

Unorthodox: Thoughts on Tradition from Non-Traditional Thinkers

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Outline of this course

- 15th May – Isaiah Berlin
- 22nd May – George Steiner
- 29th May – Erich Fromm
- 5th June – Martin Buber
- **12th June – Cynthia Ozick**



Cynthia Ozick– Bio I

Born: New York City – April 17, 1928

Raised in the Bronx by Jewish immigrant parents

Attended Hunter College and NYU

Her works often explore Jewish identity, the Holocaust, and the interplay between the sacred and the profane, particularly in her early works like *Bloodshed* and *Three Novellas* (1976).

She is known for her nuanced female characters and her exploration of Jewish-American experiences.

Cynthia Ozick– Bio II

Ozick studied at a boy's heder, gaining an early love of Yiddish and of Jewish culture that would infuse her work. She then went on to Hunter College, NYU, and Ohio State University, discovering a passion for western literature, particularly Henry James, whose writing would deeply influence her own. Her first published novel, *Trust*, appeared in 1966, followed by five more novels, fourteen collections of short stories and essays, and two plays, one of which was an adaptation of her widely acclaimed story of the Holocaust, "The Shawl." Over the course of her career, she won many of the highest honors in the field for her powerful and challenging prose: three O. Henry prizes, fellowships from Guggenheim and the National Endowment for the Arts, two PEN awards, and a National Book Critics Circle Award.

The World of Cynthia Ozick – Daniel Walden

When Cynthia Ozick was in graduate school, at the Ohio State University, she was “besotted with the religion of literature.” As she admitted once, she actually became Henry James for a while, “though I was a nearsighted twenty-two-year-old young woman infected with the commonplace intention of writing a novel.” When she discovered Leo Baeck’s essay on “Romantic Religion,” she began that process of synthesis and nonsynthesis (the exact word eludes me), of Judaizing herself and her material within a Christian civilization’s context that we have come to recognize as hers. Perhaps, as I have described Chaim Potok in an earlier essay, she is “zwischenmensch,” a between-person, one who is an autodidact, who seems to have read almost everything of the world’s literature as well as in Jewish history and religion, but she’s caught up in the conflict between her traditionalism and the echoing world she also longs to embrace.

Tradition

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/cynthia-ozick/>

“The term ‘Jewish writer’ ought to be an oxymoron,” observed Cynthia Ozick in her typically sharp essay “Tradition and (or versus) the Jewish Writer,” from her 2006 essay collection *The Din in the Head*. Here Ozick is specifically referring to novelists like Norman Mailer, whose best work, she believes, stems from a rejection of the bonds of tradition—be it literary or religious.

Tradition is the air Ozick breathes, informing nearly all of her work. Her novella “Envy, or Yiddish in America” (1989) envisions the writers of her generation—Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow—through the eyes of a frustrated Yiddish writer of an earlier time named Edelshtein, infuriated by what he sees as the race away from Jewish heritage and their desire to conform: “Jewish novelists! Savages! The allrightnik’s children, all they know is to curse the allrightnik! Their Yiddish! One word here, one word there. *Shikseh* on one page, *putz* on the other, and that’s the whole vocabulary!” Here, a social critique takes the form of a literary one.

Feminism, Judaism and God

<http://billmoyers.com/content/abban-eban-cynthia-ozick/> (Interview in 1986)

CYNTHIA OZICK: Well, the great intellectual and philosophical heritage of the Jews is truly the work of half the Jewish people, namely, the men. And I think women, in being deprived of this, have been buffeted, they have been given a sense of being outsiders to their own tradition. There is a sense, if you haven't created it, of course it's yours, you have been given it; but at the same time, if you have the intellect, and you have the love for the Jewish people, and you have all the other concerns and insights, you want also to be among the creators who make the tradition and its evolution.

BILL MOYERS: Is it true that when you were a child just starting to Hebrew school, that on the first day the rabbi dismissed you and said, "Girls were not supposed to learn, take her home"?

CYNTHIA OZICK: That's exactly what he said. And my grandmother, who had taken me by the hand to the cheder, or Hebrew school, obeyed him and took me home. And I don't know what happened in her mind, or in the mind of the household, overnight, but I do recall that the next day I was back there, to stay.

Feminism, Judaism and God

BILL MOYERS: I wonder what that rabbi would think if he knew that you were Phi Beta Kappa, had been honored by the Guggenheim Fellowship, by the National Endowment for the Arts, by the Academy of Arts and Letters, and won three prizes for your short stories. What do you think he would think?

CYNTHIA OZICK: I think it's easy for me to imagine what he would think. He would regard it as chaff and wind. He would regard it as part of the secular world, which has no weight or meaning. It would not be part of his religious and metaphysical civilization, and he would regard it as insignificant and without worth....

...**CYNTHIA OZICK:** Well, I don't know how to answer that exactly. I think it's something she must work out for herself. In our synagogue, where we have a very beautiful-souled rabbi, there will not-and it is an Orthodox synagogue -there will not be change within anybody's foreseeable lifetime. But I do believe in the long run that there will be. I think that there are mechanisms within orthodox Jewish law which will make this possible. And it's not that these mechanisms are obstacles, it's rather that they're not being utilized. And I think a day will come -whether it will be my daughter or her daughter remains to be seen -but I do believe a day will come when there will be justice for women.

BILL MOYERS: Well, you've written quite powerfully about the theological basis for your understanding of yourself as a woman. You said the creator has no likeness in any terms that human beings can see or know or imagine.

CYNTHIA OZICK: Yes.

Feminism, Judaism and God

BILL MOYERS: For you, what is the essence of God?

