Rosa Study Guide

Rosa by Cynthia Ozick

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"Rosa" by Cynthia Ozick was first published in the *New Yorker* in 1983. However, its protagonist, Rosa Lublin, was introduced three years earlier in "The Shawl," a much shorter story also published in the *New Yorker*. The two stories were re-released together as a book in 1989 entitled *The Shawl*. "Rosa" also appeared in the anthology *Prize Stories 1984*, a collection of O. Henry Prize winners.

While "The Shawl" tells the painful story of how Rosa's infant daughter is brutally killed by a Nazi guard in a concentration camp, "Rosa" revisits the protagonist 30 years later, who is still devastated by her daughter's death. Living a meager, isolated existence in a "hotel" for the elderly, financed by Stella her resentful niece, Rosa is unable to let go of her daughter and the past.

"Rosa" dramatizes the lasting impact of the Holocaust on a unique, complex character who is not entirely sympathetic. While obviously the far-reaching effects of the Holocaust is a major theme in this story, Ozick also deals with themes of alienation and denial and explores how American culture devalues and isolates the elderly.

Author Biography

Cynthia Ozick was born April 17, 1928, in New York City, the second child of Russian immigrants William and Celia Ozick. Her parents owned and operated a drugstore in the Bronx, where Cynthia worked delivering prescriptions. Her father was a Jewish scholar, and her uncle was a well-respected Hebrew poet who first introduced her to the world of literature.

During her early school years in the Pelham Bay section of the Bronx, Cynthia endured anti-Semitic attacks and slurs, especially when she refused to sing Christmas carols with the rest of her class. She escaped into reading, getting books from her older brother and from a traveling library that came by her parents' drugstore. Her school life took a more positive turn when she entered Hunter College High School in Manhattan, where Ozick's academic excellence was more appreciated. After high school, she went on to graduate cum laude from New York University in 1949. She then earned a master's degree from Ohio State University, writing her master's thesis on the works of Henry James, a writer who influences her own work.

In 1952, Ozick married lawyer Bernard Hallote and worked briefly for Filene's Department Store as an advertising copywriter. In 1966, the year after Ozick gave birth to her daughter Rachel, Ozick's first novel, *Trust*, was published to positive reviews. Ozick followed *Trust* with three collections of short fiction: *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories*, *Bloodshed and Three Novellas*, and *Levitation: Five Fictions*, which were all critically acclaimed, firmly establishing Ozick as an important voice in contemporary literature.

In 1983, Ozick published both her second novel, *The Cannibal Galaxy*, and a collection of essays entitled *Art and Ardor*. In that same year, "Rosa" appeared in the *New Yorker*, winning an O. Henry Prize for short fiction. Subsequently, she published three more novels—*The Messiah of Stockholm* (1987), *The Puttermesser Papers* (1997), and *Heir to the Glimmering World* (2004)—as well as three collections of essays: *Metaphor and Memory* (1989), *Fame and Folly* (1996), and *Quarrel and Quandary* (2000). *The Shawl*, a book composed of the two short stories "The Shawl" and "Rosa," was released in 1989.

Over her career Cynthia Ozick's work has been awarded numerous honors, including the O. Henry Prize for short fiction (in 1975, 1981, 1984, and 1992), a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship (1968), the American Academy of Arts Award for literature (1973), and a Guggenheim Fellowship (1982). Much of her fiction centers on Jewish culture and issues, and she has received awards from many Jewish literary organizations. In 1972, she was awarded the B'nai Brith Jewish Heritage Award; in 1977, National Jewish Book Award for fiction; in 1984, the Distinguished Service in Jewish Letters Award.

Plot Summary

The story "Rosa" is set in 1977, the same year in which it was written. "Rosa" is written in the third person limited point of view, but the reader is allowed only Rosa's viewpoint on events; letters in the story are, of course, written in first person. Because Rosa's mental state is unstable, her perceptions are not always the most reliable.

Cynthia Ozick begins "Rosa" by describing the current state of Rosa Lublin's meager existence. Having destroyed her own antique shop in New York City ("It was a mad thing to do") Rosa is now living in a shabby "hotel" for the elderly in Miami, Florida. Her resentful and critical niece Stella, still living in New York, supports her. Rosa sees no one, goes out only when absolutely necessary, and barely eats enough to stay alive. She spends most of her time composing letters to her daughter Magda, who was killed as an infant by a Nazi guard in a concentration camp, thirty-five years ago.

As the story begins, Rosa reluctantly sets off to the laundromat ("After a while, Rosa had no choice"). While watching her clothes swirl about in the washer, she is approached by the flirtatious older man, Simon Persky. Like Rosa, he is from Warsaw, Poland, but Rosa is quick to tell him, "My Warsaw isn't your Warsaw." Undeterred, Persky helps her fold her laundry and insists on taking her to a diner for a hot cup of tea and a Danish. There he tells her that he is a retired businessman who once owned a button factory and that his wife is in a mental institution. Rosa tells him how she destroyed her antique shop, "Part with a big hammer . . . part with a piece of construction metal I picked up from the gutter." When Perksy encourages her to tell more about her life, she gets up to go. She says she has no life, because "Thieves took it."

