

Cynthia Ozick's "The Shawl"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/cynthia-ozicks-shawl>.

Introduction

"The Shawl" is one of the most celebrated and widely taught short stories by the great American Jewish writer Cynthia Ozick (1928–). It was first published in the *New Yorker* on May 26, 1980, and it was awarded first prize by the O. Henry Prize for the Short Story in 1981. A very short story, it describes a mother and her infant daughter and their experiences in a Nazi concentration camp during the Holocaust. Ozick, whose family immigrated to the United States before World War II, has raised questions about the ethics of writing fiction about the experiences of those who lived and died in the Holocaust.

Cover image: Cynthia Ozick in black and white, courtesy of The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH, www.americanjewisharchives.org.

Subjects

Fiction, Holocaust, Women Writers

Reading and Background

- As part of its "Big Read" program, the National Endowment for the Arts created an [extraordinary guide to "The Shawl"](#) (and to the novella "Rosa" that was published alongside it in a slim book in 1989), which includes a video interview with Ozick, an audio guide to the story, discussion questions, and more.
- On Ozick's background and career, in general, see [this profile](#) at the Jewish Women's Archive.
- Ruth Franklin's book *A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (2010), quoted in resources below, is an excellent introduction to the questions about truth and representation of trauma that are raised below, and David Roskies and Naomi Diamant's *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide* (2013) is an impressive and accessible introduction to the topic of Holocaust literature in general.
- Eric Sundquist's "Black Milk: A Holocaust Metaphor," included in Victoria Aarons and Holli Levitsky, eds., *New Directions in Jewish American and Holocaust Literatures: Reading and Teaching* (2019), considers Ozick's story in relation to other works of Holocaust literature and is useful background reading.
- "The Shawl" is extremely short and is available in its entirety on the [New Yorker's website](#). It is read aloud by the author Joyce Carol Oates on the [New Yorker's Fiction podcast](#).

Resources

1: Interview excerpt, Cynthia Ozick, 1997.

In an interview with the *Atlantic Monthly*, Ozick explains her objections to writing fictional works about the Holocaust.

Suggested Activity: Read Ozick's remarks aloud; make sure students understand all the vocabulary, including "mythopoeticization." Divide students into two groups, and have them debate the following proposition: "It is wrong to write Holocaust fiction." Ask students to draw on Ozick's arguments, and on other moral or emotional justifications that they feel are relevant.

Source: Katie Bolick, "The Many Faces of Cynthia Ozick," *The Atlantic Unbound* (May 15, 1997), [online](#).

2: Excerpts, Ruth Franklin, "A Thousand Darknesses," 2010.



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Literary critic Ruth Franklin considers the question of truth and fictionality in writing about the Holocaust in her prize-winning 2010 book. She emphasizes that “every canonical work of Holocaust literature involves some graying of the line between fiction and reality.”

Suggested Activity: Ask students to consider what it means that all texts are “mediated” and to suggest examples of how “aestheticizing influences” and “narrative conventions” affect the telling of a story. One possible activity to illustrate this would be to have students tell a simple story from their day, and then to ask all students in the class to retell the story using different conventions or constraints.

Source: Ruth Franklin, *A Thousand Darkneses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11.

3: Interview excerpt, Cynthia Ozick with Kim Heron, 1989, and text excerpt, William Shirer's "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich," 1960.

Ozick has repeatedly told interviewers that the inspiration for "The Shawl" was a line in William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, as in the first resource here. But it seems that there is no mention in that book of babies being thrown against electrified fences, as Ozick has recalled; the closest moment in Shirer's book is the second resource here. (No one has yet been able to find a line in Shirer's very long book that conforms to Ozick's description; the scholar Eric Sundquist has also noted, in the essay cited in the "Reading and Background" section above, that he was not able to find such a moment in Shirer's book.)

Suggested Activity: Ask students how they feel about Ozick's having told interviewers, not once but many times, that she was inspired by something that she likely misremembered. Was Ozick lying? Does Ozick's mistake matter, or is the line in Shirer's book close enough so that it doesn't? What does this discrepancy suggest about the value of people's memories of events as compared to documentary sources?

Sources: Kim Heron, "I Required a Dawning," *New York Times* (September 10, 1989), 39.

William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), 948.

4: Poem, Avrom Sutzkever's "For My Child," 1943, Yiddish with English translation.

The Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever wrote "For My Child" in the Vilna ghetto after his wife had given birth to an infant that was immediately murdered by the Nazis.

Suggested Activity: Read the poem aloud as a class. Ask the students to consider what choices Sutzkever made in writing about an infant murdered by the Nazis, and how they differ from Ozick's choices. How does the fact that Sutzkever's poem responded to an actual historical event—the death of his child—make it different from Ozick's story?

Sources: Avrom Sutzkever, "For My Child," trans. Seymour Mayne, *Burnt Pearls: The Ghetto Poems of Abraham Sutzkever* (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1981), 33. This translation is for non-commercial and non-profit use. If anyone wishes to reprint the work they should contact Seymour Mayne for further directions and permission.

Avrom Sutzkever, "Tsum kind," *Lider fun geto* (New York: Ikuf, 1946), 16–17.