter and a notebook found in the rabbi's pockets at the time of his death, that the rabbi had become preoccupied with philosophical and theological musings on the worship of Nature. The rabbi had written a "love letter" to a Creature, which seemed to be some sort of goddess of nature. Seduced by this Creature of Nature, he had become obsessed with nature and plant life, which carried him further and further away from his Jewish faith toward a "paganism" based on the worship of Nature.

Sheindal Kornfeld

Sheindal Kornfeld, also addressed as Rebbetzin Kornfeld (wife of the rabbi), is the widow of Rabbi Isaac Kornfeld. The narrator had first met her at her wedding to Isaac, when she was seventeen years old. He was struck by her long, dark, beautiful hair, which would be hidden from the public eye, according to Orthodox Jewish Law, after her marriage. Sheindal is a Holocaust survivor, who was born in a concentration camp and saved by a liberating army at the last minute from death by being thrown against an electrical fence by the Nazis. She retains a scar, shaped like an asterisk, on her cheek where the barbed wire had cut her face. When the narrator goes to visit her upon Isaac's suicide, she is bitter and disdainful of her husband's loss of Jewish faith and foray into the pagan worship of Nature. The narrator falls in love with Sheindal immediately upon seeing her, and plans to woo and marry her. But after she shows him the letter left by the rabbi, the narrator is struck by her inability to forgive her deceased husband for his apostasy. The narrator, reminded of his own father, who refused to forgive him for quitting rabbinical school, leaves Sheindal, no longer interested in marrying her.

The Narrator

The narrator of the story, who is unnamed, is a Jewish man in his mid-thirties. His father was a rabbi. When he left rabbinical school, his father declared him dead and never spoke to him again. As the story opens, he has just learned that Isaac Kornfeld, with whom he had attended rabbinical school, had committed suicide by hanging himself from a tree. In an attempt to understand the meaning of Isaac's death, the narrator first goes to look at the tree from which Isaac hanged himself, then goes to visit Sheindal, Isaac's widow. The narrator learns about Isaac's crisis in faith and turn to the "pagan" worship of Nature through Sheindal, who asks him to read both the notebook and the letter left in the rabbi's pockets upon his death. The narrator instantly falls in love with Sheindal, having met her only once before, and the two of them discuss Isaac's preoccupation with Nature leading up to his suicide. When the narrator sees that Sheindal is unable to forgive her deceased husband for wandering from Jewish faith into paganism, he is reminded of his own father, who was unable to forgive him for leaving rabbinical school. No longer interested in pursuing Sheindal, the narrator leaves her, suggesting she go to find her husband's soul in the park where he hung himself. He goes home and flushes the three houseplants he has down the toilet.

The Narrator's Father

The narrator's father, a rabbi, declares his son (the narrator) dead when he leaves rabbinical school. He observes traditional Jewish mourning practices over the loss of his son, and never speaks to him again, even when they are both present at Isaac's wedding to Sheindal. The narrator's father has a disease of the throat, an "obstruction" that makes it difficult and, eventually, impossible for him to speak. The narrator explains that "I was afraid of my father; he had a certain disease of the larynx, and if he even

uttered something so trivial as 'Bring the tea' to my mother, it came out splintered, clamorous, and vindictive." At the present time of the story, the narrator's father is already dead.

Themes

Death and Mourning

This story focuses on the theme of death and mourning. It begins with the death by suicide of Rabbi Isaac Kornfeld. In visiting Sheindal, the rabbi's widow, the narrator implicitly "asks the unaskable"—what is the meaning of the rabbi's suicide? The narrator's own father, also a rabbi, had declared him dead when he decided to leave rabbinical school and, following traditional Jewish mourning practices, he "rent his clothes and sat on a stool for eight days." The narrator's father never spoke to him again, eventually dying without another word to his own son. The narrator declares that "it is easy to honor a father from afar, but bitter to honor one who is dead." In discussing Isaac's suicide with Sheindal, the narrator blurts out, "What do you want from the dead?" Isaac's philosophical and theological musings, left in his letter and notebook, also address themes of death, in relation to the soul: "There is nothing that is Dead. There is no Non-life. Holy life subsists even in the stone, even in the bones of dead dogs and dead men." In recording his discussion with the Nature goddess, the rabbi reports that she told him, that, in men's praise of Nature, "It is not Nature they love so much as Death they fear."

Marriage and Family

The narrator's quest for the meaning of the rabbi's suicide is in part an attempt to make sense of his own experiences of marriage and family. His father having declared him dead, the narrator married a non-Jewish woman, clearly out of rebellion. At the Orthodox wedding between Isaac and Sheindal, the narrator becomes aware of his non-Jewish wife's negative attitude about Jews and Judaism, and compares their secular wedding in a courthouse to the religious ritual of the Orthodox wedding. The narrator's initial plan to woo and marry Sheindal, after Isaac's suicide, is a swing in the opposite direction, a desire to reconnect with an Orthodox Jewish life after the failure of his marriage to a non-Jewish woman. In the end, however, the narrator's desire to reconcile his failed relationship with his dead father, a rabbi, by marrying the widow of a rabbi, is negated when he finds that, much as his own father refused to forgive him for leaving rabbinical school, so Sheindal refuses to forgive her dead husband for leaving his Jewish faith in the pursuit of paganism.

Crisis in Faith

This is the story of an Orthodox rabbi's secret crisis in faith, as revealed posthumously through the note and letter he left upon his suicide. The worldrenowned rabbi develops a secret life in which he addresses theological and philosophical questions concerning the pagan worship of Nature. The rabbi's extreme crisis in faith, which results in his suicide, parallels the crisis in faith of the narrator, who chose not to pursue his father's

rabbinical career. Ozick's writing often addresses crises in faith of Jewish people in secular America. The seduction of the Orthodox rabbi by a pagan goddess of Nature represents the seductiveness of secular, non-Jewish society to many modern Jews.

Nature

The "pagan rabbi" is seduced away from his Jewish faith by a goddess of Nature. He becomes preoccupied with Nature in the form of the plant world, and with literary and philosophical references to Nature. His notebook contains quotes from the Romantic poets of the nineteenth century, whose poetry focuses on Nature as a source of inspiration. Nature is posed in opposition to Jewish theology. Having been exposed to such musing on the part of the rabbi, at the end of the story, the narrator finds himself flushing his three houseplants down the toilet. This is a highly enigmatic ending. Is the narrator negating any evidence in his own home of the worship of Nature? Is he, in effect, liberating the houseplants, by sending them back into nature, via the public sewer system, through which they will end up in the river of sewage by the park where the rabbi hung himself? Is this story a condemnation of paganism? These questions are left for the reader to interpret, without clear guidance from the narrator.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is an important theme of this story, in terms of the relationships between characters in the context of their Jewish identity. The narrator's father is unable to forgive him for choosing not to become a rabbi. The father's inability to forgive is so extreme that he declares his son dead and never speaks to him again. The narrator's psychology is deeply rooted in the bitterness of being cast out by his own father. When, in the end of the story, the narrator sees that Sheindal is unwilling to forgive her dead husband for his "paganism," he is reminded of his own father's obstinacy, and loses any desire to marry her.

Style

Narrative Point-of-View

This story is told from the first person limited perspective, meaning that the reader is given only information which the narrator, also the protagonist of the story, also has. This is effective in that, while the story centers on the suicide and religious crisis of Isaac Kornfeld, the "pagan rabbi," it is portrayed as a reflection upon the religious and identity crisis of the narrator himself. The reader is presented with the events and characters only from the perspective of the narrator. Thus, each element of the story further develops the character of the narrator.

Story Framing

As in many of Ozick's stories, this one is built upon multiple types of story framing. The first person narrator begins by narrating the events of the "present" time in the story, which begin when he learns of the suicide of rabbi Kornfeld. The narrator, however, explains the significance of the present events in relation to past events, which are related in a sort of "flashback" mode, jumping between past and present. When he goes to visit Sheindal, the rabbi's widow, she in turn narrates to him the story of her husband's behavior leading up to his suicide. When she gives the narrator the rabbi's notebook, the story unfolds through the narrator's discussion of direct quotes from the rabbi's writings. Later, when Sheindal hands him the letter Isaac left, the narrator is reluctant to read it; instead, Sheindal reads the letter aloud to him. This narrative technique creates a kind of "Chinese box" or Russian tea doll effect, whereby a story is revealed through multiple framing. The narrator is telling a story which is based on Sheindal's story of the rabbi, which is based on her reading aloud the rabbi's letter.

Literary References

Ozick's writing is known to be difficult due in part to the erudite literary references that play a significant role in her stories. In describing Rabbi Isaac Kornfeld's reading habits, the narrator explains that, "One day he was weeping with Dostoyesvski and the next leaping in the air over Thomas Mann." It would be important to know about the great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyesvski and the great German writer Thomas Mann to appreciate the significance of these references to the themes of the story. In reading Isaac's notebook, the narrator mentions a number of literary references. The rabbi jotted down passages and quotes from various writers, which the narrator describes as "the elegiac favorites of a closeted Romantic." The narrator here is referring specifically to the literary period of Romanticism, which flourished in the early nineteenth century. The narrator cites some of the most renowned romantic poets from the rabbi's notebooks: "He had put down a snatch of Byron, a smudge of Keats . . . "

Greek Mythology

In his pursuit of the worship of Nature, the rabbi turns to Greek mythology. In his notebook the narrator finds the statement, "Great Pan lives." This refers to the Greek god Pan, half goat, half man. The goddess of Nature who seduces the rabbi into paganism is given the Greek-sounding name of Iripomonoéià.

Character Names

Most of the characters in this story have names taken from the Old Testament. The rabbi's name is Isaac. Isaac is the only son of Abraham and Sarah. God commands Abraham to sacrifice his own son; Abraham demonstrates his faith in God by preparing to carry out this command, but at the last minute, God commands Abraham to spare the boy's life. This biblical tale points to both the unquestioning faith of Abraham and the mercy of God. In Ozick's story, Isaac's daughters also have biblical names such as Naomi, Esther, and Miriam. Each name thus refers to a biblical character and story. Learning more about these biblical references would shed further light on the themes of the story.

Historical Context

The Three Denominations of Judaism

There are three main denominations of Judaism— Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. Orthodox Judaism maintains the strictest observance of traditional Jewish law and ritual. (Hasidism is an even more traditional practice of Orthodox Judaism.) Conservative Judaism, while maintaining most of these traditions, concedes to some modernization of the observance of Jewish law. Conservative Judaism can be traced back to Germany in the 1840s. In 1985, a significant change in the policy of Conservative Judaism was the decision to ordain women rabbis. Reform Judaism, which dates back to the early 1800s, is the observance most adapted to modern society, and focuses less on the strict observance of traditional Jewish law. Reform Judaism was the first branch to include a girls' Bat Mitzvah confirmation equivalent to the traditional boys' Bar Mitzvah confirmation. A newer and more radical practice of Judaism is Reconstructionism.

