

The Symbolism of the Shawl in “The Shawl”

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In academic literature, the title, which "not only isolates and closes the "text space," but also provides it the quality of internal calmness and wholeness," is at the focus of our attention. According to Ilya Romanovich Galperin, the work's title "always conveys the originator of the text's fundamental notion, idea, or concept.". According to Valery Tyupa, the title has three objectives: 1) referential, i.e. the text's relationship to the aesthetic world, and the world's "value consolidation" around its "value center" (hero); 2) creative - connection of the text with the author's creative will as a communicative event organizer; 3) receptive - correlation of the text with the reader's co-creative empathy as a possible implementer of this communicative event.

Indeed, the literary work's title exposes its central idea, but it also connects to the primary characters and the text's aesthetic universe. The title is the most crucial structural element that organizes the work's commencement. The title of the novel “The Shawl” includes an item of clothing that is utilized as a source of heat and simply as a fashion accessory in everyday life; in the text, it becomes a significant symbol.

The shawl signifies diverse things for the characters and corresponds with each of them in their own way, therefore the title's referential function is most clearly identified in the works. In this sense, we must consider the following: what does a shawl imply for Magda? What is she in the tale for Stella, and how does the novel's main character connect to this subject? What part of Rosa's life does the shawl play?

In Cynthia Ozick's “The Shawl”, it conveys several meanings such as protection, shelter, love and object of memory and its centrality to the story also means that that its meaning is complex and shifting. The shawl provides several things to the characters who use it. The shawl affects Magda the most and being wrapped in a shawl secretly, Magda owns it as her shelter and spends most of her time in the shawl. It is her home and the only accommodation that keeps her alive and fed. The shawl also symbolizes a savior, as it saved Rosa's life by muffling her screams. It then comforts her in the event of her daughter's death. Unfortunately, the death of Magda was caused by both shawl and Stella who stole it from her. The shawl is the most important symbol throughout the story; not only because it appears so much, but because it has a major impact on the characters' lives.

The first part of the novel, “The Shawl” shows that Rosa loses her beloved child in the hands of the Nazi soldiers whom she has been keeping secretly. The second part of the narrative “Rosa” describes that Rosa has never really recovered from this life-changing event that she gets compulsively fascinated with the memory of her dead daughter and fantasizes about having a relationship with her after her identity as a mother has been damaged and finally shattered. Rosa's life after 30 years in Miami, in the United States where she has not yet found herself, struggles to get accustomed to society. Ozick is able to argue that Holocaust survivors continue to suffer not just because they relive their previous experiences, but also because they begin to identify themselves by the absence of loved ones. Rosa creates a melancholy space in which she may continue to live as a mother to Magda by stressing her daughter's absence via her fascination and preoccupation with the shawl she used to wrap her in the concentration camp. Ozick offers concerns about survival issues such as guilt after surviving, loss of belief in the present, and hope for the future while living in the darkness. The majority of critics on “The Shawl”, including Harold Bloom, Gerhard Back, Marianne M. Friedrich, agree that the novella focuses on the protagonist during the process of reforming her

identity in the corridors of memory, all the while creating her dead daughter as an object of worship. They claim Rosa is unable to let go of her murdered daughter's memories, and as a result, she is unable to forget the Holocaust's inhumanity. Since she keeps remembering her daughter, and because her daughter's picture is so strongly associated with the Holocaust and especially with the shawl, the present becomes a shadow of the past, and the past becomes an unending time that determines Rosa's present and likely future. Because "The Shawl" is built on the concept of "remembering," as it is in many other literary and historical texts, "memory" is expanded as an important subject to be examined. Historians have been interested in memory, according to Dominick LaCapra, since history has a wish to be sensitive to the difficulties of the past and "memory- along with its lapses and tricks- poses questions to history in that it points to problems that are still alive or invested with emotion and value" (1998: 8). Indeed, Rosa's problem is still present, causing complexity by depriving her identity as a Jewish woman.

When I had my store I used to "meet the public," and I wanted to tell everybody-not only our story, but other stories as well. Nobody knew anything. This amazed me, that nobody remembered what happened only a little while ago. They didn't remember because they didn't know. (82).