When Rosa arrives back at her hotel, a package and two letters are waiting for her. The first letter is from Stella, who writes to tell Rosa that she has sent her Magda's shawl in a separate package. The tattered shawl in which Rosa swaddled baby Magda is all that she has left of her daughter, and now she treats it as a sacred relic. Stella's letter describes with disdain how Rosa worships the shawl: "You'll open the box and take it out and cry, and you'll kiss it like a crazy person." Assuming the package she has received contains the shawl, she begins to tidy up her room in preparation: "Everything had to be nice when the box was opened."

Before reading the second letter, Rosa inventories her laundry and discovers she is missing one pair of underpants. At first, she is ashamed of her own carelessness: "Degrading. Lost bloomers□dropped God knows where." Then she latches onto the idea that Persky picked up the underwear but was too embarrassed to hand them to her. Finally, she decides that Persky has stolen them.

After reaching this questionable conclusion, Rosa opens the second letter, which is from Dr. James Tree, a university researcher who is conducting a study on repressed animation in Holocaust survivors. It is not the first such letter Rosa has received. The impersonal, clinical tone outrages her, so she lights a match and burns the letter.

Next, Rosa writes her own letter, a long letter in Polish to her daughter Magda. Rosa has invented an entire life for her daughter, whom she now imagines to be a professor of Greek philosophy at Columbia University. In the letter she tells Magda that her niece Stella suffers from dementia, and to humor her, Rosa agrees that Magda is dead. Rosa writes that Stella believes Magda's father was a Nazi who forced himself on her, but Rosa insists Magda's father was the son of a family friend, to whom Rosa was engaged. "No lies come out of me to you," she writes.

Rosa finishes the letter to Magda and then prepares herself to open the box containing Magda's shawl. She puts on a nice dress, fixes her hair, even puts on some lipstick, but then when she sits down on the bed to open the box, she is lost in a reverie of concentration camp memories. After hours spent reliving past horrors, she finally leaves her room in search of her lost underpants.

Rosa wanders Miami at night, looking for her underwear in a host of unlikely places: on the street, at a newsstand, and then finally, at the beach. She goes through a gate and onto the private beach of a fancy hotel, where she stumbles upon two men having sex. She tries to leave the beach, but she is locked in, a trespasser. She reacts to the barbed wire fence surrounding the beach. Desperate, she asks the men for help, but they laugh at her. Finally, she escapes by making her way through the hotel kitchen. Once in the lobby, she demands to see the manager, whom she chastises for the barbed wire on the fence. When the manager asks her to leave and not disturb "important guests" who are visiting the hotel, Rosa leaps to the conclusion that Dr. James Tree is staying at the hotel: "I see you got Tree! You got a whole bunch of Trees!"

When Rosa returns to her hotel, she discovers Simon Persky there, waiting for her. He invites himself up to her room for a cup of tea. During their conversation, Persky asks if Rosa lost her family in the Holocaust. Rosa says there are just three left: Rosa herself, Stella, and one more. She offers him the box with Magda's shawl as "evidence." But the box contains not the shawl, but the study on repressed animation sent by the persistent Dr. Tree. Enraged, Rosa hurls the book at the ceiling. Persky leaves, promising to return the next day.

The next day Rosa receives the package containing the shawl and takes it up to her room. When she handles the shawl, a vision of her daughter at sixteen springs to life. Rosa picks up her pen and writes another letter to Magda. But when the phone rings with a call from Simon Persky, the vision vanishes.

Characters

Finkelstein

Finkelstein is the manager of the Hotel Marie Louise. Rosa is trapped on the hotel's private beach when she inadvertently trespasses. After she escapes, she rages at Finkelstein for having barbed wire around the perimeter of the hotel beach.

Rosa Lublin

The title character of the story, Rosa Lublin□who reflexively gives her name as Lublin, Rosa□is a fifty-eight-year-old Holocaust survivor now living in Miami, Florida. Rosa lost her only child, a baby daughter named Magda, when a Nazi guard threw the baby against an electrified fence. Rosa's life stopped at this moment; she tells Simon Persky: "Before is a dream. After is a joke. Only during stays." For Rosa, the Holocaust has never really ended.

Rosa is full of contradictions. She is Jewish and yet anti-Semitic; she has contempt for Persky yet fixes her hair and worries about a hole in her dress while she is with him. She finds her lost underpants rolled in a towel but tells her niece Stella, "A man stole my underwear." She seems determined to live as little as possible. Repeatedly, when she is told to get on with her life, she replies, "Thieves took it."