The Rabbinical Council of America

The Rabbinical Council of America is a national organization of Orthodox rabbis, founded in 1923. It is a branch of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, founded in 1898. Together, these organizations are devoted to supporting Orthodox Jewish observance and education, as well as supporting the State of Israel. They are also the primary body that overseas the approval of manufactured foods as "kosher," or consistent with Jewish dietary laws.

The Medieval Ghetto

Rabbi Isaac Kornfeld in this story at one point mentions the "medieval ghetto" in the "letter" that the narrator reads. In modern American usage "ghetto" generally refers to low-income areas of a city, often inhabited primarily by minority populations. However, the term "ghetto," first dubbed in the early sixteenth century, referred to areas of many cities in which Jews were legally forced to live, segregated from the rest of the population. A high fence or gate usually enclosed ghettos, and Jews had to observe special rules and precautions when venturing outside of the walls of the ghetto. In Nazi Germany, the practice of the "ghetto" was brought into use as a means of temporarily containing Jews in one area of a city before sending them off to the death camps.

Yeshiva University

A yeshiva is an institution of Jewish learning and scholarship. In the United States, the first yeshiva was established in New York City in 1886. In 1928 it became Yeshiva College, and in 1945 Yeshiva University.

Philip Roth

Philip Roth is a contemporary modern Jewish- American writer, perhaps better known than Ozick. Roth's stories, while very different in style, address many similar themes and concerns as do Ozick's. His first book, *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (1959) addresses themes of Jewish identity and faith in the context of secular American culture, as well as themes of family and sexuality. His most famous, most popular, and most controversial work is *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), a novel in which Alexander Portnoy, a Jewish man in his thirties, addresses his psychotherapist concerning his preoccupations with his Jewish identity, overbearing mother, and neurotic sexuality.

Critical Overview

Lawrence S. Friedman refers to "The Pagan Rabbi" as "a quintessential Ozick story." It was first published in *The Hudson Review* in 1966, and then in 1971 as the title piece in the first collection of Ozick's short stories, *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories*. Garnering extensive critical acclaim, this collection won the B'nai B'rith Jewish Heritage Award in 1971, The Jewish Book Council Award, and the Edward Lewis Wallant Memorial Award in 1972, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in 1973. It was also nominated for a National Book Award in 1971. "The Pagan Rabbi" is included in the collection *Neurotica: Jewish Writers on Sex* (1999). Critics have consistently praised Ozick as a leading writer of short fiction. Five of Ozick's short stories have been included in the annual anthology, *The Best American Short Stories*, and three of her stories have won the O. Henry Award.

While critics haggle over whether or not Ozick, an Orthodox Jew, can only be understood as a Jewish-American writer, or if she is more accu- rately categorized in the larger canon of American writers, most agree on the central themes of Ozick's fiction: the place of the Jew in secular American society; the role of the writer in Jewish culture; and the lure of paganism or idolatry in opposition to Judaism. Ozick's first novel *Trust* (1966), which took her over six years to write, received only mild attention and mixed, lukewarm reviews. However, with the publication of *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories*, Victor Strandberg asserts that "Ozick makes the transition from being an 'American novelist' to being one of our foremost Jewish American storytellers." Josephine Z. Knopp states that "Jewishness and Judaism are among Cynthia Ozick's central concerns as a writer." Strandberg states that "a master theme" of Ozick's work is "what, in this time and place, it means to be a Jew."

Gigliola Nocera concurs that Ozick's "main concern as a writer" is "the difficulty of being Jewish today." Sanford Pinkster points to the originality of Ozick's early work as a Jewish writer: "'The Pagan Rabbi' is so unlike any previous Jewish-American story one can think of that its central tension has become Ozick's signature." Pinkster claims that Ozick "has changed radically the way we define Jewish-American writing, and more important, the way Jewish-American writing defines itself." Elaine M. Kuavar, however, makes the case that the stories of Ozick should be understood in a broader context of American literature, claiming that "Cynthia Ozick's art is central to American literature, not peripheral to it."

Friedman states that "with the publication of her first volume of short fiction, Judaism is firmly established as the dominant force in Ozick's work." Friedman sees Ozick's Jewishness as central to her fiction: "Ozick observes the world through the eyes of a deeply committed Jew." He points to a central theme in her work, in which "opposing ideologies clash on the moral battleground of fictions peopled largely by contemporary Jews." These "opposing ideologies" are "conventional Judaism" in con- flict with "whatever is not: paganism, Christianity, secularism." The lure of assimilation into mainstream American culture for the contemporary Jew is one focus of this theme.

According to Friedman, in Ozick's fiction, "assimilation is anathema, involving as it does the yielding up of Jewish identity, the homogenization of Jewish uniqueness."

One of the most central and recurring conflicts in Ozick's fiction is that between Hellenism (Greek mythology) and Hebraism (Jewish theological doctrine). Critics have also referred to this conflict in Ozick's work as "Pan-versus-Moses." Friedman explains that: "In her fiction the Hellenism that spawned pagan gods repeatedly squares off against the Hebraism that invented monotheism. The battle between conflicting values is fought in the hearts and minds of Ozick's Jewish protagonists—all of whom can attain, maintain, or regain moral stature only in fidelity to Judaism." Friedman claims that "The Pagan Rabbi" is one of two of her "most powerful stories" that "illustrate[s] the surrender to pagan temptations associated with the Hellenistic world." Calling "The Pagan Rabbi" Ozick's "most inventive amalgam of the whimsical and the moralistic," Sarah Blacher Cohen concludes that "it stresses the injurious effects of choosing pagan aesthetics over Jewish ethics and spirituality." Closely associated with paganism is the worship of nature; as Friedman claims, "A recurring motif in Ozick's fiction is the opposition of pagan naturalism to Jewish traditional religious practice."

Idolatry, in opposition to the Second Commandment, is one of the most important recurring themes in Ozick's work. Friedman states that "in a typical Ozick story idol worship signifies moral transgression." Quoting from Ozick's essay "The Riddle of the Ordinary," Kuavar explains that, for Ozick "an idol" is "'anything that is allowed to come between ourselves and God. Anything that is *instead?* of God.'" Sarah Blacher Cohen points out that "Ozick's characters fall prey to an alluring idolatry, with its false promise of fulfillment." Kuavar points out that "idolatry and idolaters abound" in Ozick's fiction.

Ozick's concern with idolatry has also affected her understanding of the role of the writer in Jewish culture. Friedman explains that "like any Jewish writer, Ozick is subject to the tension created by the sometimes antithetical demands of religion and art. To be a writer is to risk competing with the Creator, thereby drawing perilously close to what the Jew must shun . . . ." Such an act of creation in defiance of God is associated in Ozick's writing with the pagan worship of multiple gods, also a form of idolatry. Friedman states that "the fear that those who make art serve pagan gods instead of the Jewish God threads through Ozick's writing." Joseph Lowin explains that "for many years, Ozick has been asking herself, and us, how it is possible to be both Jewish and a writer. For her, the term 'Jewish writer' is an oxymoron—like 'pagan rabbi'—in which each half of the phrase is antithetical to the other . . . "

Critics agree that an awareness of Jewish history, particularly the Holocaust, is also central to Ozick's stories. Knopp states that:

As with other Jewish-American writers who merit serious attention, Ozick's work displays an acute historical consciousness, an understanding of the role of Judaism in world history. Her Jewish stories earn that designation by virtue of a perspective shaped by the author's sense of Jewish history. They succeed in placing contemporary Jewish problems within their historical framework, thus illuminating the anomalies of modern

Jewish life while at the same time revealing the significance for the present of the link with the Jewish past.

Critics have also made note of the "difficult" nature of Ozick's stories, from the perspective of the reader. Friedman states that "while her stories dealing with what it means to be Jewish understandably fail to achieve broad popular success, they have earned wide critical acclaim." Earl Rovit points out that, because of its "density, allusiveness, intellectual concern, and ambiguity," Ozick's body of work "presents formidable difficulties for its readers." He goes on to explain that "the typical Ozick tale is multilayered, deliberately skewed, and elusive in meaning."

In assessing Ozick's body of fiction as a whole, Strandberg sees her focus on Jewish themes as a strength in her literary achievement as an American writer:

What matters in the end is the imaginative power to elevate local materials toward universal and timeless significance. By that standard, I judge Ozick's work to be memorably successful. Her variety and consistent mastery of styles; her lengthening caravan of original and unforgettably individualized characters; her eloquent dramatization through these characters of significant themes and issues; her absorbing command of dialogue and narrative structure; her penetrating and independent intellect undergirding all she writes—these characteristics of her art perform a unique service for her subject matter, extracting from her Jewish heritage a vital significance unlike that transmitted by any other writer. In the American tradition, Cynthia Ozick significantly enhances our national literature by so rendering Jewish culture.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American culture, specializing in cinema studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the Jewish theological texts referred to in this story.

Critics have noted that Cynthia Ozick's stories are difficult. This assessment is in part due to the erudite character of Ozick's literary style, which makes reference to literary, philosophical, and theological texts not necessarily familiar to the reader. In particular, there are many references to elements of religious doctrine, ritual, and observance practices specific to Judaism. The following essay provides a brief gloss of the key texts of Jewish theology referred to in "The Pagan Rabbi," and their significance to the story.

The narrator mentions that Isaac Kornfeld, the thirty-six year old rabbi whose suicide initiates the story, is a professor of Mishnaic history, who had published a "remarkable collection of responsa." To understand the significance of this, one must have a clear idea of the central texts of Judaism. The Torah refers to the first five books of the Old Testament, also called the Pentateuch (from the root "five"): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Torah is taken to be the text of God's revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Torah in a Jewish synagogue is handwritten on parchment scrolls and kept in a special cabinet called an "ark," removed only for special rituals and holidays. The Mishna was the first written, codified text compiling an authoritative volume of the orally taught Jewish laws, rituals, and traditions to be recorded since the Torah. The Mishna was compiled over the course of two centuries by many scholars, and completed in the early third century, A.D. Two collections of commentary on the Mishna were later compiled in a volume called the Gemara or Talmud, completed in the fourth and fifth centuries, A.D. The Talmud also sometimes refers to the Mishna and Gemara together.

