

Imagination for the Unspeakable: Figurative Representations in “The Shawl”

Yuka Omori

1. Introduction

Cynthia Ozick (1928–) is a Jewish-American author whose imagination was fired by the Holocaust nightmare. She began by treating the Holocaust as a subplot in her first novel, *Trust* (1966). Although her narrative strategy in most of her following stories mentions the Holocaust indirectly, through descriptions of survivors, “The Shawl” (1980) was her first and unique attempt to depict life in Auschwitz—which, of course, Ozick never experienced. First published in *The New Yorker* in 1980, “The Shawl” was reprinted in 1989 in one book with a novella, “Rosa,” which depicts life after the Holocaust of Rosa, the protagonist of both stories. These stories were so highly appreciated that each of them was awarded the first prize in the annual O. Henry Prize Stories collections. However, “The Shawl” also incurred public censure mainly for two reasons. First, it transgresses the inviolable sphere of the atrocity through imaginative representation. Second, its narrative style and poetic descriptions would inevitably fail to truthfully represent such a brutal situation.

This paper is an attempt to examine and clarify the effect of the poetic narrative style which presumably Ozick needed to describe the unspeakable and convey what she tries to represent with the figurative images. First, I provide a brief overview of Holocaust literature in the US and Ozick’s conflict over its fictional representation. Second, I examine the potentiality and efficacy of figurative images in “The Shawl”. Third, I invoke Ozick’s original view on literature, particularly regarding the relation between imagination and interpretation in creating unexpected scenes.

2. Responsibility to Write about the Holocaust

Until around the 1960s, postwar Jewish-American fiction had not taken up the Holocaust; not only did most American Jews not feel entitled to write about the Holocaust, they were too remote from specific events to have enough knowledge to do so.¹ Actually, far from writing Holocaust fiction, it was quite rare for Jewish Americans even to talk about it in the United States for approximately two decades after the war as Eva Hoffman, as a second-generation Jew, writes about her parents’

predicaments as Holocaust survivors in America. Even if survivors did talk about their experiences, they often could not make themselves understood partly because in most cases their English was not good enough—if they spoke it at all—and, more importantly, because of the atrocity of their experience which was so appalling as to make anyone doubt its truthfulness.

In the 1960's, the publication of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1960) by William L. Shirer, Adolf Eichmann's 1961 trial in Jerusalem, and the 1967 Arab-Israeli Six Day War provided the American public with shocking facts about the Holocaust through various media coverage, bringing the horrible event to their attention. During the late 1960's, the Holocaust began to appear in Jewish-American fiction mostly through retrospective narrative, as S. Lillian Kremer claims, employing devices such as dramatic presentation, memory, and nightmare to depict the horrors of concentration camps (19).

In a letter, a Holocaust survivor who read "The Shawl" admonished Ozick to stop writing about the Shoah, stating that it would lead to the falsification and desecration of the unprecedented event. The survivor warned her to postpone writing until no survivors could find fault with her representation (Cohen 147–48). Critic Susanne Klingenstein also reacts with dismay, "[M]y resistance to 'The Shawl' (never to 'Rosa') was now so great that I gave up on being reconciled to it" (166).

The survivor's letter raises an essential question: Are those who have not witnessed the Holocaust entitled to write about it? Not only survivors but also most Americans who remained at a safe distance during the war seemed to consider it inappropriate for a third party to write pieces of fiction about the Holocaust. Ozick addresses this issue through Rosa's reaction to a letter from a scholar of social pathology in "Rosa." He requests an interview with her to assist his study of survivors.