It becomes clear as the story progresses that Rosa is mentally unstable, especially during the nighttime search for her lost underwear. Her musings on their whereabouts progress from questionable to absurd, for example, when she concludes that the underwear "thief" may have buried them on the beach.

Magda

Though Rosa's daughter has been dead for more than thirty years when this story takes place, Magda figures as an important character in the story because to Rosa, she is still very much alive. Rosa writes her long letters telling of her life before the Holocaust and describing life in the Warsaw ghetto. When Rosa embraces the shawl that once held baby Magda, a vision of Magda springs to life before her.

Through Rosa's letters Stella suspects Magda was fathered by a Nazi who forced himself on Rosa. Though Rosa denies this vehemently in her letter to Magda, later when she is gazing upon the vision of Magda, the reader learns, "she was always a little suspicious of Magda, because of that other strain, whatever it was, that ran in her." In "The Shawl," the story that precedes "Rosa," Stella has a different word for it: "Aryan." When writing Magda, Rosa uses endearments such as "my yellow lioness," "yellow blossom," and "yellow flower." The yellow suggests the yellow Star of David, which Nazis forced Jews to wear on their clothing. The name, Magda, suggests Mary

Magdalen (the reformed prostitute Jesus healed of evil spirits [Luke 8:2]), and it also suggests magdalen, which is a reformatory for wayward women or prostitutes. In her name, baby Magda may embody Rosa's memory of the traumatic rape by a Nazi.

Simon Persky

Simon Persky is a flirtatious, seventy-one-year-old man who "picks up" Rosa at the laundromat. Though he has had his share of tragedy□his wife now lives in a mental institution□his philosophy of life seems to be the antithesis of Rosa's: he is determined to enjoy the moment and help Rosa do the same. Persky is undeterred by Rosa's strange outbursts□"If there's one thing I know to understand, it's mental episodes," he says□and persistently chips away at her defenses.

Persky is a well-off retired businessman who once owned a factory that manufactured buttons and other notions. Button metaphors recur in the story. For instance, when Persky offers to take Rosa to a library to get some books, Rosa is touched: "He almost understood what she was: no ordinary button."

Stella

Stella is Rosa's niece living in New York, who supports Rosa financially (repeatedly reminding her, "I'm not a millionaire."). Stella was in the concentration camp with Rosa and her baby daughter when the baby was killed. It is obvious that Rosa resents Stella for having survived: "Stella was alive, why not Magda?"

Unlike Rosa, Stella is determined to leave her Holocaust experience in the past. About Stella, Rosa writes in one of her letters to Magda: "Every vestige of former existence is an insult to her." Stella finds Rosa's obsession with Magda and her shawl exasperating and will only let her have the shawl periodically. In her exchanges with Rosa, Stella is not only impatient but cold and unfeeling. Rosa refers to her as the "Angel of Death," to whom she attributes almost every negative experience of her life: "It comes from Stella, everything!"

Despite Stella's attempts to deny the past, there are signs that she is not succeeding. Now forty-nine, Stella is still searching for a husband, taking night classes in hopes of finding a man to marry. As Rosa writes to Magda, "Because [Stella] fears the past, she distrusts the future . . . as a result she has nothing."

Dr. James Tree

Dr. Tree is a university researcher and Ph.D. who is conducting a study on the metaphysical aspects of "Repressed Animation" in Holocaust survivors. He contacts Rosa requesting that she meet with him at her home as part of his research: "I should like to observe survivor syndroming within the natural setting."

The language Dr. Tree uses in his letters to Rosa is impersonal and clinical. Earnestly oblivious to his own insensitivity, he even sends Rosa a copy of a study on repressed animation, with the recommendation: "Of special interest, perhaps, is Chapter Six, entitled 'Defensive Group Formation: The Way of the Baboons.'" He sees her not as a human being, but as a curiosity to be examined, a specimen, a supposedly lower form of life.

To Rosa, Dr. Tree becomes the enemy, the symbolic representative of all the people who cannot□or will not□understand what she has been through, extending her oppression and leaving her alienated and isolated.

Themes

The Holocaust

"Rosa" gives a dramatic example of how the Holocaust not only took the lives of the millions of Jews who died in concentration camps, but also emotionally crippled millions of others who survived. While Rosa and Stella survived the camp physically, both are disabled emotionally, though they deal with it in very different ways. Rosa refuses to move on; Stella refuses to look back. Rosa tells Persky that Stella "wants to wipe out memory."

Conflict in approaches to dealing with the Holocaust has given rise to an important debate in the years since World War II (1939—1945). An extremist movement calling its members "Holocaust revisionists" claims that the annihilation of Jews in Nazi concentration camps either never happened at all or was vastly exaggerated. Denounced by historians, these "revisionists" have nonetheless made themselves heard, attempting, like Stella, to "wipe out memory."