The Mishna is made up of six sections, each of which is divided into tractates (treatises). The first section, Zera'im ("Seeds"), is comprised of eleven tractates, which discuss daily prayer and religious laws regarding agriculture. The second section, Mo'ed ("Festival") is comprised of twelve tractates, which discuss the laws pertaining to ritual observance of the Sabbath and other religious holidays. The third section, Mahim ("Women"), is comprised of seven tractates, which discuss rituals and laws pertaining to marriage and divorce. The fourth section, Neziqin ("Damages") is comprised of ten tractates, which discuss civil and criminal laws.

Neziqin also includes the important prohibition on Idolatry (the worship of graven images), which is punishable by death. One of these seven tractates, *The Ethics of the Fathers*, provides guidance for a moral life that does not violate these laws. The fifth section, Qodashim ("Holy Things"), is comprised of eleven tractates, and discusses laws and rituals regarding the Temple of Jerusalem. The sixth section of the Mishna, Tohorot ("Purifications"), is divided into twelve tractates, and discusses laws and rituals of purification.

Further written commentary on the Talmud (the Mishna and the Germara), called responsa (written replies), developed in the seventh century. Responsa continue to be written (and published) in modern times, by learned rabbis. The character of rabbi Isaac Kornfeld, the pagan rabbi of Ozick's fictional story, as a scholar of Mishnaic history, has published more than one renowned volume of Responsa at the time of his suicide. The rabbi's apostasy, or moving away from Jewish faith, is all the more drastic in the context of his role as a scholar of Jewish law. For instance, the law against Idolatry, punishable by death, is discussed in the fourth section of the Mishna. The rabbi in the story, however, eventually gives in to "idolatry," as he feels compelled to worship Nature over God. Yet the rabbi's reasoning, as revealed in the letter that Sheindal, his widow, reads to the narrator, concludes that, as God resides in Nature, the worship of Nature is not idolatry at all, but merely an extension of the worship of God. Sheindal reads:

It is false history, false philosophy and false religion which declare to us human ones that we live among Things. The arts of physics and chemistry begin to teach us differently, but their way of compassion is new, and finds few to carry fidelity to its logical and beautiful end. The molecules dance inside all forms, and within the molecules dance the atoms, and within the atoms dance still profounder sources of divine vitality. There is nothing that is Dead. There is no Non-life. Holy life subsists even in the stone, even in the bones of dead dogs and dead men. Hence in God's fecundating Creation there is no possibility of Idola try, and therefore no possibility of committing that socalled abomination.

The rabbi thus refers to Jewish doctrine to justify his violation of that very doctrine.

In the notebook found in the pocket of the rabbi after he hanged himself, the narrator finds passages from the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. The passages, scrawled in Hebrew, are "drawn mostly from Leviticus and Deuteronomy," the third and fifth books. One quote, which the narrator explains is "not quite verbatim," reads: "And the soul that turneth after familiar spirits to go a-whoring after them, I will cut him off from among his people."

This quote is significant to the story in that the rabbi, in fact, does eventually "turneth after familiar spirits" in the form of the spirit of Nature that he pursues in the park. He can further be said to "go awhoring after them," as his obsession with the wood nymph takes on a distinctly sexual element. The rabbi, as a result of his direct violation of the laws of his religion, is spiritually "cut off from among his people." The alienation from his own religious community that resulted from the rabbi's foray into the worship of Nature, it is suggested, may have contributed to his eventual suicide.

The rabbi's theological and philosophical foray into the worship of Nature includes reference to Shekhina. Shekhina is a term, which in Jewish theology, refers to the presence of God in the world. It comes from the Hebrew meaning "presence" or "dwelling." Shekhina is sometimes used in place of the word for God in the Talmud. In Ozick's story, the rabbi mentions Shekhina twice. In one passage of the letter that Sheindal reads to the narrator, he mentions Shekhina in relation to the "coupling" of "mortals" with "gods."

An extraordinary thought emerged in me. It was luminous, profound, and practical. More than that, it had innumerable precedents; the mythologies had documented it a dozen times over. It recalled all those mortals reputed to have coupled with gods (a collective word, showing much common sense, signifying what our philosophers more abstrusely call Shekhina), and all that poignant miscegenation represented by centaurs, satyrs, mermaids, fauns, and so forth. The rabbi's thought process, as recorded, is a process by which he justifies his own act of "coupling" with the Creature, a sort of goddess of Nature. These thoughts, however, represent a complete violation of Jewish theological doctrine, a central tenet of which is the existence of "one" god. The rabbi refers to "gods," which he then relates to Jewish theology, suggesting that Shekhina in fact represents a Jewish notion of multiple gods. One can only assume that there are complex theological discussions in rabbinical scholarship that address the significance of Shekhina, but at least at a fundamental level, it seems that the rabbi, in his thinking, is twisting a Jewish doctrine that clearly emphasizes "one" god, into a justification for his developing pagan beliefs, which in fact completely violate Jewish doctrine. This convoluted reasoning on the part of the rabbi leads up to his attempt to "copulate" with the "Creature" of the Nature goddess. He hopes, by this act, to "free my own soul from my body":

By all these evidences I was emboldened in my confidence that I was surely not the first man to conceive such a desire in the history of our earth. Creature, the thought that took hold of me was this: if only I could couple with one of the free souls, the strength of the connection would likely wrest my own soul from my body—seize it, as if by tongs, draw it out, so to say, to its own freedom. The intensity and force of my desire to capture one of these beings now became prodigious.

The rabbi comes to believe that through sexual union with the pagan Creature, or goddess of Nature, his soul will achieve transcendence. The rabbi successfully calls forth the Creature to satisfy his desire when he evokes the name of Shekhina. "As the sons of God came to copulate with women, so now let a daughter of Shekhina the Emanation reveal herself to me. Nymph, come now, come now." Again, the rabbi uses the term Shekhina, which refers to the Jewish belief in the presence of "one" God, in order to address the purely pagan and multiple spirit of Nature, a concept totally in violation of Jewish doctrine. The rabbi then de scribes an ecstatic sexual experience, in which he "couples" with what seems to be "some sinewy animal." The rabbi is fully aware that this would be a violation of Jewish law, stating that he "believed I was defiled, as it is written: 'Neither shalt thou lie with any beast.'" But, when he finally sees the Creature, which appears as a form combining features of an adolescent girl and those of a plant or flower, the rabbi justifies his encounter by exclaiming that "scripture does not forbid sodomy with the plants."

The rabbi describes a series of nights of passionate copulation with the plant nymph, until, one night, she tells him that his body no longer contains his soul. She points to a man walking on the road, wearing a prayer shawl and carrying "some huge and terrifying volume, heavy as stone," which turns out to be "a Tractate. A Tractate of the Mishnah." (A prayer shawl, also called a talith, is traditionally worn by Jewish men, wrapped around the shoulders, during prayer.) The nymph flees, and the rabbi

approaches the man, who admits to being the rabbi's soul. The rabbi's devotion to the study of Jewish theology in books is markedly contrasted to his sexual coupling with the pagan Creature of Nature. The rabbi asks his soul "if he intended to go with his books through the whole future without change, always with his Tractate in his hand, and he answered that he could do nothing else." The rabbi then unwraps the prayer shawl from the man who is his soul, and hangs himself with it from a tree.

The implications of "The Pagan Rabbi" for Jewish religious identity cannot be reduced to any one simple or indisputable moral. However one may conclude that the rabbi, through his pagan worship of Nature, loses his Jewish soul. Having strayed from his study of Jewish theology, in the texts of the Tractates of the Mishna, into the pagan realm of Nature, the rabbi is no longer able to turn back to his faith. Abandoning his soul, the rabbi chooses death.

Source: Liz Brent, Critical Essay on "The Pagan Rabbi," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Kauvar explores thematic links between Ozick's novel Trust and the stories in The Pagan Rabbi. In particular, Kauvar finds that Ozick continues "the battle between Hebraism and Hellinism, the artists' dilemma" in "The Pagan Rabbi."

Faced with divergent paths at the end of her voyage, the narrator of *Trust* follows neither of them; they remain on the same plane of her vision. But they are pursued in *The Pagan Rabbi*, Cynthia Ozick's first collection of stories. Each tale in the volume has its counterpart; each provides a different perspective, records a disparate experience. The dialectical structure of Ozick's first novel shapes not only the individual stories in *The Pagan Rabbi* but the structure of the volume itself. Informed by the storyteller's duplicate vision, the collection revives the themes present in *Trust*, often pairing them within a single tale or else matching them in two separate tales. That juxtaposition of conflicting ideas, like the narrator's reflection in the divided mirror in *Trust*, gives back a dual image of the self, the artist's sense of all identity. The controlling principle for the entire collection, Ozick's penchant for doubling had already evinced itself in the unpublished novel *Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love* and in the evocative sketch "The Butterfly and the Traffic Light," which grew out of that novel and which was published five years before *Trust.*

History is crucial for the narrator of *Trust*, and history makes an immediate appearance in the first paragraph of "The Butterfly and the Traffic Light," in which Jerusalem serves as a contrast to the places "where time has not yet deigned to be an inhabitant." A "phoenix city" with a "history of histories," a city where "no one is a stranger," Jerusalem illuminates the true meaning of the past rather than the fabricated one exemplified in the midwestern American town that is the story's setting. Wanting the college town to have historical allusions, the mayor named one of the town's streets after the "Bigghe diaries," a traveling salesman's forged records. And Big Road, as it came to be spelled, occasions Fishbein's lectures to Isabel. In them are elements bridging *Trust to The Pagan Rabbi*, adumbrations of its central thematic concerns, and two of its controlling metaphors.

One metaphor arises from the "doubleness that clung to the street," the doppelgänger every person and every object owns. That "insistent sense of recognition"—the dawning of the creative process, the birth of metaphor—immediately becomes attached to the Hebraism-and-Hellenism issue in Isabel and Fishbein's ensuing argument. For Fishbein the uniformity of lampposts in America evinces its dreary sameness, the diverse lampposts in Europe its individuality. But Isabel sees them as "some kind of religious icon" belonging to an "advanced religion," monotheism. Hers is an opinion Fishbein disputes: "The index of advancement is flexibility. Human temperaments are so variable, how could one God satisfy them all? The Greeks and Romans had a god for every personality." The Jews' refusal to obey Antiochus IV's decree "to set up a statue of Zeus on the altar of the Temple of Jerusalem" caused the Maccabean War, but that "altogether unintelligible occasion," Fishbein tells Isabel, came "of missing an imagination," of not accommodating "Zeus *and* God under one roof," of forcing icons to

be alike. To the Jews' determination to uphold monotheism in the face of severe opposition Fishbein attributes an absence of imagination: he conjures up the argument Enoch Vand and Nick Tilbeck have over personal values and abstractions.