Rosa was brave enough some time before destroying her own store when she desperately wanted to share her experience with the people, however, people did not know or did not want to know what happened to her so she decided to ruin her store and forget about the past. Nonetheless, the past which was full of merciless news cannot be forgotten and it deeply locates in one's mind. Memory that rises to the surface may be used to fulfill particular goals, putting people at risk of "an obsession with, or fixation on, memory" (1998: 12). What is recalled from the past is replicated in the present, and it is in danger of becoming an obsession or fixation, as La Capra puts it. Bereaved from her only child, Magda, Rosa becomes a person who is excessively obsessed with the memories of her child. When she bore her child in a concentration camp, nobody but her niece knew about the existence of Magda as she was keeping her under the shawl, a piece of cloth that gave some time of life. The shawl was only Magda's belonging and:

"She guarded her shawl. No one could touch it; only Rosa could touch it. Stella was not allowed. The shawl was Magda's own baby, her pet, her little sister. She tangled herself up in it and sucked on one of the corners when she wanted to be very still." (22).

Ozick appears to have chosen the shawl as the title to emphasize its importance to the protagonists. It is important to note that simply seen as a piece of cloth - the shawl is the main symbol of memory throughout the narrative, representing comfort for Rosa and aversion for Stella. According to scientific research, the emotional state and emotional value is attributed to a material to be memorized which proves the fact that *the shawl* is a main tool that provokes painful memories and it plays significant role in the lives of Rosa and Stella. If Magda died in the first part of the story because of the shawl, then she resurrects in the second narrative with the help of the shawl. At the time when Magda is thrown on an electric fence, Rosa is stuck in a dilemma: to die with her daughter in the hands of Nazi soldier because rescue is unsuccessful or to stay in the barracks and keep quiet as it may save her life. She chooses the latter one, saving her own life because she is unable to protest, yet, she is terrified by the scene. As stated by David Brauner, "the story does not finish on a note of triumphant, liberated expression, but rather with another image of repression, of (self)-enforced silence" (120).

...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. (26)

After terrible accident which took Magda's life, Rosa is deprived from motherhood and consciousness that destroys her emotional condition. Moreover, this loss functions as a torturing memory. The shawl is an only thing that is left from Magda, holding Magda alive for Rosa for more than thirty five years and her experience with memory

proves to be more catastrophic, since it renders her insane.

The coldness of the surroundings is felt from the opening lines: "...cold, cold, coldness of hell" 8, and the vision of Stella, Rosa's niece, is accompanied with this coldness: "She was always chilly thereafter, always," says the narrator. Rosa sees Stella's heart has gone chilly as a result of the cold. Cynthia Ozick demonstrates how war's brutality affects human nature and the repercussions of Stella's actions are confirmation of this. Magda is envied by Stella because she is "warm" and protected. As a result, Stella steals the shawl "Stella was heaped under it, asleep in her thin bones" (24). She might not have wanted to damage her loved ones in any other situation. But when she is in the camp, all she can think about is how to stay alive.

Similarly, the shawl creates distaste and agonizing memories, nevertheless, she is the villain who steals the shawl from Magda, being one of the causes her death. She regards it as an object of distaste, claiming that:

Your idol is on its way, separate cover. Go on your knees to it if you want. You make yourself crazy, every one thinks you're a crazy woman. (47).

Stella believes that thirty five years is long enough for Rosa to forget the past memories and live her own life, and for her to stop acting insanely and idolizing emptiness. Both women find it difficult to reconstruct the emotional connection separating them, and Stella claims that it is a "long distance". Stella does not depend on her memories, especially, she does not accept Rosa's bondage with the shawl. The shawl reminds of her unfair and thoughtless action and she suffers from those memories. She has already forgotten the past and lives with current world, however, she is reminded of the past that comes when she exchanges letters with Rosa.