Disease, disease! Humanitarian Context, what did it mean? An excitement over other people's suffering. They let their mouths water up. Stories about children running blood in America from sores, what muck. Consider also the special word they used: *survivor*. Something new. As long as they didn't have to say *human being*. It used to be *refugee*, but by now there was no such creature, no more refugees, only survivors. A name like a number — counted apart from the ordinary swarm. Blue digits on the arm, what difference? They don't call you a woman anyhow. *Survivor*. Even when your bones get melted into the grains of the earth, still they'll forget *human being*. Survivor and survivor and survivor; always and always. Who made up these words, parasites on the throat of suffering! (37)

From a victim's perspective, two problems are raised here: depriving the so-called "survivors" of their human rights and the parasitic exploitation by intellectuals. Such discrepancy between the victims' feelings and the intellectuals' senses of duty is difficult to resolve, highlighting Ozick's compunction

as a writer.

Interestingly enough, Ozick was hesitant about its publication, so it took four years for her to publish “The Shawl” and as for “Rosa,” seven years, according to a telephone interview with Ozick by Kim Heron (Heron 39). Ozick had a “great abiding fear of ‘making art out of the Holocaust,’ of ‘mytho-poeticizing, making little stories out of a torrent of truth,’” further adding, “I worry very much that this subject is corrupted by fiction and that fiction in general corrupts history” (Heron 39).² However, she could not help writing those stories as she asserted, “after the Holocaust, and through knowledge of it, everybody is a witness, not just those who went through it and came out alive” (Bernstein C15).

Such sense of historical solidarity with the great suffering as Jews comes from the Passover Haggadah, which reminds Jews that “all generations stood together at Sinai” (Ozick, “Literature as Idol” 194). Thus, Ozick believes that she is obliged “to belong to an event that occurred only forty years ago” as well as to the Exodus of four thousand years ago as “the Haggadah enjoins me to incorporate it into my own mind and flesh, to so act as if it happened directly and intensely to me, not as mere witness but as participant” (Cohen 148).³ Ozick’s feeling of presence at Auschwitz arises from Jewish liturgy, which demands that Jews share their collective memory. As a writer, Ozick conveys memory through metaphor in the form of fiction.⁴

3. Figurative Images in “The Shawl”

As just stated above, Holocaust fiction seems to be given a section in the whole range of Holocaust writings, but now Ozick’s descriptive style in “The Shawl” raises another question. She states that she is “not in favour of mythologizing or poeticizing it” (Lang 284), but “The Shawl” could probably be read as a prose poem with the characteristic use of figurative language, marked by a verbless poetic rhythm.⁵ On one hand, the poetic imagery here mysteriously represents the unspeakable.⁶ On the other hand, however, the same poetic imagery can lead readers in unexpected directions, leaving interpretations widely open and thus giving rise to considerable objections to its poetic freedom, while admittedly giving the deep effects of symbolism to the text.

In “The Shawl,” the protagonist Rosa is a mother to the fifteen-month-old Magda. She hides Magda in a shawl because there should not be any babies in the camp, and they would be shot if discovered. When Rosa’s fourteen-year-old niece Stella takes the shawl from Magda to warm herself, Magda, screaming sharply, goes out of the barracks to the square outside searching for it. A Nazi guard captures Magda and kills her by throwing her against the electrified fence. Standing frozen, Rosa watches her baby being murdered, every moment of it, filling her mouth with the shawl finally retrieved from Stella.

The frequent use of figurative language, particularly that of metaphors, is characteristic of “The Shawl.” Ozick applies inorganic, lifeless imagery to the characters’ bodies. Rosa, who is on a death march, is a “walking cradle,” and Rosa’s dried-up nipple is a “dead volcano” (4). The ravenous Stella’s knees are “tumors on sticks, her elbows chicken bones.” Magda has “little pencil legs” (7). This inorganic imagery symbolically shows malnutrition and starvation. The family becomes so lightweight that they almost float as Rosa felt like “someone who is already a floating angel” (3–4). On seeing her baby killed, Rosa’s wolf-like screech ascends “through the ladder of her skeleton” (10). The inmates use metaphors to describe disgusting elements: “flowers” for excrement and “rain” for urine coming down from the upper bunks. Horrific aspects are also symbolically expressed: “(b)elow the helmet a black body like a domino and a pair of black boots” (9) to describe the German soldier who takes Magda away. In this way, Ozick represents unearthly terror with dehumanizing images.