The second metaphor emerges in one of Fishbein's lectures: "Looking at butterflies gives pleasure. Yes, it is a kind of joy . . . but full of poison. It belongs to the knowledge of rapid death. The butterfly lures us not only because he is beautiful, but because he is transitory. The caterpillar is uglier, but in him we can regard the better joy of becoming. The caterpillar's fate is bloom. The butterfly's is waste." An affirmation of process, Fishbein's metaphors recall Baeck's explanation of classical religion and echo Keats's idea of beauty in the "Ode on Melancholy." There the death-moth is linked to Psyche, whose emblem Fishbein adopts. His name and his allusion to Psyche invoke Venus, the role the goddess of love played in the Cupid and Psyche story. As in *Trust*, that goddess is implicated in the creative act. And the story's epigraph—"the moth for the star"—suggests Isabel, whose name resembles that of the American moth Isabella, as the devotee of "something afar," of Shelley's muse Urania. Yoking these allusions, Ozick proclaims the process of becoming, the "work as it goes," superior to the finality of completion. In the confluence of her references resides the battle between Hebraism and Hellenism, the artist's dilemma and a major conflict in "The Pagan Rabbi."

In that later story Ozick explores the consequences of what Fishbein deems a "harmless affair": bringing Zeus together with God. Whereas in *Trust* and "The Butterfly and the Traffic Light" the dichotomy between Judaism and paganism is represented by two separate characters, in "The Pagan Rabbi" the conflict is an internal one—a rabbi's wrenching struggle to reconcile his attraction to two utterly disparate and discordant ways of life. Rabbi Isaac Kornfeld's predicament, like the narrator's quest in *Trust*, is broadened to include cultural and historical contentions as well. Not only does the tale provide three distinct perspectives on the same situation, not only does it afford a series of ideas and situations which are doubled and divided, it connects the turmoil suffered by the rabbi to the disquiet endured by the artist.

Like *Trust*, "The Pagan Rabbi" has an unnamed first-person narrator who seeks a solution to a mystery, the reason why Isaac Kornfeld hanged himself on a tree in a public park. But as the narrator of Ozick's first novel knows, facts are not enough; they must be judged by history. And it is to history the narrator of "The Pagan Rabbi" turns to recount the events in his life and to describe his relationship with Isaac Kornfeld. Fathers loom as large in this tale as they do in Trust, and their presence throughout *The Pagan Rabbi* testifies to their vital and continuing importance to Ozick's fiction. Where in *Trust* Ozick reports the narrator's quest for a father, in *The Pagan Rabbi* she emphasizes the strife between generations. That tension is manifest in "The Pagan Rabbi," in which two sons comply with their fathers' choices of careers and attend a rabbinical seminary but have reactions to their training that diverge from their fathers' expectations. Isaac's experience differed from the narrator's as well, for the seminary that recognized Isaac's "imagination was so remarkable he could concoct holiness out of the fine line of a serif," was the same seminary in which the narrator discovered he had no talent. Neither father regarded Greek philosophy as anything but an "abomination." Judging Socrates a "monotheist," Isaac's father nonetheless believed

philosophy to be the corridor to idolatry; the narra tor's father vowed philosophy brought his son to atheism and determined him to withdraw from the seminary. His subsequent marriage to a gentile was an occasion for his father to mourn his son as if dead. A lapsed Jew, the narrator furnishes one of the three perspectives on the events in the tale.

Driven to know the entire story of Isaac Kornfeld's suicide, the narrator journeys to Trilham's Inlet to see the tree on which a pious Jew saw fit to end his life. A powerful symbol of both Hebraism and Hellenism, the oak tree revives the tree in Trust, and the bay surrounding Trilham's Inlet is reminiscent of the filth at Duneacres: "filled with sickly clams and a bad smell," its water "covered half the city's turds." The cut up pieces of trees, the "deserted monuments" in the park□these recall the dilapidated garden in which the narrator of Trust first sees her father. In the garden and in the public park are blasted paradises—the lost idyllic Arcadia, the fallen Garden of Eden. If in *Trust* the daughter's hopes are dashed upon meeting Tilbeck, here the rabbi's crumble in the wake of deviating from a father's established beliefs. The rabbi's name embodies the conflict central to the story: Isaac refers to the trust the biblical son placed in his father and "Kornfeld" alludes to Demeter, the Greek goddess of fertility. But in "The Pagan Rabbi," it is the failure of the son to trust the father's tradition and the rabbi's attraction to Hellenism that ultimately prove destructive. The conjunction of the two names, like the double implications of the oak tree, emphasize the coexistence of two desires which must forever remain embattled. Specifically associated with important biblical events and people, the oak was sacred to Zeus; and linking the tree's roots and the toes of a gryphon Ozick evokes a Greek tree of life, for gryphons function as guardians of immortality, of what is sacred, powerful, or omniscient. Explicitly forbidden in Deuteronomy, however, is the worship of trees: "you shall tear down their altars, and dash in pieces their pillars, and burn their Asherim with fire; you shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy their name out of that place." Serried with allusive and contradictory significance, the oak which the narrator describes at the beginning of the story and on which Isaac hangs himself functions as a hieroglyph of the tale just as the tree in the swamp constitutes an emblem of "Duneacres."

And as the rain, which brings revelation in *Trust*, begins to fall, the narrator of "The Pagan Rabbi" recognizes himself as "a man in a photograph standing next to a gray blur of tree," a man who "would stand through eternity beside Isaac's guilt if [he] did not run." A lapsed Jew whose father died without ever speaking to his son again, the narrator identifies with Isaac's guilt: the photograph, a representation of truth, implies both men have partaken of forbidden fruit. As if to rectify that sin, the narrator runs to the woman he once loved, to the woman Isaac Kornfeld married—the woman born in a concentration camp. About to be thrown against an electrified fence, Sheindel was saved by the vanishing current, a seemingly magical intervention by God. Unlike Isaac and Sheindel's, the narrator's marriage to a gentile was childless and ended in divorce. The histories of the men, their careers as a rabbi and a bookseller, locate one man at the center of Judaism and the other at its fringes. Isaac Kornfeld, an authority on the Mishnah (the oral code of Law), was also a writer who contributed significant responsa answers to questions on halakhic (law) topics. But his was a frenzied path to achievement, as his favorite authors, Saadia Gaon and Nietzsche, attest: one a

specialist in biblical study, the other an enthusiast of the ideals of Greece, the two writers represent Isaac's antithetical passions.

The opposition between Sheindel and the narrator, however, is implied by their positions at her dining table "as large as a desert" and "divided . . . into two nations" by a lace cloth. As it does in *Trust*, the division into halves invokes contrary perspectives. Speaking "as if every word emitted a quick white thread of great purity," Sheindel scorns Isaac's reading "about runners with hats made of leaves," the bedtime stories that gave to animals and nature human life, the rabbi's insistence on a "little grove" for the location of their picnics. Her derision of his darkly inventive stories—"stupid and corrupt" fairy tales "full of spirits, nymphs, gods, everything ordinary and old"—adds yet another reference to Isaac's imagination and reveals Sheindel to be, as the narrator observes, "one of those born to dread imagination." One of those born to exalt imagination, Rabbi Isaac Kornfeld writes stories like an artist inspired by a Greek muse.

Of the notebook containing what Sheindel believes is the reason for her husband's suicide, the narrator concludes, "it was all a disappointment." In fact, the notebook affords important and indispensable clues: extracts from Leviticus and Deuteronomy, a "snatch of Byron, a smudge of Keats . . . a pair of truncated lines from Tennyson," and an unidentified quatrain. Passages from the Bible vie with lines from English Romantic poetry and references to the classics, revealing the rabbi's unspoken desire: to reconcile a love of nature with belief in Torah. The very description of the notebook— its "wrinkled leaves," the handwriting that fills it, "oddly formed" like that of a man who is "leaning on a bit of bark"—recall Tilbeck's "wild" handwriting. To determine the tree's age, Isaac thinks of "counting the rings" just as he imagines his age "may be ascertained by counting the rings under his poor myopic eyes." The alliance between the writer of the notebook and the male muse intimates the relationship of writing and paganism. His affiliation of self and tree yokes the Mishnaic scholar to nature. That he has edited the extracts from Deuteronomy and Leviticus in transcribing them indicates a wish to alter their meaning, for they concern the renewal of the Covenant and the penalties for violating its laws. From Deuteronomy Isaac has copied, "He shall utterly destroy all the places of the gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree." His version leaves out the injunction to burn the Asherim, to cut down graven images, to root out their name. An extract from Leviticus follows: "And the soul that turneth after familiar spirits to go awhoring after them, I will cut him off from among his people." Reminding himself of God's commandment, Isaac is then driven to record the penalty for breaking God's commandment.

Unable to penetrate Isaac's preoccupations, the narrator judges the unidentified quatrain in the notebook "cloying and mooning and ridiculous." But the quatrain's last line, "The beauty of the earth is haunted still," precedes the description of the tree, a *Quercus velutina*. An Australian she-oak, it is the spirit with whom Isaac falls in love and from whose branches he hangs himself. Below the passage appears the deliberately legible announcement, "Great Pan lives." Including fragments written in Greek, Hebrew, and English, the tiny notebook presents the "Pan Versus Moses" case in miniature. It begins with the consequences of transgression and ends with a firm declaration; Isaac Kornfeld implies that the Greek cult of nature and beauty should not be reviled by the

Hebrew lawgiver, that Moses need not oppose Pan. That idea alludes to one in "The Last of the Valerii" and anticipates the fate of Isaac and Sheindel's marriage: in James's story the Count forsakes his wife for a statue and "communion with the great god Pan." The Count's desires are echoed in Isaac's letter, which is read aloud by Sheindel when the narrator returns the notebook, secretly angry at having been cheated. Written on "large law-sized paper," the letter of self-explanation contains proofs; it resembles in form Isaac's responsa.

To choose that form to express a powerful attraction to nature is to endeavor to bring what amounts to paganism under the aegis of Judaism. And Judaism impels the rabbi to return to "human history," to his personal history: "At a very young age I understood that a foolish man would not believe in a fish had he not had one enter his experience. Innumerable forms exist and have come to our eyes . . . from this minute perception of what already is, it is easy to conclude that further forms are possible, that all forms are probable." His apprehension of forms precedes his pantheistic celebration of nature, the subsistence of "holy life" in "God's fecundating Creation." Once the immanence of God is acknowledged, the threat of transgressing the Second Commandment vanishes. What Isaac disputes is not the injunction against idolatry but the possibility of committing idolatry: if Divinity resides in nature, worship of its beauty should yield an expanded proclamation of God's glory, not a violation of His Divine fiat. The rabbi's argument is reminiscent of the one propounded by Spinoza, to whom Ozick refers in the story. The immanence of God, that philosopher maintained, was a principle of the law: "It was Spinoza who first dared to cross these boundaries [of tradition], and by the skillful use of weapons accumulated in the arsenals of philosophy itself he succeeded in bringing both God and man under the universal rule of nature and thus establishing its unity." But Spinoza's insistence upon the absolute unity of body and soul is denied by Isaac's assertion: "To see one's soul is to know all, to know all is to own the peace our philosophies futilely envisage. Earth displays two categories of soul: the free and the indwelling. We human ones are cursed with the indwelling." His divergence from talmudic belief and his compulsion to unify discordant ideas is revealed in the revision Isaac attempts of the Platonic theory of Forms and Plato's concept of the soul.