Alienation

Rosa lives in almost complete isolation, partly because of her own efforts. Though she is supremely articulate in her native Polish, her English is still halting and broken, even after more than thirty years in the United States. "Why should I learn English?" she asks Persky. "I didn't ask for it, I got nothing to do with it." Through her own brand of anti-Semitism, she alienates herself from her own people, even those who have suffered the same tragedies. In a letter to Magda, she writes, "imagine confining *us* with teeming Mockowiczes and Rabinowiczes and Perksys and Finkelsteins, with all their bad-smelling grandfathers and their hordes of feeble children!" Finally, through her own mental illness, living in her fantasy world with visions of Magda, she further distances herself from reality and others.

Rosa's alienation is not entirely her own doing, however. In New York, she attempted to reach out to customers of her antique shop, to tell her story, but no one listened. "Whoever came, they were like deaf people," she says. Also, the impersonal university letters from Dr. Tree epitomize the kind of insensitivity that has convinced Rosa no one will ever understand.

Treatment of the Elderly in America

Like Rosa, the other elderly residents of the Miami hotel are isolated, shut off from their families and their former lives: "Everyone had left behind a real life. Here they had nothing." In letters they read "rumors of their grandchildren," but it all seems unreal. Rosa's visions of Magda are more substantial than the connection many of the residents experience with their living family members. These people are essentially forgotten.

This is all too typical of American attitudes toward the elderly; while other cultures value and revere the elderly, Americans tend to view them as burdens who have outlived their usefulness. One way or another, the younger people featured in the story are all fenced off from the elderly. The Cuban receptionist, for instance, works in a cage; the gay men on the beach are enclosed by a barbed-wire fence.

Idolatry

Idolatry, the worship of something or someone other than God, is a recurrent theme in Cynthia Ozick's work. Though Rosa writes in a letter to Magda, "I don't believe in God," she worships Magda's shawl with all the fervor and ritual of religion, giving it the status of a relic like medieval Christians did objects associated with the life of Jesus. As Stella writes her, "You're like those people in the Middle Ages who worshiped a piece of the True Cross." Rosa makes special preparations for the opening of the box, putting on a nice dress, fixing her hair, tidying her room. Once opened and taken from the box, the shawl has the power to bring the dead back to life, conjuring the vision of Magda at age sixteen. In "The Shawl," the story which precedes "Rosa," baby Magda is somehow sustained by sucking on the shawl, even though Rosa is no longer capable of nursing her.

Sex and Shame

Rosa tells Magda in one of her letters, "I was forced by a German, it's true, and more than once." Though she denies that Magda is the result, late in the story when Magda's vision begins to fade, Rosa implores her, "Magda, my beloved, don't be ashamed! Butterfly, I am not ashamed of your presence."

When Rosa imagines that Persky has picked up her lost underpants, her first thought is one of disproportionate humiliation: "Oh, degrading. The shame. Pain in the loins. Burning." Later she wanders Miami at night in a futile search for the lost underwear, and her lost innocence. When Persky asks her what she lost, what she is looking for, she replies, "My life."

Style

Setting

The setting of Miami, Florida, figures prominently in this story. The incessant heat and humidity add to Rosa's suffering and make her even more reluctant to leave her room. "Where I put myself is in hell," Rosa writes to Stella early in the story. The frequent mentions of the intense, suffocating heat confirm this impression. The heat is described as "cooked honey dumped on their heads," and "burning molasses air"; the sun is "a murdering sunball." When Rosa burns the letter from Dr. Tree, she thinks, "The world is full of fire! Everything, everything is on fire! Florida is burning!"

In Florida, Rosa is surrounded almost entirely by other elderly people whose productive lives, like hers, are in the past. In the mirrors in the lobby, the elderly hotel guests see themselves as they used to be, not as they are now; they are arrested in time, just as Rosa's life remains centered on the moment of her daughter's death.

Metaphor

Metaphor is a technique which conveys a description of one thing in terms of another. Buttons, for instance, are a recurring metaphor in Ozick's story. Simon Persky tells Rosa he once owned a button factory. Later, Rosa reflects on how trivial Persky's life seems to her, "himself no more significant than a button." Then she extends this metaphor to the city's entire population: "All of Miami Beach, a box for useless buttons!" When Rosa flies into a rage after opening the package from Dr. Tree, she yells at Persky, "I'm not your button, Persky! I'm nobody's button." And finally, when the vision of Magda appears wearing a dress Rosa herself wore as a teenager, the buttons are so beautiful that "Persky could never have been acquainted with buttons like that." Attached to cloth, buttons function as fasteners, creating connection, holding separate parts together; collected in a box, buttons are useless, meaningless. Buttons become a metaphor for these elderly people, collected in Florida, but detached and without function or purpose.

