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## “The Shawl”: Of Which Bears the Facade

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“The Shawl”: Of Which Bears the Facade

As disasters occur, one is met with a time to cope. When I cope, I think of riddles and find enjoyment in coloring books. A riddle to bring up for this discussion is this: “When you say its name, it is no longer there. What is it?” The answer is short - silence. After disasters like September 11th, the centuries of slavery, countless school shootings and stabbings, more often than not the survivors are supposed to let out their feelings in order to achieve catharsis. However, for one of the worst disasters that has occurred on this Earth, the Holocaust, there is hesitation for Jewish writers to expel details of that event. Whether they be fully accurate or simulated literature, the topic is dense. The topic is difficult and emotional. Cynthia Ozick, a Jewish-American author, took the past of the Holocaust and brought it to a closer present. Her short story “The Shawl” exemplifies just a small fraction of the trials and tribulations that many had faced during the Holocaust. This short story, specifically, centers on its effects on Jewish women in the Holocaust. The three main figures of the story, Rosa, Magda, and Stella all symbolize the effects of the the trauma. Rosa is hope, Magda is innocence, and Stella is self-preservation. This is proven throughout multiple points in the text, of which I shall be discussing further.

Let us begin with Rosa, the hope. Rosa is the mother of Stella and Magda, body weak and spirit shaky. Rosa was so malnourished that “there was not enough milk; sometimes Magda

sucked air” (Ozick 516). Rosa was unable to lactate to feed her child. At this rate, Rosa was running on fumes- but she still continued on for her daughters. This woman was starved, but she “did not feel hunger” (516). Instead, “she felt like, not like someone walking but like someone in a faint, in trance, arrested in a fit, someone who is already a floating angel” (516). In other words, her consciousness was fading away as she was in the torturous prison created within the concentration camp. An out of body experience, Rosa is “alert and seeing everything, but in the air, not there, not touching the road;” she is simply passing through the camp similar to time swiftly passing by in the universe. This is how she represents hope in the beginning of the short story- she continues to live and attempt to prosper for her family in hopes of survival.

Rosa was an attentive mother that knew she could not make mistakes at the time. She knew that “if she moved out of line they might shoot,” reveal the shawl, and murder infant Magda (Ozick 516). This hope within Rosa, I propose, was part of the reason the shawl that held Magda was truly magic. The magic was in the fact that, as Magda “took the corner of the shawl and milked it,” she was being fed with the fibers of hope, keeping her alive (517). Rosa’s body continued to deteriorate, as it is seen that she “did not menstruate” (517). This can occur for multiple reasons, whether it be stress, menopause, or a body so weak that it cannot function properly. In Rosa’s case, it is most likely all of the above. However, as she was “slowly turning into air,” Rosa never failed to protect baby Magda (517). Later in the short story, Rosa is subject to one of the worst horrors a mother could face: losing a child. Author Peter Kerry Powers dictates that Rosa “embodies the past, because her experience in the camps-particularly witnessing the brutal murder of her small child-has left her incapable of functioning” but this did

not stop her from staying alive to continue to care for Stella (89). Rosa's response to the ruthless toss of Magda onto the electrified fence showed how cold her soul had become:

She only stood, because if she ran they would shoot, and if she tried to pick up the sticks of Magda's body they would shoot, and if she let the wolf's screech ascending now through the ladder of her skeleton break out, they would shoot; so she took Magda's shawl and filled her own mouth with it, stuffed it in and stuffed it in, until she was swallowing up the wolf's screech and tasting the cinnamon and almond depth of Magda's saliva; and Rosa drank Magda's shawl until it dried. (520)

In times of the death of a loved one, especially one's child, the grieving process is strenuous and confusing. However, Rosa coped the best way she could, swallowing the hope that was wrapped around her chest and continuing to push on for her older daughter Stella. It was in this scene that she, like hope for many during the Holocaust, was so lost and broken that one would not see her wanting to live afterwards. She did, though, because the hope was weak but it was still present.

Now to discuss baby Magda, the innocence. With a "face, very round, a pocket mirror of a face," Magda had the light skin and bright eyes of an Aryan child (Ozick 516). Her eyes made her appear to not even be Rosa's daughter, "blue as air" along with the "smooth feathers of hair nearly as yellow as the Star sewn into Rosa's coat" (516). Magda had no control over what she looked like, as many had no control over their innocence while battered spiritually and physically throughout the Holocaust and war. The thing about Magda was that she was due to die. It was a surprised that she lived as long as she did based on how the malnourishment was "distending her stomach" to the point of her looking "balloonish" (Brauner 27; Ozick 519).