Interested more in humanity than in nature and believing the entire human being was active in history, talmudic Judaism declared body and soul inseparable. That monistic doctrine opposes Platonic dualism, in which the task of philosophy is to liberate the body from the soul. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates tells Simmias that "it is only those who practise philosophy in the right way . . . who always most want to free the soul; and this release and separation of the soul from the body is the preoccupation of the philosophers." But the soul, Socrates contended, belongs to an invisible realm and is imperceptible. That is the realm Isaac proclaims visible, the sight of it divine wisdom. Disputing Spinoza's conviction that Moses was ignorant of nature, Isaac concludes, "Moses never spoke to [our ancestors] of the free souls, lest the people not do God's will and go out from Egypt." Since the existence of free souls was a secret kept from him, Isaac only accidentally discovered a Platonic Form, what Tilbeck called "Sacred Beauty."

It becomes incarnated in "Loveliness," to whom Isaac has addressed his letter and who is its subject. Proof of her existence is the "shape of a girl" whom he saw wading among his seven daughters in a stream and who exemplified, as Sheindel comments bitterly, the "principle" the rabbi habitually found "to cover" his proofs. And the memory of ample precedents for mortals "reputed to have coupled with gods," Isaac explains, emboldened his desire to "couple with one of the free souls" so as to liberate his soul from his body. In an erotic passage that recalls the one in *Trust*, Ozick describes the reaction Isaac has to his union with a dryad: "Meanwhile, though every tissue of my flesh was gratified in its inmost awareness, a marvelous voluptuousness did not leave my body; sensual exultations of a wholly supreme and paradisal order, unlike anything our poets have ever defined, both flared and were intensely satisfied in the same moment." As in *Trust*, the sexual act occurs in a place befouled by filth and decay. But satiety brings in its wake the conviction of having been "defiled," the memory of Leviticus: "Neither shalt thou lie with any beast." But a dryad is not an animal, and the dryad with whom Isaac discovers he has coupled claims she would refuse a man wishing "only to inhabit [her] out of perversity or boastfulness or to indulge a dreamed-of disgust"; to which Isaac responds, "Scripture does not forbid sodomy with plants." The rabbi judges his lust for Nature with his knowledge of the Law: he attempts to bring paganism into accord with Judaism.

But the two are asymptotes and can never meet. That the rabbi's belief in *halakhah* is incompatible with the wish to abandon himself to Nature emerges in the extraordinarily imaginative interchange between Isaac and the dryad. The embodiment of paganism, the dryad Iripomonoéià, "who shed her own light" and who plays with language, brings back the tree in the swamp at Duneacres and the narrator's dislike of words-in-themselves. As the dryad near the cottage at Brighton augured Tilbeck's disappearance, Iripomonoéià anticipates Isaac's disappearance. The rabbi, she observes, has "spoiled" himself "with confusions"; in its separation from his soul, his body will become "crumpled and withered and ugly," the very antithesis of Sacred Beauty. It is the very antithesis of everything moral: "'Where you have pain, we have ugliness. Where you profane yourselves by immorality, we are profaned by ugliness.'" By its very nature, the dryad explains, paganism is "all-of-a-sudden"; like Nick's name, "it goes too quick." Of Isaac's soul, the soul of a Jew, Iripomonoéià complains: "I do not like that soul of yours. It conjures against me. It denies me, it denies every spirit and all my sisters and every nereid of the harbor, it denies all our multiplicity, and all gods diversiform, it spites even Lord Pan, it is an enemy."

Such a soul cannot survive among diversiform gods, nor can it worship Beauty. What the rabbi struggles to bring into consonance must perforce remain asunder, as the confrontation between Isaac Kornfeld and his soul reveals. An ugly old man wrapped in a drooping prayer shawl, his soul trudges along a road reading a tractate of the Mishnah with such absorption that the beauty of the field eludes him. Once desiring to see his own soul, Isaac now rejects it; it cares "only to be bound to the Law." Divided from his body, Isaac's soul declares the dryad has "no real existence," that it was not the soul of Isaac "who clung to her" but his body. In angry despair, Isaac seizes his soul and shakes it, but it confronts him with the truth of his existence: "The sound of the Law . . . is more beautiful than the crickets. The smell of the Law is more radiant than the moss.

The taste of the Law exceeds clear water." In contradiction with himself and unable to accept his own soul, Isaac Kornfeld hangs himself with his prayer shawl on the branches of the oak whose spirit he believed would grant him immortality.

This clash between opposing aspects of the self is implicit in the story's title and in the rabbi's name. Worship of Pan cannot subsist alongside obedience to Moses: a rabbi cannot be a pagan. The idea that Form must either retreat or perish at the advance of its opposite is set forth in the *Phaedo*, which Ozick reveals is at odds with Isaac Kornfeld's desire—a reflection of talmudic monism. In her essay on James's *The Sacred Fount*, "The Jamesian Parable," published shortly after she finished Trust and three years before "The Pagan Rabbi," Ozick de fines the meaning of self-contradiction: "He who desires to change himself, negates the integrity— the entelechy—of his personality." To be in contradiction with oneself is to be "unreal" and unreality leads to "moral self-cancellation." Lured by the beauty of paganism and owning a Jewish soul, Isaac engages in an act of moral self-cancellation; and as the fragment he copied from Leviticus warns, he is "cut off from among his people."

That punishment in Leviticus is the one in- flicted on Tithonus. Granted immortality when Eos asked Zeus to bestow it on him, Tithonus was doomed to eternal decrepitude because Eos forgot to ask for everlasting youth; however, he changed himself into a cicada and continued his existence apart from human life. Wanting to couple with Nature, Isaac remembered "Cadmus, Rhoecus, Tithonus, Endymion." But the rabbi forgot that radical isolation results from the negation of entelechy; he turns "after familiar spirits" and is severed from his people. That fate explains why his soul prefers the sound of the Law to that of the cricket. Both Isaac and Tithonus wither, but Tennyson's Tithonus asks:

Why should a man desire in any way
To vary from the kindly race of men,
Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance
Where all should pause, as is most meet for all.

Ravished by Nature, Isaac wanders outside the Law, and in the process, varies from the ordained source of life□the Torah, Israel's Tree of Life. The epigraph to "The Pagan Rabbi," a maxim from *Pirke Avot*, renders Isaac's story in brief: "Rabbi Jacob said: 'He who is walking along and studying, but then breaks off to remark, "How lovely is that tree" or "How beautiful is that fallow field!"— Scripture regards such a one as having hurt his own being.'" That following Pan can destroy human existence is evident in the deaths of Isaac Kornfeld and Gustave Nicholas Tilbeck, for both men perish before their lives reach natural completion.

Adherence to Mosaic law in "The Pagan Rabbi" is represented by Sheindel. Contrasting images buttress the conflict between Isaac's notion of Judaism and Sheindel's. The oak tree and the Torah as the Tree of Life, the Fence of the Law and the fence of the concentration camp epitomize the dichotomy between Hebraism and Hellenism, between life and death. And Isaac's reference to the animism that existed as a

"historical illumination" within the Fence of the Law alludes to the pantheistic tendencies in the Kabbalah and other forms of Jewish mysticism that were opposed by traditional, rational Judaism—the kind of Judaism to which Sheindel adheres. She has kept pure the Fence Isaac scales. His choice of Sheindel represents his Hebraism, the dryad his Hellenism—the difference between the sacred and the profane. Surrounded by the Fence of the Law, Isaac partakes of God's holy fecundity— his seven children who are reminders of God's creation.

On the other side of that Fence is the sterility of the narrator's life. Unnamed and unattached, the narrator remains as cut off as Isaac becomes from his own people. The men began their journey to that predicament in the same rabbinical seminary from which they followed two paths: one led to God's manifestation everywhere, the other to His absence altogether. Though both Isaac and the narrator loved Sheindel, neither stays with her. The attraction to Nature proves too powerful for the rabbi, and he avoids his wife to capture a dryad. The narrator, however, has divorced his wife and intends to marry Isaac's widow. But her "unforgiving" voice, her pitiless derision of her husband, the "terror of her cough, which was unmistakably laughter"—these determine the narrator not to return to Sheindel, who is as different from him as she was from Isaac. What she deems a superfluity of imagination, a "choking vine on the Fence of the Law," the narrator regards as "possibility," "inspiration," insight. To her claim that her husband was an "illusion," the narrator responds, "'Only the pitiless are illusory,'" and advises her to go to the park to "consult" Isaac's soul. But at home he drops "three green house plants down the toilet" as she had given hers away to rid her house of "little trees." His gesture suggests he shares Sheindel's horror at Isaac's crossing the boundaries of Judaism into paganism even though the narrator has lived outside those boundaries. Where he will go in the future, whether he will climb over the fence to Judaism is a question Ozick characteristically leaves unanswered.

A story that dramatizes the warring drives in a human being, the simultaneous desires to follow Hebraism and Hellenism, the discord between rational mainstream Judaism and its mystical components, "The Pagan Rabbi" itself has a structure that reflects conflict: each character has an opposite, each idea an antithesis. Dividing ideas and characters, Ozick then doubles events by matching them. In her vision of the doubleness that clings to all existence is glimpsed the complexity of human life.

If "The Pagan Rabbi" concerns the cleavage between Pan and Moses, the tale dramatizes the unconscious battle between father and son and the searing conflicts awakened in the Jewish artist. But those conflicts are not confined to Jewish writers. If Isaac Kornfeld "brings to mind I. B. Singer's Yasha Mazur," he also conjures up Henry James's Mark Ambient in "The Author of Beltraffio." In turn, Ambient's wife Beatrice and Sheindel judge their husbands' writing products of paganism. And the description Mark Ambient offers of the rift between him and his wife pertains to Isaac and Sheindel as well:

The difference between us is simply the opposition between two distinct ways of looking at the world, which have never succeeded in getting on together, or in making any kind of common household, since the beginning of time. They've borne all sorts of names,

and my wife would tell you it's the difference between Christi and Pagan. . . . She thinks me at any rate no better than an ancient Greek.