Ozick also employs beautiful imagery, especially for baby Magda, who is described as “a squirrel in a nest” (4) through motherly eyes. The use of beautiful expressions for Magda’s appearance, “another kind of face altogether, eyes blue as air, smooth feathers of hair nearly as yellow as the Star sewn into Rosa’s coat” (4), gives us profound sense of Rosa’s motherly love, and yet cruelly suggests that Magda’s father could be a German persecutor: “You could think she was one of *their* babies” (4). Lyrical words are applied even to the fatal situation, the murder of Magda, who, hurled against the electrified fence, “looked like a butterfly touching a silver vine” (9). This scene is presented also with a lyrical, idyllic, natural background: “On the other side of the steel fence, far away, there were green meadows speckled with dandelions and deep-colored violets; beyond, even farther, innocent tiger lilies, tall, lifting their orange bonnets” (8). Ozick emphasizes the concentration camp’s horrible, extreme situation by contrasting it with these beautiful lyrical images.

This most controversial scene can be interpreted as changing the brutal murder of Magda into an experience of something beautiful or even redemptive. Some critics interpret Magda’s death as her ascension to heaven, a kind of redemption that liberates Magda from earthly suffering.⁷ The description of the horrific scene with lyrical images may invite an illusory reading that the scene itself is beautiful. Furthermore, such descriptions move the focus from the unpardonable reality to a kind of redemptive ending that might compensate for it.⁸

This scene includes another problem: Why does Magda, who is flying to the killing fence, appear to be a butterfly in Rosa’s eyes? Is it a revelation of her inhumanity?⁹ Or, is she too human, that is to say, weak and flawed, to confront or accept harsh reality? Fundamentally speaking, can there be anything beautiful in concentration camps?

As for the last problem, in fact, sensing beauty and finding a sense of humor in concentration camps is not impossible—even if it is rare. On the basis of his experience, Victor Frankl demonstrates the possibility that prisoners can appreciate the beauty of art and nature and can develop a sense of humor

(33-35). He states that the inmates were entranced by nature's beauty, for instance, a view of the sunset, and records one's comment, "How beautiful the world could be!" (33). He also recalls suggesting to a workmate that they "invent at least one amusing story daily" (35). As he indicates, humor is "the soul's weapon in the fight for self-preservation" because it "can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above a situation, even if only for a few seconds" (35).

The inmates' laughter seems the last possible phenomenon imaginable in concentration camps, but Rosa sometimes finds Magda laughing when the wind blows the corners of the shawl. Magda's laughter could be just Rosa's illusion, but an innocent baby is likely to laugh in any loathsome environment. Magda's laughs are flickering lights of hope for Rosa against the gruesome backdrop of the concentration camp. The ill-matched combination of laughter and a concentration camp becomes a certain reality through the mother's eyes; Ozick's imagination enters deep into Rosa's mind and witnesses what common sense prevents us from expecting. In the midst of death, Rosa does find life, which is to be lost too soon, though.

Hence, these images of Magda could symbolize the faint hope aroused by motherly instinct. Formerly the chrysalis wrapped in the shawl, Magda appears to Rosa as a newly-liberated butterfly that flies away. As observed by several critics, however, this scene introduces another ethical problem, that is, the beautification of a child's electrocution glosses over the horror of the Holocaust when it appears as if Magda is liberated from the hell on earth to heaven, which distorts the essence of the problem. This issue is discussed in the next section.

4. Imagination and Interpretation

Ozick strongly believes that works of literature, except lyrical poetry and journalism, should have "a certain corona of moral purpose" (245). Needless to say, she would not write moral messages explicitly in words. She claims that literature should be a story with a moral purpose enveloped by a "corona" that allows readers to decode it with their own imaginations. Ozick's employment of imagery, as in "The Shawl," creates a corona that brings readers to a deeper layer of her fiction.

