

Jillian Alekna

E177A-Holocaust Literature

Dr. Erin Mae Clark

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The Paradox of Beauty in Horror

One would think that the last place beauty can be found is a home of death and destruction. Oddly enough, there is a certain beauty that sets the survivors apart from the departed, but also marks “the different” for ridicule and maltreatment. In Cynthia Ozick’s “The Shawl,” this unlikely concept plays a crucial role in the development of the story, making its words stick in the reader’s head long after they’ve finished. By using descriptive wording, figurative language, and the tone of internal hatred for those “unlike us,” Ozick examines the juxtaposition of beauty in a world of horror and the means of survival to make it through.

The passage I chose to entertain occurs toward the beginning of the short story. The reader is immediately introduced to the main characters of Stella, Rosa, and Magda whom are living in an unidentified concentration camp during the Holocaust and currently participating in a regulatory march. As Rosa carries Magda and Stella follows behind, Ozick sets the scene:

“Rosa did not feel hunger; she felt light, not like someone walking but like someone in a faint, in trance, arrested in a fit, someone who is already a floating angel, alert and seeing everything, but in the air, not there, not touching the road. As if teetering on the tips of her fingernails. She looked into Magda’s face through a gap in the shawl: a squirrel in a nest, safe, no one could reach her inside the little house of the shawl’s windings. The face, very round, a pocket mirror of a face: but it was not Rosa’s bleak complexion, dark like cholera, it was another kind of face altogether, eyes blue as air, smooth feathers of

hair nearly as yellow as the Star sewn into Rosa's coat. You could think she was one of *their* babies" (Ozick 3-4).

Beginning, the imagery reflected throughout this passage showcases the uncanny light and hope in a world of darkness and fear. For example, Rosa is described as feeling like a "floating angel" (3) as she walks with Magda in her arms. Angels are normally associated with possessing wings and carrying themselves lightly, whereas Rosa feels that there is simply nothing left on her body to carry. Additionally, angels are historically supposed to look over mankind as "guardians" of sorts. Rosa enacts this principle by being a guardian to Stella, Magda, and thus Magda's shawl as well. Another form of imagery comes when describing Magda's appearance, both in the shawl and as an "odd" looking child. Magda is bundled up in the shawl, reminiscent of "a squirrel in a nest" (3) and safe from harm. Squirrel nests are to be tucked away in trees and crevices where prying eyes and predators can't touch them. Rosa wants the same for Magda, a place where she can be safe and away from the prying eyes and grabbing hands of the Nazis or members of the concentration camp. This also calls to mind the security of a mother's love and embrace, which Rosa tries to provide for her young child. In addition, the juxtaposition of Rosa; said to have a "bleak complexion, dark like cholera" (4) with Magda; "eyes blue as air [and] smooth feathers of hair" (4) examines the irony of beauty in a horrific place. If Magda is to be discovered, she will not only stand out in the bleak camp because she is a child, but because of her uncanny appearance, far removed from the dark cloud and demeanor that seems to impact the adults of the camp such as Rosa or Stella.

Overall, the tone in this passage acts as an examiner, allowing the reader to simply take the events for what they are without much hesitation. However, the description of Magda as looking like "she was one of their babies" (4) is the most evident of an aggressive or "outsider"

belief in the story. Though this story is narrated by Rosa, this phrase seems to come right out of a jealous Stella's mouth. The fact that "their" is italicized makes it seem as if being blue-eyed and blonde is a crime, if not a marker for someone of lesser background. Ironically, the Aryan race of blue eyes and blonde hair was seen as the ideal German population. In a camp of pale and malnourished Jews, however, it's less than ideal to stand out. Magda herself is a crime in some accounts, as the reader can deduce that she's the product of a rape via a Nazi member. Since the Jewish population is meant to die out rather than reproduce, a baby is not a good omen for the concentration camp and the Nazis.

The amount of figurative language, especially alluding to appearances, allows the reader to examine the feelings of comfort and safety mingled with the iron grit it takes to survive. First, Magda is referred to as "a squirrel in a nest" (3) of her beloved shawl. The thought of being warm, cozy, and protected sounds pleasant to anyone, but the idea of being comfortable in a world of death seems anything but. Still, as a mother's love is unconditional, Rosa's desire to keep her daughter tucked away is just as great. Magda's face is also referred to as "a pocket mirror of a face" (4) in her mother's opinion. This at first seems odd, as Magda's appearance is very sunny and light, whereas Rosa's is "dark like cholera" (4). However, this could mean one of two things. Because a mirror reflects back what it sees, Magda is simply reflecting back Rosa's inner beauty. This "beauty" so to speak, isn't of appearances necessarily, but of character and the sacrifices she's willing to make to ensure her daughter's safety. The other interpretation is that as Magda sucks nutrition from her mother, she also sucks the color and life from her as well. Of course, she isn't doing this intentionally, but Rosa is allowing it to happen. This could even mean that Rosa has given up on life entirely; she knows that she will most likely die in this camp and expects her niece and young daughter to follow suit. Finally, Magda is said to have hair "as

yellow as the Star sewn into Rosa's coat" and "eyes blue as air" (4). Besides being drastically different from her mother and cousin, Magda's appearance is another cohabitation of light in darkness. Her hair is blonde (or yellow), such as a proper German child would have, yet it's the same yellow of the Star branding her as a Jew, condemning her to ill treatment. Her eyes are the color of a bright blue sky, such as one would see on a summer day. The dark and smoky skies over a concentration camp are anything but clear and blue.

It is evident that Ozick's representation of these Holocaust victims shows both the darkness and horror of death and the brightness of the human spirit. Each phrase is carefully chosen to allow the reader to enter not only the minds of the characters, but the feeling of the setting and the mood of this devastating time in history. Perhaps it is an examination of the lengths mankind goes to in order to justify their actions. In short, it is clear that a life is filled with both beauty and horror, both experiences felt deeply by the victims of the Holocaust.

Works Cited

Ozick, Cynthia. *The Shawl*. Phoenix, 2007.