Mirrors constitute another recurring metaphor in "Rosa." Rosa's antique shop, for instance, specialized in old mirrors, perfect for a character who spends her life gazing into the past. The mirrors in the lobby of Rosa's hotel reflect the past as well, showing the elderly guests what they want to see and nothing more.

Point of View

"Rosa" is written in third-person subjective point of view, which means the reader has access to Rosa's internal thoughts and feelings, but not those of others. Because Ozick moves from ordinary narration right into Rosa's thoughts without any distinguishing punctuation, readers get the feeling they are constantly inside Rosa's head. This feeling

becomes especially important during Rosa's moments of dementia, blurring the line between what is imagined and what is real.

Though the bulk of the story is told in the third person point of view, much of what we learn about Rosa's background, and also about Stella, we learn from the long letters Rosa writes to Magda, which are of course written in the first person. There is a sharp contrast between the way Rosa writes and the way she speaks, because she writes in her native Polish. Letter-writing Rosa is articulate and well-educated; Rosa's spoken English, however, "ain't no better than what any other refugee talks," as Persky says.

Unlike the usual prose written in the first person, the style of a letter is dictated in part by the recipient. Rosa's letters to Magda are rife with endearments, rhapsodic in their description of Warsaw and her former life, and somewhat arrogant. She expresses her opinions and views openly and lies boldly because she knows there is no real reader to contradict or chastise her. She can ignore reality and paint a picture of life as she wishes it to be.

On the other hand, Stella's two short letters to Rosa are caustic and critical, revealing the resentment she feels towards Rosa. She knows that though Rosa saved her life, Rosa would much prefer it if Stella had been the one to die, rather than Magda. She is jealous of the shawl, as if it were Magda herself. This is implied in her description of Rosa's ritual of worshiping the shawl ("What a scene, disgusting!") and also by her withholding the shawl, only allowing Rosa to have it periodically.

Finally, the letters written by Dr. Tree, in their highly clinical, emotionless language, portray him as unfeeling and arrogant. His repetitive use of the term "survivor," a label that could be attached to any living thing, plant or animal, reveals his attitude towards the recipient of his letter. Rosa notes this immediately when she reads it: "*Survivor*. Even when your bones get melted into the grains of the earth, still they'll forget *human being*."

Irony

Irony appears in "Rosa" on many levels; some almost humorous, some tragic. First there is the irony that Rosa has survived the Holocaust and the camps only to be "confined" in Miami with many of the same people for whom she had so much contempt in her earlier life. She is confronted again by barbed wire and by a scientist who wishes her to consent to an "experiment," just as many Holocaust victims were used as experimental subjects.

Dr. Tree's letters ironically speak of "Repressed Animation," written by a man who has clearly repressed any human feeling or compassion towards the people he studies. He writes in the service of science, but he is unable to recognize the way he objectifies the subjects of his research. To further drive home the message that he sees Rosa on the level of any other laboratory animal, he refers her to a study entitled, "Defensive Group Formation: The Way of the Baboons."

Finally, though Stella clearly resents supporting Rosa and tries to keep all contact with her as brief as possible, she guarantees continued and regular contact by keeping Magda's shawl. She knows that as long as she keeps it, she and Rosa are connected by a bond much greater than the financial support she provides.

Historical Context

Cynthia Ozick's "Rosa" first appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1983. In 1979, a group calling itself the Institute for Historical Review (IHR) was founded by Willis Carto. Carto had also founded Liberty lobby, an anti-Jewish propaganda organization. Members of the IHR call themselves Holocaust revisionists. They claim that the Holocaust either never happened or has been greatly exaggerated by the Jewish people. The IHR and its claims have been denounced by historians, who cite the vast volume of documentation seized from the Nazis themselves, as well as firsthand accounts from survivors. Indeed, the Holocaust is one of the best documented events in history.

The establishment of the IHR occurred, ironically, just two years after the establishment of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a Jewish human-rights organization dedicated to apprehending Nazi war criminals and keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive. In 1981, the center produced an Academy Award—winning documentary about the Holocaust entitled *Genocide*.

"The Shawl" and "Rosa" deal with the pivotal event of Rosa Lublin's life, the death of her infant daughter, who was thrown against an electrified fence by a Nazi guard. This brutal killing was drawn from an actual event Ozick read of in William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*.

Critical Overview

Since she published her first novel in 1966, Cynthia Ozick has garnered substantial critical acclaim for both her fiction and her essays. Many critics acknowledge that she is a gifted writer, and one of the most important voices in contemporary literature. John Sutherland, in the October 8, 2000, *New York Times Book Review*, calls her "the most accomplished and graceful literary stylist of our time."