Imagination plays a principal role in producing imagery, and the relation between interpretation and imagination in Ozick's works is uniquely complex. Imagination is essential for literature, but Ozick recognizes two aspects of imagination: "the Evil Impulse" and "the energy of creative renewal" ("Innovation and Redemption" 247). A kind of imagination leading to the evil impulse is "the most frightening human faculty" to "penetrate evil, to take on evil, to become evil" (247). At the same time, "the imagination seeks out the unsayable and the undoable, and says and does them" (247), which can be applied to "The Shawl" as Gottfried argues (Gottfried 41). Imagination accompanies the danger of having "the lust to tear down meaning, to smash interpretation" ("Innovation and Redemption" 247).

The process of interpretation is logical and rational, but imagination sometimes goes beyond rational reasoning to create a world of fiction that refuses ordinary interpretation.

Figurative representations in “The Shawl,” such as the image of a butterfly, can also be regarded as visualizing “the unspeakable,” or “the unseeable.” Rosa’s choice not to rush to her daughter can be taken as a strong instinct of self-preservation which somehow defies motherhood.¹⁰ A Polish survivor, Tadeusz Borowski, records a Jewish mother leaving her child, denying their kinship, and ignoring the child’s calling out to her. The mother was brutally killed by a sailor, who disdained her for abandoning the child. Borowski makes a subjective comment to describe what was in her mind: “She wants to hide, she wants to reach those who will not ride the trucks, those who will go on foot, those who will stay alive. She is young, healthy, good looking, she wants to live” (43). He seems to have regarded her behavior as self-preservation. His judgment of the mother’s behavior does not deny the sailor’s vilification, “Ah, you bloody Jewess! So you’re running from your own child! I’ll show you, you whore!” (43). As Cohen claims, what is horrific here is her attempt to destroy her maternal instinct as well as their brutal murders (149). Ethical judgment aside, her desperate act of abandoning her own child shows the hopelessly extreme situation.

Borowski’s testimony conveys the dreadfulness of the Holocaust, which could have stifled even maternal love. At the same time, however, its detached description—without reference to the mother’s mental agony—allows German abuse, ironically, to condemn her as subhuman. In “The Shawl,” descriptions of Rosa’s torment over her daughter’s safety contradict Borowski’s interpretation of the mother’s behavior. The fictional poetic style that allows compassion for Rosa contrasts markedly with an objective report by a real witness.¹¹

Although “The Shawl” is not a historical record,¹² it has an air of authenticity due to the narrative style which is very close to interior monologue. All her acts and feelings show that every moment she is walking toward a vanishing point, the final death, which is very close but invisible. Rosa fearfully foresees without thinking Magda’s ultimate fate: Magda might be dropped if given to a stranger when Rosa slips away from the death march, squeezed to death under Rosa’s thigh while she is sleeping, found and killed when she learns to walk, or be stolen and eaten.

Rosa’s five senses have been strongly enhanced, and she grasps the situation vividly. Rosa smells and tastes Magda’s cinnamon-and-almond-flavored saliva. “The stink mixed with a bitter fatty floating smoke” (9) is both smelled and felt upon her skin. Rosa’s hearing is her most acute sense. She can hear the electricity inside the fence hum like grainy sad voices though Stella cannot.

Sound plays a critical role in channeling instinct in the scene where Rosa suddenly starts trembling with a strange and “fearful joy” when she sees Magda appear in the square.

Rosa saw that today Magda was going to die, and at the same time a fearful joy ran in Rosa’s two

palms, her fingers were on fire, she was astonished, febrile: Magda, in the sunlight, swaying on her pencil legs, was howling. (7)

A joy is the most improbable feeling which a mother could have for her child in the imminent presence of danger. A joy being felt here is so shocking that it makes readers confused and could provoke their antipathy at their first reading. However, it is clarified in the next sentence that the maternal joy of Rosa, who was afraid that Magda might be deaf or mute,¹³ directly comes from what she *hears*, that is, Magda howling, though the dread is never gone. As Magda cannot speak, Rosa needs to be sensitive to any sound, in the hope that Magda might make one. In this scene, Rosa's understanding that utterance is fatal to Magda is completely separated from her maternal instinct, which anticipates hearing her child speak. This internal division is effectively captured by the oxymoron: "a fearful joy." Ozick's artistic imagination grasps the unyielding maternal love in Rosa's feeling of joy.