Rosa sees the shawl as an idol, encircled by the aura of a long time lost daughter and often writes letters to Magda. She creates an imaginary universe for herself, which comes to life when she touches the shawl and begins writing letters. Both objects serve as an attempt to build connection with Magda which can be as a "trauma memory". Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between two types of trauma memory: the first, which he finds beneficial, leads to "working through," while the second, which is based on denial, leads to "acting out" (2001:143). Working through trauma is an articulatory practice: to the extent that one works through trauma, one is able to discriminate between past and present, recalling in memory what occurred to one in the past while also knowing that one is alive in the present and has a future ahead of one. In "acting out," on the other hand, one is haunted by the past and performatively engrossed in the reenactment of traumatic scenes – "scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop [...] it is as if one were back in the past reliving the traumatic scene" (LaCapra 2001:21). Since a result, "acting out" is linked to obsessively repeating something, as people who have experienced trauma have a tendency to replay the past or even exist in the present as if they were still totally immersed in the past, with no distance from it. LaCapra also mentions how persons who have been traumatized by terrible experiences may resist working through them due to a "fidelity to trauma, a feeling that one must somehow keep faith with it," as LaCapra puts it (2001:23). Part of this emotion may stem from a sense of guilt that by working with the past in a way that allows for reengagement in life, one is betraying people who were overwhelmed by the horrific past. The trauma may gain value as a result of one's link with the deceased, and this circumstance leads to a more or less unconscious wish to stay in trauma. Rosa does not want to lose the connection with Magda, however, at the same time she is haunted by the memories that control her living in the present, as she is still stuck in the past. She does not want to betray Magda, although, she will never be with her physically, but only with letters and most importantly with the shawl. In her letters, Magda is alive and grown up woman who has a family and a job. She composes loads of letters so her residence which is described as a "dark hole, a single room in a "hotel." (29) is full of them. In her letters, she writes:

What a curiosity it was to hold a pen-nothing but a small pointed stick, after all, oozing its hieroglyphic puddles: a pen

that speaks, miraculously, Polish. A lock removed from the tongue. Otherwise the tongue is chained to the teeth and the palate. An immersion into the living language: all at once this cleanliness, this capacity, this power to make a history, to tell, to explain. To retrieve, to relieve!

To lie. (60).

Rosa is not subconsciously repeating the past to work over the trauma, as Freud's theory of repetition compulsion would imply, but she intentionally chooses to stay in the previous memories because she lacks the present whereas her niece Stella totally forgets the past and lives with the current world. The irony is that Rosa still keeps her memories of her dead daughter that gives her happiness and makes her another, but her niece, and the way how she behaves irritates Rosa since Stella does not belong to her Jewish identity anymore. This argument is supported by the following excerpt:

She wrote sometimes in Polish and sometimes in English, but her niece had forgotten Polish; most of the time Rosa wrote to Stella in English. Her English was crude. To her daughter Magda she wrote in the most excellent literary Polish. (30).

Indeed, letters help ease the pain and they are link to the past as well as bridge to the future. They keep her comforted, yet, the most comforting thing is the shawl that she switches to it after the letter. She reinvigorates in the presence of the shawl as if it is Magda who has come to visit her from New York City.

She put on her good shoes, a nice dress (polyester, "wrinkle-free" on the inside label); she arranged her hair, brushed her teeth, poured mouth wash on the brush, sucked it up through the nylon bristles, gargled rapidly. As an afterthought she changed her bra and slip; it meant getting out of her dress and into it again. Her mouth she reddened very slightly a smudge of lipstick rubbed on with a finger. (60).

Now she is with her daughter, dreaming and remembering all the memories she cherished and she has gained it by this shawl. It is important to note that her physical and mental connection is secured.

The Shawl's theme is inextricably linked to its title, which serves as the ultimate signifier of this short story. The shawl is the fundamental theme of the story, and the three female characters revolve around it. When it comes to Magda, the shawl is almost like a second skin, protecting her from the elements. The shawl, in Rosa's opinion, is what helps her seal the outside world for her daughter by some type of unique blessing. The shawl is also a subject of jealousy when it comes to Stella. Less but not least, it is an object that reminds of the past memories that are morbid and disturbing.

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