Some critics believe, however, that Ozick's penchant for displaying her own prowess with words interferes with her message. Accusing her of "Parading her erudition like a peacock," Ilan Stavans, in the July 16, 1999 issue of *Times Literary Supplement*, notes that while Ozick's words are meticulously chosen, "their splendour can also get in her way, obstructing the plot, making it morose, dispensable." Bruce Bawer, in the *Wall Street Journal*, also mentions that Ozick can be "too preoccupied with intellectual matters for [her] own good,□or, to be specific, for the good of [her] fiction."

Whatever negative criticism Ozick has received, very little of it has been attached to the two stories featuring Rosa Lublin, "The Shawl" and "Rosa." Each story won an O. Henry Prize for short fiction when it was first published in the *New Yorker* (in 1980 and 1983 respectively). In his *The Wall Street Journal* review of the book *The Shawl* (which combines both stories in one volume), Bruce Bawer writes, "Ms. Ozick succeeds stunningly in bringing this tragic, demented woman to life." Critics were especially impressed by Ozick's sensitive handling of the difficult subject matter. Irving Halperin, in *Commonweal*, writes, "In a time when the memory of the Holocaust is being trivialized by slick fiction, talk shows, and TV 'documentaries' . . . Ms. Ozick's volume is a particularly welcome achievement of the moral imagination." Francine Prose in the September 10, 1989 *New York Times Book Review* says that Ozick "pulls off the rare trick of making art out of what we would rather not see."

Overall, these two stories featuring Rosa Lublin are considered some of Ozick's finest work. Both are often included as required reading for students studying the Holocaust.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Pryor has a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Michigan and twenty years experience in professional and creative writing with special interest in fiction. In this essay, Pryor examines how the current life of the title character in "Rosa" mirrors her past Holocaust experience and the disparate methods the characters use to cope with that experience.

How does one deal with the Holocaust and its memory? This is the question that "Rosa" brings to mind, but does not necessarily answer. Rosa Lublin's niece Stella theorizes that there are three lives: before the Holocaust, during, and after. Rosa claims: "Before is a dream. After is a joke. Only during stays." Rosa's answer to dealing with the Holocaust is to carry it with her every day, to deny that there is a life after by living only in the past.

In fact, in moving to Miami Beach, Rosa has returned to a confined camp of sorts. Where the Warsaw ghetto segregated and confined Jews, Miami Beach confines the elderly. The few younger people Rosa encounters are segregated from the elderly by fences: the gay men at the beach, the receptionist in her "cage." Even the description of the elderly as "scarecrows, blown about under the murdering sunball with empty rib cages" brings to mind images of emaciated concentration camp prisoners.

The words and images Ozick uses to describe Miami Beach depict a place just this side of hell. The heat and humidity are oppressive, thick, and suffocating; the air is "molasses," the streets are a "furnace," the sun is "an executioner," bringing to mind more images of Holocaust atrocities. The heat serves to further confine Rosa in her dismal, grimy room, which she shares with "squads of dying flies." In coming to Miami, Rosa has moved back into the worst of her past.

As Rosa lives in the past, clinging to her memories of Magda, there are signs that she would actually like to move on but has no idea how to do it. First, there is the simple fact that she continues to live, however marginally. Second, it seems that she realizes her mistake in coming to Miami; she writes her niece, "Where I put myself is in hell," and she later suggests naively to Stella that she could return to New York and re-open her store. Finally, her attempts to get rid of the optimistic Persky seem half-hearted, and when she is with him she worries about her hair, her missing button, the fact that she is not wearing her nice shoes. Though these signs indicate some willingness to move forward, her isolation and misery have become such an ingrained way of life that she is not even fully aware of other options. When Persky comes into her dingy room and sets her table to eat the crullers he has brought, "to Rosa this made the corner of the room look new, as though she had never seen it before."

The incident on the private hotel beach gives Rosa a chance to rewrite her own history in some small way. When she is trapped on the beach behind barbed wire, she is forced to relive the past not just in her mind, but in reality. She pleads with the men on the beach to let her out, but they refuse. They are her persecutors, her jailers. This time,

however, she makes her own escape, finding her way through the hotel kitchens and into the Eden-like lobby. After telling off the hotel manager, she marches out of the lobby, "Irradiated, triumphant, cleansed." When she returns to the hotel, Persky is waiting for her; the next morning, she requests that her phone be reconnected. She has taken one tentative step into the future. Even Magda seems to know that something is different: when Rosa opens the box containing Magda's shawl, this time, "For some reason it did not instantly restore Magda." In fact, when Rosa first looks at the shawl, she is "indifferent." For the first time, she is seeing the shawl for what it really is, "a colorless cloth."

The ever-patient Persky seems ideally suited to lead Rosa from the confinement of her own misery. She has a button missing; he is a manufacturer of buttons. She barely eats enough to stay alive; in both of their meetings he buys her food. As Rosa comes to realize, "he almost understood what she was: no ordinary button." Between the extremes of living in the past and denying it, Persky takes the middle road. Unlike Stella, he is sympathetic to Rosa's anguish, though he advises, "Sometimes a little forgetting is necessary."