The conflict between reason and instinct reaches its limit in the final scene. Rosa witnesses Magda's expiration. She hears the wild, electric voices—"Maamaa, maaa-maaa"—that push her to run toward her daughter. However, instead of running, Rosa stands where she is, and tastes the shawl that is flavored with the cinnamon and almond of Magda's saliva. Magda, thrown against the electric fence, appears to be a butterfly in Rosa's eyes. It is because of her motherly love. As stated above, some critics regard the scene inappropriate, interpreting it as exposing Rosa's weakness, that is, as revealing her inhumanity. However, it is possible for mothers to compare their children to pretty things such as a squirrel or a butterfly in any atrocious situation; Mothers cannot help feeling that their child is pretty and lovely and wish for his / her healthy growth in any harsh circumstance even if excessive fear paralyzes their senses. In other words, these scenes express very human instincts in a significantly dehumanized situation through the figurative imagery.

Traditionally butterflies symbolize "life," "light" and "rebirth."¹⁴ Although comparing her own dying child to a butterfly is unexpectedly amazing, this amazing vision could be brought by "redemption." Ozick writes about redemption in "Innovation and Redemption: What Literature Means";

Implicit in redemption is amazement, marveling, suspense.... Implicit in redemption is everything against the fated or the static: everything that hates death and harm and elevates the life-giving—if only through terror at its absence. (246)

The vision of the butterfly could reflect Rosa's instinctive refusal of Magda's brutal fate and her unconscious wish for her rebirth. This is the moment of "redemption" Ozick presents for Rosa, in the most extreme situation imaginable, but not so for Magda. The marvelous image of Magda as butterfly continues to live in Rosa's mind after the Holocaust in "Rosa."

5. Conclusion

Words have a limited capacity to represent events. They can vary according to who says what, when, and where. Nevertheless, images form an impression on the mind. Intense images—both positive and negative—return as flashbacks, either traumatizing and tormenting or offering some hope for redemption, which Ozick regards as an important function of literature.

Ozick, who separates her view on literature from the view of “art for its own sake” which considers that “the Holocaust and a corn cob are the same” as a theme, claims that “literature *is* the moral life” (“Innovation and Redemption” 245). She continues to maintain: The tales we care for lastingly are the ones that touch on the redemption—not, it should be understood, on the guaranteed promise of redemption, and not on goodness, kindness, decency, all the usual virtues (245). Ozick struggles to represent Rosa’s life in the concentration camp with figurative images captured through her five senses. As part of the conflict between reason and instinct, her well-honed senses grasp what is happening around her, while her body remains paralyzed. Ozick creates intense and impressive scenes that appeal to readers’ senses, making them feel like a part of the story. By allowing Rosa to see Magda as a flying butterfly, Ozick leaves her room for redemption. In “Rosa,” Magda appears to Rosa as a phantom of a butterfly, thereby allowing her soul to elevate and not collapse.

Notes

1. Brauner summarizes this long silence according to several categories: moral, pragmatic, aesthetic, psychoanalytical, geographical, sociological, and political (115–16).
2. In a 1993 interview with Kauvar, Ozick expressed her concern for the danger of revisionism and denial of the Holocaust as a result of imagining and fictionalizing it and professed a deep regret for creating it (390-91).
3. Kremer claims that, “[C]ontemporary Jews increasingly feel that, geography aside, they were present at Auschwitz” as “[t]radition commands all Jews to consider themselves figuratively present at Sinai to receive the Torah” (15).
4. Daikuhara argues, based on Ozick’s “Metaphor and Memory,” that Ozick describes *The Shawl* as a metaphor of suffering of Jews who experienced slavery in Egypt. Metaphor can be the reciprocal agent which enables us to feel empathy for the Other.
5. Tokunaga claims that the frequent use of metaphors in *The Shawl* transforms an individual’s tragic fiction with vivid memories into a larger scale of historical narrative (Tokunaga 435).
6. Hamura argues that “The Shawl describes the undescribability of the Holocaust.” “It uses unexpected expressions to represent the Holocaust,” which “prevent the reader from universalizing the Holocaust and grasping it as a fixed knowledge” (227-28).