It is also the difference between Jew and Pagan. The inventiveness that produces Isaac Kornfeld's letter of self-explanation, a luminous narrative, establishes the rabbi as a writer who ushers his readers into an unknown world, one he imagines and creates. As the narrator of *Trust* observes, "whether a letter is more substantial than a chapter is moot." Conjuring a realm where all of nature becomes an animated manifestation of God, Isaac Kornfeld fashions Nature into the image of God forbidden to monotheism. The Rabbi becomes the Creator's rival. In opposition with his own soul which embraces Holy Law, Isaac Kornfeld hungers after the beauty of Nature to which he attributes holiness. Two impulses contrast and collide: one impulse wants to maintain the tradition handed to the son by the father at the same time that another impulse seeks revision of that tradition. The distinction between Isaac's soul and Isaac's body—a young body inhabited by an old man, one resembling the rabbi's father—suggests the ambivalence existing between generations and reflects the dissension between the artist and tradition. Whether for a Jew or a Christian, the gulf between Hebraism and Hellenism abides, and as the narrators of Ozick's and James's stories learn, is "well-nigh bottomless." The first in a collection of stories which in their deepest grain concern artists, "The Pagan Rabbi" focuses on the Jewish artist.

Source: Elaine M. Kauvar, "The Insistent Sense of Recognition," in *Cynthia Ozick's Fiction: Tradition and Invention*, Indiana University Press, 1993, pp. 40-49.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Friedman explores Ozick's rendering of Jewish identity and religion in "The Pagan Rabbi."

At the end of *Trust*, Enoch Vand (né Adam Gruenhorn) begins the arduous process of turning himself back into a Jew. Under the tutelage of a bearded Holocaust survivor whose concentration camp number, tattooed on his forearm, "was daily covered by phylacteries" Vand studies Hebrew. After devoting three years to reading the entire Bible in Hebrew, he finishes *The Ethics of the Fathers* in two months and is ready to take up the Talmud when *Trust* ends. Jewish authenticity— embodied in his teacher's beard, tattoo, and prayer implements no less than in Hebrew and holy texts— is Vand's goal as it will eventually prove to be Ozick's dominant theme. Coming as it does at the end of a novel begun "for the Gentiles" and finished for the Jews, Vand's self-willed conversion parallels Ozick's own deliberate transition from an American novelist to a Jewish storyteller. By 1970 she had jettisoned the "religion of Art" for "liturgical" writing in which aesthetic niceties would take a back seat to Jewish values. Fueled by "moral imagination," Ozick's fiction would henceforth resonate with a "communal voice: the echo of the voice of the Lord of History."

While not all of the writing in *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories* (1971) satisfies the demands of the "liturgical," Ozick signals her commitment to a predominantly religious point of view by making "The Pagan Rabbi" —the volume's most deeply Jewish fiction— its title story. Anticipating the theme of "The Pagan Rabbi" (1966), however, is "The Butterfly and the Traffic Light" (1961), the earliest story in the collection. Published in the midst of her prodigious labors (1957-63) on Trust, this brief sketch rehearses Ozick's fuller treatment of Jewish identity in "The Pagan Rabbi" ever as it testifies to the long gestation of what is to become her dominant theme. The contrast between Jerusalem, where street names "have been forgotten a thousand years," and American cities, where only street names impose centrality upon formlessness, functions as a prelude to the slight main action of "The Butterfly and the Traffic Light." That action consists merely of Fishbein and Isabel conversing in the course of a walk down Big Road, the blandly named main thoroughfare of an unnamed city that could be Anywhere, USA. Fishbein, a Jewish intellectual, is ill at ease in the society of this midwestern university town. To this "imitation of a city" he opposes the world's ancient and fabled capitals which he vociferously prefers. And because Jerusalem, quintessentially Jewish, is invoked as the epitome of the city hallowed by history and the antithesis of the anonymous American city, invariably Gentile, Fishbein's advocacy seems tantamount to Jewish affiliation.

The first of the story's two central metaphors reinforces Fishbein's apparent Jewishness: although he is attracted to the strolling girls in their summer dresses who sprout "like tapestry blossoms" on the sidewalks, he likens them to the transitory butterfly whose fate is waste. Beautiful but ephemeral, the butterfly compares unfavorably to the uglier caterpillar in which "we can regard the better joy of becoming." If butterfly and caterpillar alike are metaphors for art—the former signifying the finished work, the latter the creative process—then Fishbein may simply be expressing an

aesthetic preference. But if the "better joy" relates to the liturgical; if, in other words, butterfly and caterpillar stand respectively for profane and sacred art, then Fishbein's preference is at least as religious (i.e., Jewish) as it is aesthetic. The second metaphor of the title is less ambiguous, and it is in Fishbein's reaction to Isabel's likening of a redundant traffic light over Big Road to "some kind of religious icon with a red and a green eye" that his essential antipathy to Judaism is revealed. Stressing their sameness, Fishbein denies that traffic lights could ever be icons, since "What kind of religion would it be which had only one version of its deity?." "An advanced religion. I mean a monotheistic one," replies Isabel, symbolically invoking Judaism as the religion which in its transcendent achievement gave birth to monotheism. Fishbein denies the intrinsic superiority of monotheism, arguing for the accommodation of "Zeus *and* God under one roof." Although he is himself a Jew, if only a nominal one, Fishbein maintains that "only the Jews and their imitators . . . insist on a rigid unitarian God." Attracted to the many gods of classical antiquity, he denies the essence of Judaism and his own Jewishness (not "we Jews" but "the Jews" believe in- flexibly in one God). In Fishbein, Ozick invokes for the first time the apostate Jew, a recurring figure in her later fiction. "The Butterfly and the Traffic Light" thus foreshadows more exhaustive treatments of her overarching theme—Jewish identity— and hints at her primary strategy—the Hellenism/ Hebraism dichotomy—for expressing it.

The title of "The Pagan Rabbi" rehearses the clash of opposing theologies that the story dramatizes. Just as "pagan" is incompatible with "rabbi," so passion for nature is incompatible with Judaism. That Ozick's rabbi eddies perilously between Jewish and pagan belief is betrayed by his name—an unlikely mingling of the biblical (Isaac) with the pantheistic (Kornfeld). Nor are the oppositions of "The Pagan Rabbi" confined to title or a name: the entire story is grounded in a series of similar contrasts between what is Jewish and what is not. Even before the story opens, its epigraph—about breaking off studying to remark upon the beauty of nature—previews its central dichotomy. Drawn from *The Ethics of the Fathers* (one of the Hebrew texts read by Enoch Vand apropos of reasserting his Jewishness at the end of Trust) the epigraph sounds a cautionary note in judging its erring rabbi: "Scripture regards such a one as having hurt his own being." The fathers of Isaac and the narrator, themselves rabbis, echo the epigraph in their belief that philosophy is a "corridor" to the ultimate "abomination"— idolatry. Implicit in the fathers' warnings is their certainty that moral peril lurks just beyond the Jewish pale. Both Isaac's suicide and the narrator's apostasy result from the philosophical waywardness that led them respectively to pantheism and atheism. Jewish literature abounds with stories of sons who stray from the ethics of the fathers, invariably with disastrous results. The Faustian strain—potentially heroic for Gentiles—that mani fests itself most often in a fever to enlarge or transgress the boundaries of the traditional—is anathema to pious Jews. A classic account of the wages of intellectual hubris is given by Isaac Bashevis Singer in his massive novel *The Family Moskat*. In the aimless and futile career of Asa Heshel Bannet, another rabbi's son, Singer traces the many dislocations that eventually come to symbolize the breakdown of traditional values and the breakup of the Jewish family and community, and even to foreshadow the ultimate chaos of the Holocaust. While "The Pagan Rabbi" ostensibly focuses on the fate of a single erring Jew, it reverberates with the same fear for the fate of all Jews, the narrator included.

Isaac Kornfeld's suicide—a radical example of the self-destructive action of Rabbi Jacob's nature worshiper in the epigraph—is announced in the first sentence of "The Pagan Rabbi." Thereafter "The Pagan Rabbi" evolves into a kind of detective story: the narrator, in quest of understanding, goes first to Trilham's Inlet, the site of the suicide; then to Sheindel, Isaac's widow. To learn why Isaac hanged himself is to learn what sort of man Isaac had become, and thereby to unlearn what had formerly passed for the truth about Isaac. Not surprisingly, the process of discovery leads the narrator into a series of reappraisals of his friend's life that reveal hitherto unsuspected affinities with his own. Thus his dropping out of the seminary, marrying and divorcing a Gentile, alienating his father—all conventional indices of apostasy—are writ large in Isaac's definitive transgression. As is often the case in Jewish literature, erudition begets doubt, doubt apostasy. From sacred texts Isaac branches out to profane literature, eventually to embrace the Spinozist heresy: that reality is one substance with an infinite number of attributes of which only thought and extension may be apprehended by human intelligence. Redolent of polytheism and therefore anathema to pious Jews, the philosophy of Spinoza is conventionally invoked in opposition to traditional belief. That Asa Heshel Bannet goes nowhere without his copy of Spinoza's *Ethics* immediately signals his flawed Jewishness in *The Family Moskat*. And Isaac Bashevis Singer himself struggled for years to overcome his early attraction to Spinoza, who more than any other secular writer represents the dangers of forbidden knowledge.

For Isaac Kornfeld such knowledge took the form of a deepening fixation with nature. Sheindel's conviction that if her husband "had been faithful to his books he would have lived" seems at first paradoxical in light of the rabbi's scholarly reputation. What Sheindel means, however, is not that Isaac stopped reading but that he no longer read his (i.e., holy) books. Instead he began compulsively to devour books on agronomy, horticulture—in short, on anything pertaining to nature. His insistence on picnics, his joining a hiking club, his writing of fairy tales full of "sprites, nymphs, gods"—all manifestations of a sudden passion for nature and the outdoors prefigure the astonishing last words of his notebook: "Great Pan lives."

It is this apparently deep immersion in paganism that lends credence to Sheindel's no less astonishing remark that Isaac "was never a Jew." An offshoot of the Spinozist heresy of perceiving the one in the many, pantheism nullifies the Second Commandment, the keystone of Judaism. In the transformed Rabbi Kornfeld is the antithesis of one of the classic figures of Jewish literature—the pale and pious scholar buried in holy texts, all but entombed in his study. In the light of traditional Jewish values the narrator's point that "fathers like ours don't know how to love. They live too much indoors" becomes a devastatingly ironic commentary not on the fancied inadequacies of the fathers but on the real shortcomings of the sons. It is the enclosed world of the study rather than the boundless world of external nature that is the proper province for the believing Jew.