Cynthia Ozick has made the emotional anguish of Holocaust survivors immediate and real by making Rosa a flawed, not entirely sympathetic character. Rosa is both an intellectual snob and an anti-Semite, despite all that she has suffered at the hands of anti-Semitism. It is exactly because she is not heroic or noble that the reader can relate intimately to her suffering. Her experiences are made even more immediate by Ozick's technique of shifting from narrative to Rosa's thoughts without punctuation. What is actually true and what is the product of Rosa's unstable mind? The lines are blurred.

While Rosa has lived the last thirty-five years in the past, Stella has spent the last thirty-five years trying to ignore it. Though Rosa describes her as pretty, Stella has been unable to find "the one thing she wanted more than anything: an American husband." Ozick does not reveal what Stella does for a living, though her constant reminders to Rosa that she is not a millionaire would indicate a lack of success in this area as well. As Rosa asks aloud to Stella's letter, "And you, Stella, *you* have a life?" It would appear that Stella's methods of dealing with her war-time experience have been as ineffective as Rosa's. In fact, by trying to blend in with other Americans and hide her own past, Stella does not even have her own heritage to rely on and draw strength from.

Like Rosa and Stella, other people have their own difficulties in dealing with the Holocaust. If Rosa is representative of one extreme (remembering to the point of obsession) and Stella represents the other (denying or ignoring the Holocaust entirely), then Ozick seems to advocate memory. Though hardly lovable, Rosa is a far more sympathetic character than the cold and critical Stella. The importance of remembering the Holocaust has been underscored in the late twentieth century and early 2000s by the rise of the Holocaust "revisionist" movement, an extreme group that denies the Holocaust ever really happened or if it did, it has been greatly exaggerated. Ozick's Rosa, stubbornly and proudly clinging to the past despite the urgings of those around her, is a defiant answer to these deniers. Though Persky advocates "a little forgetting," the more problematic question for Rosa, and for society in general, is how much

forgetting is too much? At what point does forgetting become carelessness, leaving the door ajar for future persecution, for history to repeat itself? And to what extent does this forgetting devalue the suffering and sacrifice of millions of Jews suffered and died at the hands of the Nazis?

"Rosa" and "The Shawl" not only raise these questions, they are in some small measure part of the answer. If writers and artists can create work that brings the suffering and horror of the Holocaust so sharply into focus, as these stories do while avoiding the temptation to create myth from history, they can help all people remember and understand.

Source: Laura Pryor, Critical Essay on "Rosa," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

In interviews, Cynthia Ozick has said that in principle, she is against making fiction out of the Holocaust, but felt compelled to write "The Shawl" and "Rosa." What might be the dangers of using the Holocaust or other historical events as a basis for fiction? What positive results might come from this fiction? Write about the pros and cons of creating art from history.

The five stages of grief, as identified by psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, are denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In which of these stages is Rosa living? Can you find signs of the other stages throughout the story? Does she progress or regress through the process as the story continues?

Rosa experiences "mental episodes," as Persky would call them, throughout the story. What events trigger these episodes and why? How does her fragile mental condition affect her ability to cope with her loss? Do some research on post-traumatic shock syndrome and then write an essay in which you explain its relevance to Rosa's mental state and those events that exacerbate it.

A recurring theme in Ozick's work is idolatry, the worship of someone or something other than God. Rosa's idol is Magda's shawl. How did Hitler use idolatry to create the Holocaust? Can you find other examples of idols in society in the early 2000s?

Compare and Contrast

Early 1940s: Central and eastern Europe is the largest center of the world's Jewish population by the start of World War II (1939—1940), with an estimated 9.5 million of the world's 16.7 million Jews (following historical shifts from Palestine to Babylon in ancient times, then to Spain in the eleventh century until the Inquisition, when the center began shifting to central and eastern Europe).

Late 1970s: With about two-thirds of Europe's Jewish population wiped out by the Nazis during World War II and the Holocaust, the center of Jewish population has shifted to the United States and Israel. An estimated 5.7 million Jews live in the United States, and 3.2 million in Israel.

Today: In 2000, the world's Jewish population is estimated at 13.2 million, of which only 1,583,000, or twelve percent, live in Europe. Most Jews live either in the United States or Israel. In most recent years, the worldwide Jewish population has risen slightly but still remains at a statistical zero-population growth.

Early 1940s: The legal rights, property, homes, businesses, social freedoms, indeed all aspects of human community life for Jewish citizens is systemically taken away by the Nazi government (in Germany itself and in Nazi-occupied European states from France in the West to occupied Russia in the East) without legal or political opposition. The depth of this political powerlessness is ultimately expressed by the Holocaust, the government-sanctioned and -operated extermination of some 6 million European Jews, along with millions of others, such as Christian sympathizers, political dissenters, homosexuals, and physically or mentally handicapped persons.