7. Gottfried suggests that Ozick runs greatest ideological risk “in choosing to beautify a child’s electrocution” and “glossing over the horror of the Holocaust in favor of aesthetics” (42). Langer, after wondering if “the poetry of similitude itself [is not] a form of denial (140)” that causes trauma in her later life, concludes that “Rosa does not seek to beautify the truth” (140) because she reacts candidly to the great insanitariness. That is, Rosa is so sincere that she does not hide her intuitive impression of her dying baby as a beautiful creature.
8. Martin claims “[...] the soldier has freed her from her bondage to enjoy immortality [...] and possibly to cross into that beautiful world beyond the fence” (Hattenhauer, et al. 238); Sivan states, “Here is a Jewish child who even at the moment of death is seen as an elegant and refined creature” (“Crossing the Abyss” 45).
9. Rosenberg regards this description as evidence that “Rosa [...] is flawed, that is to say, she is a human being, who imagines, instead of death, that her daughter has become a butterfly” (6).
10. Kitagawa argues that the instinct of self-preservation seems to become predominant here, but the final act of Rosa’s “drinking” the shawl can be interpreted as “a symbolic final frantic attempt ... to protect her offspring” as Barbara Scrafford interprets (76).
11. Aihara claims that Jewish American authors, who cannot be witnesses of the Holocaust because of the lack of the firsthand experience, tackle the difficult task of conveying the suffering of the victims with the Jewish imagination and the traditional American imagination which has created American romance since Nathaniel Hawthorne.
12. Although “The Shawl” is fiction, Ozick got the idea from William Shirer’s *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*: “There was a line in there...that spoke about babies being thrown against the electrified fences, and I guess that image stayed with me” (Heron 39).
13. Many critics consider that “a fearful joy” Rosa feels comes from Magda’s cry as her first word in the concentration camp. Rosenberg considers the matter of silence and speech to be a leitmotif in *The Shawl* and concludes that “Ozick makes this inarticulate cry Magda’s only direct speech...to represent the horror of the premeditated genocide.” Martin and Gordon think that Rosa’s joy here comes from realizing that her baby can speak because Rosa worries that Magda is “a mute” because of “something amiss with her intelligence” (7). Brauner states that “the greater fear — that her child will die — makes hers (in a felicitous oxymoron) a ‘fearful joy’ (120).
14. According to *A Dictionary of Symbolism*, a butterfly has the following images: Among the ancients, a butterfly is “an emblem of the soul and of unconscious attraction towards the light.” It is represented as the “purification of the soul by fire” in Romanesque art. “The Angel of Death was represented by the Gnostics as a winged foot crushing a butterfly, from which we may deduce that the butterfly was equated with life.... This also explains why psychoanalysis regards the butterfly as a symbol or rebirth.” (35)

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語り得ぬものへの想像力 — 「ショールの女」における比喩表現

大 森 夕 夏

【要旨】

シンシア・オジックは、ナチスの強制収容所での出来事を扱った短編「ショールの女」を創作し物議を醸した。強制収容所の体験がない者が強制収容所での生活をフィクション形式で描いたこと、描写において美的な比喩表現を用いたことが、主たる論議的であった。本稿では、上記二点に対する批判を踏まえた上で、「ショールの女」における比喩表現の意義を探る。

キーワード：シンシア・オジック、ユダヤ系アメリカ文学、ホロコースト、トラウマ