Jewish orthodoxy is expressed in Isaac's vision of a bearded old man, bent under the burden of a bag stuffed with holy books, who identifies himself as Isaac's soul. No longer part of Isaac, and therefore lost to him, the old Jew trudges along reading the Law, prayer shawl drooping "on his studious back," oblivious to the beauty of

surrounding nature. Significantly, this aged—and age-old—representative of Jewishness appears to Isaac only after the latter has committed the irrevocable sin of coupling with a dryad. In its total abandonment to pagan values this aberrant sexual union triggers the loss of soul signi- fied by the old man's sudden appearance. Whether the dryad's simultaneous disappearance symbolizes the defeat of Pan by Moses—of the ephemerally pagan by the everlastingly Jewish—or merely Isaac's belated awareness that like Dr. Faustus he has lost his soul and gained nothing in return, it seals Isaac's fate. His suicide, the predictable result of this double loss—of pagan nature and Jewish law—is immediately provoked by the old man's reminder of what Isaac should never have forgotten: the Law sounds "more beautiful than the crickets," smells "more radiant than the moss," and tastes better than "clear water." Powerfully expressive of Isaac's failure to resolve theological conflict is his method of suicide: he hangs himself with his soul's prayer shawl from his beloved's body, the young oak tree. Isaac's last words summon the dryad: "For pity of me, come, come." Although her reappearance most probably would have neither alleviated his despair nor averted his suicide, her absence suggests the final inefficacy of the paganism to which Isaac succumbed. Accepting the Jewish Book Council Award for *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stores* in 1972, Ozick underlined the lesson of her title story: "What is holy is not natural and what is natural is not holy. The God of the Jews must not be conceived of as belonging to nature."

Isaac's long letter, an explanatory confession that fleshes out the implications of his notebook, traces his growing absorption with nature and his foredoomed attempt to reconcile nature worship with Judaism. So desperate was his desire to bridge the gap between pagan and Jewish belief that he imagined a Moses who withheld the "truths" about "the world of Nature" not out of "ignorance" but only because his followers "would have scoffed." Isaac's revisionist estimate of Moses demonstrates the absurd lengths to which he will go to reconcile pagan multiplicity with Jewish monotheism. His many arguments in favor of freeing man's "indwelling" soul from the prison of his body have little to do with Judaism but everything to do with paganism and serve only to foreshadow his total immersion in nature. Not the least of Isaac's transgressions is this desire to detach soul from body, thereby denying the traditional Jewish view that both are inseparable components of a single being and together determine human essence. Again the Hebraic/Hellenic dichotomy is dramatized by an opposition, this time between Sheindel and the dryad with whom Isaac falls in love. Ozick's rabbi forsakes his quintessentially Jewish wife—a Holocaust survivor born in a concentration camp—for a pagan dryad whose girlish form emanates from a tree. An early instance of Ozick's literary strategy of leavening reality with the supernatural as a means of thematic definition, Isaac's coupling with a tree nymph symbolizes his attachment to nature and his detachment from Judaism. Like many fictional Jews who gravitate toward the perceived glitter of external society, he distorts his essential nature by opting for paganism. And Isaac proves no exception to the rule that such Jews self-destruct: "You have spoiled yourself, spoiled yourself with confusions," explains the dryad. Soon thereafter, spoliation finds its most radical expression in suicide.

Seeking in nature to free his imagined soul, Isaac finds in the old man the true (i.e., Jewish) soul he unwittingly abandoned. With the materialization of the old man,

signifying the soul detached from and thereby lost to the body, comes the end of Isaac's quest and his symbolic death. Since a soulless man is a contradiction in terms—especially in the moral terms that Judaism espouses and the rabbi cannot escape—Isaac's physical death is but the inevitable culmination of a process that began when he first sighted the old man. Her husband's tragic end elicits only contempt from Sheindel, the embodiment of Jewish orthodoxy. No pity is due the suicide, for "he who takes his own life does an abomination." More sympathetic than Sheindel toward Isaac, the narrator nonetheless flushes down the toilet three green house plants which will eventually make their way to Trilham's Inlet, there to decay "amid the civic excrement." A modest and nearly comic gesture, his disposal of greenery evidences an aversion to nature concomitant with a commitment to Judaism.

Still, the narrator's final position is ambiguous. An atheist whose apostasy at least hastened his father's death if it did not kill him outright, the narrator seems to be turning, however slowly and tentatively, back to Judaism. In his love for Sheindel, and in the section of his bookstore devoted to theological works ("chiefly in Hebrew and Aramaic") which he wishes his father could have seen, no less than in his ridding himself of plants, there are hints of Jewish affiliation. At the time of Isaac's suicide the narrator seems to have come to a crossroads in his own life. Just as Isaac's straying from Sheindel represents a step away from Judaism, the narrator's attraction to Sheindel represents a step toward Judaism. Wanting from Sheindel an explanation of Isaac's suicide, the narrator admits that he wants Sheindel herself. Like many quest stories, "The Pagan Rabbi" counterpoints the search for another with the search for the self. A potential convergence of identities typical in such stories results from the essential Jewishness shared by Isaac and the narrator. In Isaac's case the epiphany of loss triggered by the old man's appearance has a finality about it—it is, after all, a human soul that has been irretrievably lost—that leads him inexorably to suicide. The narrator's ultimate destiny is far less conclusive. Drawn to Sheindel—and symbolically, to Judaism—he nonetheless walks out on her in the end. Shaken by her pitilessness, the narrator intuits the requirements of their prospective union. Too weak in his flickering faith to share with her the uncompromising Jewishness for which she stands, he beats a hasty retreat. In his flight from her—and perhaps from himself—the narrator proves finally unable to shoulder the full burden of Jewish identity.

Source: Lawrence S. Friedman, "*The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories," in Understanding Cynthia Ozick*, University of South Carolina Press, 1991, pp. 58-67.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Lowin examines the progression from the realistic to the fantastic in "The Pagan Rabbi" and the role of the tree in that progression.

Take, for a first example, the plot of "The Pagan Rabbi." Two young men, sons of prominent rabbis, had been classmates together at a rabbinical seminary. One—the narrator—drops out of school and marries Jane, a gentile girl, an incident which causes his father to sit *shiva* (a seven&mdash:-day mourning period) on his account. He subsequently goes into his uncle's fur business in upstate New York, is miserable in his marriage because his wife is frigid (he calls her a puritan), gets divorced, moves back to New York City, and, deciding to deal in writers and writing, opens a bookstore. The other —Isaac Kornfeld□continues his rabbinical studies, becomes a professor of "mishnaic history" (whatever that is), publishes brilliant monographs on Jewish subjects, and causes his father to beam broadly with pride. He subsequently marries Sheindel, a sheitelwearing Jewish woman, and together they have seven daughters. Kornfeld winds up committing suicide by hanging himself from a tree with his tallith.

Almost everything about these two parallel lives is ordinary, recognizable, sociologically accurate, and, until the strange, brutal fact and manner of the suicide, utterly realistic. The key, the most important fact in the narrative, is not, however, the tallith. The element that moves the tale from the realistic to the fantastic is the tree from which Isaac Kornfeld hangs himself. He may have been a rabbi, but, as the narrator learns when he goes to pay a condolence call on the widow, he has become a "pagan rabbi," a teller of seemingly supernatural stories and a person who has himself lived inside these stories. Sheindel describes a series of her husband's literary inventions:

These were the bedtime stories Isaac told Naomi and Esther: about mice that danced and children who laughed. When Miriam came he invented a speaking cloud. With Ophra it was a turtle that married a blade of withered grass. By Leah's time the stones had tears for their leglessness. Rebecca cried because of a tree that turned into a girl and could never grow colors again in autumn. Shiphra, the littlest, believes that a pig has a soul.

A difference between Ozick's fiction and classical nineteenth-century fantastic literature is apparent. Reality is not only social order. It is also natural order, cosmic. The fantastic in Ozick's tale resolves itself into something more than the marvelous, and, despite appearances, into something more than a mere fairy tale. What Ozick is describing in her story about Isaac's stories is the development of the narrative of the family life of Rabbi Isaac and Sheindel Kornfeld into a story belonging to the Jewish fantastic, with its judgment of the world.

Isaac Kornfeld, a Jew, would frequently go out into the field to daydream. This action bursts with significance, places the tale firmly within a certain Jewish textual tradition. The epigraph to Ozick's story, taken from *Mishna Avot*, performs the first step of this function: "He who is walking along and studying but then breaks off to remark, 'How

lovely is that tree!' or 'How beautiful is that fallow field!'— Scripture regards such a one has having hurt his own being." The connection is clear: there is a danger to one's very Jewishness inherent in an aesthetic appreciation of nature. Ozick has made much of the fundamental opposition between paganism and the Jewish idea.

In this story, the very choice of the name "Isaac Kornfeld" places Ozick in the Jewish textual tradition, in the company of no less a Jewish writer than Rashi, the Jewish commentator par excellence. "Isaac Kornfeld" clearly alludes to the Scriptural tale of another Isaac, a young Yitzhak, son of Abraham, who, awaiting the arrival of his bride, goes out into the field to daydream. There is, first, the linguistic connection between "Isaac Kornfeld" and "*Vayetzeh Yitzhak lasu'ah basadeh*." And there is a connection between Rashi and Ozick. Rashi recalls a midrash on what Isaac was "doing" in the field. Rather than have him daydream on the erotic consequences of a marriage, Rashi reins in the dreamer and has him praying instead (" *lasuah: leshon tefila* "). Ozick's midrash tells of what happens when one goes out into nature for nonliturgical purposes.

Isaac Kornfeld, it must be emphasized, was also a writer and not only of scholarly monographs. The story contains, *mise en abyme*, Isaac's text. This text may be interpreted, variously, as the suicide note of a madman (and thus the fantastic story resolves itself into the uncanny), as the description of a supernatural occurrence (in which the story would resolve itself into the marvelous), or as an allegory or parable. Isaac's verbatim text has three "readers." Sheindel, who knows the text by heart, reads the first half to the narrator; the narrator reads the other half out loud. The reader implicit in the text, the reader who knows that he is in the genre of the fantastic, wavers between Sheindel's marvelous reading and the narrator's uncanny one. The "letter" is addressed to someone called "creature," and "loveliness." It is a Jewish text and like many Jewish texts, it begins inside the story of the Exodus. It contains a brilliant midrash against diaspora living (based on a highly intuitive, almost pantheistic mysticism). The two philosophical points of Isaac's midrash are that idolatry does not exist— because death does not exist—and that, in the plant world, in the world of trees, in the world of nature, the soul is able to be free.