Many children's stomachs will inflate in response to malnutrition- this particular form is one that

children are far more vulnerable to compared to adults. This is a phenomenon seen in some starving communities. Magda, unable to eat or drink from her mother's breasts, "sucked and sucked" the magic shawl, "flooding the threads with wetness" (Ozick 517). She clung to her only hope, the shawl, just as women in concentration camps had to cling to their innocence in hopes of staying positive and hopeful in a dreadful, hopeless area.

Magda's death was a pivotal point in the text, as it is a pivotal point for those in the concentration camps to finally lose the shred of doubt that deluded them into believing that cruelty was at its plateau. The innocence was taken from these women and taunted, no light at the end of the tunnel. Cynthia Ozick takes this short story of the Holocaust and, instead of "rending the American artist from the millions of annihilated Europeans, she offers the reader in cadenced and imagistic but curiously detached prose the execution of a small child named Magda in a concentration camp within the full and helpless view of her mother" (Wilner 125-26). This helplessness was a common feeling amongst many women in the concentration camps, especially those who were mothers. The experience would be different for mothers whose children were boys and were separated from them. I would think that a mother seeing her daughters be abused, malnourished, beaten, etc., knowing that she cannot do anything about it would be one of the most terrible pains for one to bear. This is not to say that *not* knowing about what is happening to one's child is not horrifying, but one could try to delude themselves with a possible positive image of the other side of the camp.

All at once Magda was swimming through the air. The whole of Magda traveled through loftiness. She looked like a butterfly touching a silver vine. And the moment Magda's feathered round head and her pencil legs and balloonish belly and zigzag arms splashed

against the fence, the steel voices went mad in their growling, urging Rosa to run and run to the spot where Magda had fallen from her flight against the electrified fence; but of course Rosa did not obey them. (519-20)

The thing in which makes this scene even harder to bear is the fact that Magda was just an infant. She only recently started walking and able to speak again. She had no idea what was happening or why. She had no idea why she was taken, why she was thrown. She will never find solace for her death. Magda would not even know what death is. So, as Magda's life is taken from her, so is the innocence of every woman and girl in the concentration camps. Along with that, Rosa was unable to "pick up the sticks of Magda's body" because of the threat of imminent death (520). This not only proved the loss of innocent in the concentration camps during the Holocaust but also the lack of a chance to grieve, or process, or heal in any way. This constant pain and suffering possessed these women and, even as some survived, this pain will haunt them as well.

Being haunted is a struggle all in its own right, and I want to believe that Stella was haunted, and this is why she symbolizes self-preservation. Stella was not mentioned as often throughout the short story as Magda and Rosa was. I find this to be important because her lack of a presence throughout the text only proved how subtle the idea of self-preservation was during the Holocaust. These women were hopeless, dying, suffering in every means. See, Stella "was ravenous. Her knees were tumors on sticks, her elbows chicken bones" while Magda was a round, bright-faced infant (Ozick 516). She is a young teen looking for solace in a place of utter destruction. However, Rosa is so focused on Magda, that Stella is neglected. While this would "amplify the natural jealousy that an adolescent girl might feel towards a baby sister monopolizing her mother's attention," I would argue that Stella had no actual malicious intent

towards Magda (Brauner 27). While “she she was jealous of Magda,” she was also a girl that was stuck in a concentration camp just like her mother and baby sister (Ozick 516). She needs help, they all do. Stella is characterized as hungry for attention, but it is understandable to be jealous. She wants to preserve her character, and body, and relationship with her mother.

Not only is Magda getting the attention of their mother, but she is also too young to understand anything and does not suffer the trials and tribulations that Stella and Rosa have to. It would appear that Stella was selfish in wanting her mother’s attention knowing the dire situations. Her chance to live was already incredibly higher than Magda’s, and instead of trying to help everyone survive, her envy washed over her soul and led her to dastardly acts. However, Stella is of the age to be able to fully perceive her surroundings. She *knows* the suffering she is going through. She is hurting in ways that Magda could not understand, and this is the time when her mother is the comfort that could console her spirit. When I first read how she “took the shawl away and made Magda die,” I characterized Stella as selfish (Ozick 518). After reading the scene from Stella’s point of view, I saw that Stella has not only lost her innocence and her hope, but she also is watching herself lose the connection she has with her mother. Stella is lonely, and that makes her cold. The shawl is the closest thing to her mother that she has, even though her mother is there. She wants to survive, she wants *something*. She most likely just wanted her mother to say something, affirm her character instead of ignoring her for Magda. Stella is not only preserving herself physically but trying to figure out how to preserve her spirit.

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