Late 1970s: The state of Israel, in the three decades since its founding as a sovereign nation by Jewish nationalists in 1948, has ascended to become a regional power through factors including the following: its powerful modern economy, its defeat of neighboring Arab countries in armed conflicts in 1967 and 1973, its strong economic and political alliances with the United States government and private constituencies, and its possession of nuclear weapons.

1990s: The 1990s have seen a resurgence of Nazi ideology. Neo-Nazis uphold such beliefs as anti-Semitism and a hatred of foreigners. Neo-Nazi doctrine tends to draw young people in countries around the world to participate in these hate groups.

Early 1940s: From 1943 to 1945 at the Auschwitz death camp, Dr. Josef Mengele performs hundreds of gruesome medical experiments on the camp's inmates. Ostensibly the goal of these experiments is genetic research aimed at creating a super-race of defect-free Aryans for the Reich. In truth, there is no scientific value to Mengele's experiments; using the pretext of science, they are in fact extraordinary instances of individual and group sadistic torture, mutilation, and murder. Operations are routinely performed without anesthesia, including amputations and transplants.

Late 1970s: In November 1977, in Great Britain, the first successful in vitro fertilization is performed on Lesley Brown, a woman formerly unable to conceive due to blockage of her fallopian tubes. After months of careful monitoring, Brown delivers a healthy baby girl on July 25, 1978. The birth of Louise Brown not only gives hope to thousands of infertile couples, it also raises a host of questions regarding the ethical and moral implications of creating life in the laboratory. Issues such as surrogate mothers, the morality of discarding some embryos in favor of others, the possibility of sex selection and genetic engineering are all hotly debated long before the baby is even born.

Today: In the early 2000s, in vitro fertilization is a fairly commonplace procedure that helps infertile couples worldwide.

What Do I Read Next?

Ozick's "The Shawl" (1989) tells the harrowing story of Magda's death at the hands of a Nazi guard and will give readers greater insight into the title character of "Rosa."

A Cynthia Ozick Reader (1996) gives readers a wider sampling of Ozick's other work, including seven poems, eight essays, and seven fiction pieces.

Technically a novel, Elie Wiesel's *Night* is an autobiographical account of Wiesel's experience at Auschwitz. Published in 1960, it is one of the most famous accounts written of the Holocaust.

The novel *Washington Square* is a good introduction to Henry James. This novel is shorter and easier to read than some of his more famous, later works. The Modern Library Classics edition of this novel also includes an introduction by Cynthia Ozick. James was a major literary influence on Ozick, who wrote her master's thesis on his works while she attended Ohio State University.

New Yorker Ruth Puttermesser is probably Ozick's most famous fictional character. A number of short stories featuring Puttermesser were combined to create a novel called *The Puttermessser Papers* (1997). It is one of Ozick's most highly acclaimed works.

Further Study

Frankl, Viktor E., *Man's Search for Meaning*, Simon and Schuster, 1984.

Frankl took nine days in 1945 to write this little book, assuming it would be published anonymously. Instead, the book brought its author worldwide fame. Using his own experience in a Nazi labor camp, Frankl demonstrates his extraordinary theory that human experience holds meaning, even in its most miserable state, and that humans are capable at all times of finding beauty in their circumstances.

Grove, Andrew S., *Swimming Across: A Memoir*, Warner Books, 2001.

Andris Grof (later Andrew Grove), born in Budapest, Hungary, survived in hiding during the Nazi occupation and escaped to the United States shortly before the Communist take over in 1956. The author subsequently became one of the founders of Intel and held the position of chairman in that U.S. company.

Levi, Primo, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, Simon and Schuster, 1996.

Levi pronounced himself lucky to be arrested and sent to Auschwitz in 1944. His late arrival made his survival until liberation more likely. This memoir by the Italian chemist includes the difficulties that confronted survivors immediately after liberation and the challenges they faced then in finding their way back home.

Shermer, Michael, *Denying History: Who Says the Holocaust Never Happened and Why Do They Say It*, University of California Press, 2002.

An in-depth study of the Holocaust deniers, their motivations and their claims. Each claim is carefully examined and refuted.

Spiegelman, Art, *Maus A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*, Pantheon, 1986.

A Pulitzer Prize—winning graphic novel (essentially a long comic book for mature readers) telling the story of Spiegelman's father and his persecution by the Nazis in World War II. In this tale, the Jews are mice, the Nazis cats, and the Americans are dogs.

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Prose, Francine, Review of *The Shawl*, in *New York Times Book Review*, September 10, 1989 .

Stavans, Ilan, Review of *The Puttermesser Papers*, in *Times Literary Supplement*, July 16, 1999.

Sutherland, John, Review of *Quarrel and Quandary*, in *New York Times Book Review*, October 8, 2000.