The next stage in Isaac's *itinerarium mentis* (and in the reader's road to the fantastic) is his "discovery" (on the outside as it were, in the field) of wood nymphs: He has seen a nymph save the life of one of his daughters drowning in a stream. He comes to the conclusion that there are only two ways to communicate and commune with these free-floating souls. To experience ecstasy (to stand outside of himself), he must either die or copulate with nature.

He tries the latter first. In what Ozick could only have meant to be the description of an abomination, Isaac Kornfeld fornicates with an oak tree and succeeds in achieving some sort of ecstasy this way. He even conjures up the presence of a nice pagan girl, Iripomonoéià (the "apple of his eye"), who informs him that his soul has stepped out of his body and is now visible. Isaac looks at his soul and is mortified by what he sees. Isaac Kornfeld's soul, walking in the field, studying Talmud, is Jewish! The soul does not even notice Iripomonoéià, denies her, "passes indifferent through the beauty of the field" and is faithful to the rabbinic dictum that Ozick had quoted for us in the epigraph of her

story. When Isaac Kornfeld confronts his Jewish soul, he learns that to have a Jewish soul is not to be free in nature but to be bound to law. According to Kornfeld's soul, the page of Talmud is a garden, the letters on the page are birds, and the columns of commentary on the page are trees. When Isaac Kornfeld learns that he cannot be a Jew and a writer and teller of stories at the same time, and, moreover, when he learns that he cannot live inside his stories, he decides to die.

If the story ended here, the fantastic would have dissolved into nothing more than allegory, with a clear message: If you want to be a Jew, give up writing and all that enterprise entails. But it does not end here. It ends with the reactions of the narrator and Sheindel to Isaac's tale.

Todorov, for whom the end of a work of art is art itself, and for whom the subject of writing is writing itself, warns against the use of the fantastic genre for allegorical purposes. He sees only two possible resolutions for the fantastic:

At the story's end the reader makes a decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic. If he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvelous.

He does recognize, however, that, using a strict definition of allegory, where the double meaning of words is indicated in an *explicit* fashion and does not proceed from the reader's interpretation, whether arbitrary or not, the fantastic lends itself to an allegorical resolution.

Cynthia Ozick, who has called for a liturgical component in Jewish literature, balks, however, at the use of the term *allegory* for her own works:

Two stories—"The Pagan Rabbi" and "Usurpation"— intend to be representative of certain ideas; but I think of them rather as parables than allegories. In an allegory, the story stands for an idea, and the idea can be stated entirely apart from the story, in a parable, story and idea are so inextricably fused that they cannot be torn free of each other. In this sense, I hope I've written an occasional parable. But I would never seek out allegory, which strikes me as a low form.

Whether we use the term *allegory* or *parable*, or indeed neither of these, we can agree with the comment of Ruth R. Wisse about the ending of an Ozick story: "Her reader is expected at the conclusion of her stories to have an insight, to understand the point of events." Ozick's warning against allegory should be heeded in considering the end of this supernatural tale.

Sheindel, it is clear, is on the side of Rashi. There is only one thing a Jew ought to do in a field, and that is to pray. It would be even better to make a fence about the law and not go out into the field at all. The fantastic, she seems to be saying, is not a place for

Jewish rabbis. For the narrator, and even more for the reader implicit in the text, the ending is more problematic. The narrator is a product of the Enlightenment and has even failed as a product of the Enlightenment. And yet, when he goes home, the narrator flushes all his house plants down the toilet. He apparently agrees with Sheindel's judgment of the world. Does he thereby also accept Sheindel's reading of the story? Not entirely. When he met Sheindel, in her grief, he was attracted to her. He fell in love with her and even contemplated marrying her and normalizing his life in Judaism. In the end, however, the narrator rejects Sheindel because he cannot accept her severity. He is aware of the dangers of the Enlightenment. But he would rather be normal. The act of consigning the house plants to New York's sewers is a mere gesture, however significant. The narrator will, we are certain, continue to live in the world. And after "The Pagan Rabbi," Cynthia Ozick will continue to write fantastic short stories in which she investigates further the liturgical possibilities of the Jewish fantastic.

Source: Joseph Lowin, "A Jewish Fantastic," in *Cynthia Ozick*, Twayne, 1988, pp. 69-73.

Topics for Further Study

One of the pagan rabbi's preoccupations, based on the notebook he leaves behind, is with Romantic poetry. Find out more about the literary style, known as Romanticism, which reached its height in the early nineteenth century. The story mentions some of the best-known Romantic poets, such as Byron, Keats and Tennyson. What is the preoccupation of Romantic poetry with nature? How do the poems of these writers portray nature in relation to such spiritual concerns as the soul?

Sheindal Kornfeld, the wife of the pagan rabbi, is a Holocaust survivor who was born in a concentration camp. Find out more about the experiences of children in concentration camps, and the stories of Holocaust survivors who themselves were children in concentration camps. How did their experiences affect their sense of spirituality and of Jewish identity?

Rabbi Kornfeld and Sheindal Kornfeld are Orthodox Jews. Learn more about the marriage laws and traditions of Orthodox Judaism. How do they differ from the marital laws and tradition practices by Conservative Judaism? Reform Judaism?

The god Pan, associated with paganism, comes from Greek mythology. Learn more about Greek mythology and the stories that are derived from Greek mythology. What is the significance of these ancient stories to dilemmas of the modern reader in modern society? What is their enduring appeal to the modern reader?

In his philosophical musings, the character Rabbi Isaac Kornfeld mentions the philosophers Socrates, Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Hegel. Find out more about one of these philosophers. What are the basic themes and tenets of his philosophy? In what ways do they address concerns similar to those raised in the short story?

Compare and Contrast

1960s: While Reform Judaism allows the ordaining of female rabbis, Conservative and Orthodox denominations do not.

1980s-1990s: After 1985, Conservative Judaism begins to ordain female rabbis.

1960s: Ozick's story mentions that the rabbi's parents had traveled to the "Holy Land." This refers to the nation of Israel, established in 1948 as a Jewish state. Ongoing conflict between Israel and surrounding Arab nations lead to several wars, which result in redrawing of boundaries and changes in the balance of power in the Middle East. The Six-Day War of 1967 marks a watershed in Israeli relations with bordering Arab nations, when Israeli acquires control over considerably more territory in the Middle East.

1980s-1990s: There have been various attempts at peace negotiations throughout the 1980s and 1990s between Israel and the Middle East.

1960s: Before the Six Day War of 1967, Israeli rule over Arab sections of the city of Jerusalem is relatively mild, and resistance on the part of the Arab population is minimal.

1980s-1990s: After the Six Day War of 1967, the Israeli government begins to institute stricter control over Arab sections of Jerusalem. This eventually leads to acts of terrorism on the part of the Palestinian Liberation Organizations, and such uprisings as the Intifada, which begins in 1987. Attempts at peace negotiations have occurred within this context of terrorist and counterterrorist struggles between Israel and the Palestinians. However, attempts to reach a peace between Israel and the Palestinians have resulted in changes toward self-rule of Palestinians in some areas of Israel.

1960s: Orthodox Jewish interpretations of the Talmud place specific restrictions on issues concerning death and the body. For instance, any activity that may hasten death is forbidden. Mutilation of the body is also forbidden. Such laws are subject to further interpretation by Jewish scholars to accommodate new medical technologies.

1990s: Advances in medical science and technology over the past thirty years (such as organ transplants, genetic research and advanced methods for, and increased availability of, euthanasia) have raised further challenges to rabbinical scholars in interpreting the significance of the ancient texts of the Talmud. Provisions that make exceptions in the interest of "the preservation of life" can be interpreted by Jewish theologians to be in keeping with various practices of modern medical technology.

What Do I Read Next?

The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories (1971) by Cynthia Ozick is the collection in which "The Pagan Rabbi" first appeared. This collection was the winner of many distinguished literary awards.

Fame and Folly: Essays (1996) is a collection of Ozick's essays on other writers, collected from previous publications.

The Shawl (1991) contains Ozick's most famous short story, "The Shawl," and the novella "Rosa," the sequel to "The Shawl."

Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories (1959) by Philip Roth contains a novella and short stories by one of the most noted Jewish-American writers of the century. It addresses themes of Jewish identity in modern American society.

A Cynthia Ozick Reader (1996), edited by Elaine M. Kuavar, contains selections from previous publications of Ozick's essays and short stories.

The Best American Essays (1998), edited and with an introduction by Cynthia Ozick, is the 1998 edition of the annual series Best American Essays, culled from nationally publicized journals and periodicals.

Mythology (1942), by Edith Hamilton, is a comprehensive collection of ancient Greek mythology.

What is Jewish Literature? (1994), edited and with an introduction by Hana Wirth-Nesher, is a collection of essays on Jewish literature by prominent Jewish writers. It includes the essay "America: Toward Yavneh" by Cynthia Ozick.

The God I Believe In (1994), by Joshua O. Haberman, is a collection of interviews about Judaism by Jewish writers and scholars. It includes an interview with Cynthia Ozick.

Further Study

Block, Gay, and Malka Drucker, *Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust*, Holmes & Meier, 1992.

This photographic work of pictures by Cynthia Ozick shows people who helped Jews facing persecution in the Holocaust, and contains an afterword by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis.

Burstein, Janet Handler, *Writing Mothers, Writing Daughters: Tracing the Maternal in Stories by American Jewish Women,* University of Illinois Press, 1996.

Burstein presents a critical discussion of themes of motherhood in Jewish literature. This work includes a discussion of the work of Cynthia Ozick, in a chapter entitled "Mirroring the Mother: The Ordeal of Narcissism."

Curtis, C. Michael, ed., *God: Stories*, Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

Curtis's book is a collection of short stories on themes of faith, spirituality, and religion, and includes "Rosa" by Cynthia Ozick.

Gutkind, Lee, ed., *Surviving Crisis: Twenty Prominent Authors Write about Events that Shaped Their Lives*, Putnam, 1997.

This text includes the essay "The Break" by Cynthia Ozick.

Shapiro, Gerald, ed., *American Jewish Fiction: A Century of Stories,* University of Nebraska Press, 1998.

Shapiro presents a collection of international short stories by Jewish writers, which includes "Envy; or, Yiddish in America" by Cynthia Ozick.

Stavans, Ilan, ed., *The Oxford Book of Jewish Stories*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

This book is a collection of international short stories by Jewish authors, which includes "The Shawl" by Cynthia Ozick.

Updike, John, ed., *The Best American Short Stories of the Century,* Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

This book is a collection of short stories gathered from the series Best American Short Stories, which has been published annually since 1915. It contains an introduction by John Updike and includes "The Shawl" by Cynthia Ozick.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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