CYNTHIA OZICK: Well, as a Jew, it's not for me to say that. For me to say that, I think, would be—would border on idolatry, and would be a non-Jewish statement. Deuteronomy gives it to us -I believe it's Deuteronomy 29:29 -and the gist of that is, you go about your business, you humankind, and leave the mystery to Me. Capital M-E, Me. That's the voice of the creator. And so it seems to me our human business is not to be like Gnostics, which means the knowers, who believe that they could envision and even seize the nature of God, but Deuteronomy 29:29 is that it's very hard agnostic. It says one cannot know the nature of God, and to posit the nature of God is to posit a human image, and once you've done that, you've already made an idol. And so it seems to me that the essence, as you put it, is by definition unknowable, or you cannot be a monotheist.

Woman writer vs Jewish writer

<https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/factfict/ozick.htm> (Interview 1997)

Some have called you a Jewish writer, a woman writer, a Jewish woman writer, a fiction writer, a poet, and an essayist. What do you call yourself?

I'm a fiction writer, and I do write essays, but I am not a poet. And I absolutely reject the phrase "woman writer" as anti-feminist. I wrote an essay about this as far back as 1977, at the height of the neo-feminist movement. It was becoming apparent then that there were going to be two categories of writers -- writers and women writers -- and, in fact, this has nearly come about. People often ask how I can reject the phrase "woman writer" and not reject the phrase "Jewish writer" -- a preposterous question. "Jewish" is a category of civilization, culture, and intellect, and "woman" is a category of anatomy and physiology. It's rough thinking to confuse vast cultural and intellectual movements with the capacity to bear children.

The Shawl – Intro

(available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1980/05/26/the-shawl>)

The Shawl is a short story first published by Cynthia Ozick in 1980 in *The New Yorker*. It tells the story of three characters: Rosa, Magda, and Stella on their march to and internment in a Nazi concentration camp. The Shawl is noted for its ability to instill in the reader the horror of the Holocaust in less than 2,000 words.

The Shawl – summary

The story follows Rosa, her baby Magda, and her niece Stella on their march to a Nazi concentration camp in the middle of winter. They are described as weak and starving during the march. Stella's knees are described as "tumors on sticks." Rosa is said to be a "walking cradle" because she constantly carries Magda close to her chest wrapped in her shawl. Rosa contemplates handing Magda off to one of the villagers watching their march, but decides that the guards would most likely just shoot them both. Rosa says the shawl is "magic" when Magda sucks on it because it sustained Magda for three days and three nights without food. Stella observes that Magda looks Aryan, but Rosa sees the observation as some kind of threat to Magda. At the camp, Rosa continues to hide Magda, but is in constant fear that someone will discover and kill her. One day, Stella takes Magda's shawl away to warm herself. Without her shawl, Magda, who hadn't made a sound since the march, begins screaming for her "Ma." Rosa hears the screaming, but does not run to Magda because the guards will kill them both. Instead, she runs to get the shawl and begins waving it in the hope that Magda will see it and calm down. She is too late and watches as the Nazi guards pick Magda up and throw her into the electric fence, killing her. Rosa stuffs the shawl into her mouth to stop herself from screaming.

The Pagan Rabbi - Intro

Cynthia Ozick, Pagan vs Jew (1966-1976) - Deborah Heiliigman Weiner

Ozick's overt preoccupation is the nature of the modern world and the quality of Jewish life in America. Underlying this is the problem of being a writer (read Pagan) and a Jew (the best possible Jew one can be - and what *does* that mean?). As is clearly illustrated in "The Pagan Rabbi," Ozick sees the world divided in two, that is, with opposing forces pulling at each individual. Whether she terms it Nature versus History, Paganism versus Judaism, Pan versus Moses, or Magic versus Religion, she is talking about the same thing: the pull on the one hand of the easy life, and the pull on the other of order, sense and clarification. The easy life is nature and magic: admiring the sunset, running barefoot in a meadow, falling in love with the mystery of the sea. The life of clarification demands attention to history, and for the Jew, observance of the mitzvot. This is a life not given, but made, not with ease, but with difficulty.

The Pagan Rabbi (excerpt)

“We had been classmates in the rabbinical seminary. Our fathers were both rabbis. They were also friends, but only in a loose way of speaking: in actuality our fathers were enemies. They vied with one another in demonstrations of charitableness, in the captious glitter of their scholia, in the number of their adherents. Of the two, Isaac’s father was the milder. I was afraid of my father; he had a certain disease of the larynx, and if he even uttered something so trivial as ‘Bring the tea’ to my mother, it came out splintered, clamorous, and vindictive. Neither man was philosophical in the slightest. It was the one thing they agreed on. ‘Philosophy is an abomination,’ Isaac’s father used to say. ‘The Greeks were philosophers, but they remained children playing with their dolls. Even Socrates, a monotheist, nevertheless sent money down to the temple to pay for incense to their doll.’ ‘Idolatry is the abomination,’ Isaac argued, ‘not philosophy.’ ‘The latter is the corridor to the former,’ his father said.”

The Pagan Rabbi (excerpt)

“‘Some huge and terrifying volume, heavy as a stone.’ I peered forward in the moonlight. ‘A Tractate. A Tractate of the Mishnah. Its leaves are so worn they break as he turns them, but he does not turn them often because there is much matter on a single page. He is so sad! Such antique weariness broods in his face! His throat is striped from the whip. His cheeks are folded like ancient flags, he reads the Law and breathes the dust.’ “‘And are there flowers on either side of the road?’ “‘Incredible flowers! Of every colour! And noble shrubs like mounds of green moss! And the cricket crackling in the field. He passes indifferent through the beauty of the field. His nostrils sniff his book as if flowers lay on the clotted page, but the flowers lick his feet. His feet are bandaged, his notched toenails gore the path. His prayer shawl droops on his studious back. He reads the Law and breathes the dust and doesn’t see the flowers and won’t heed the cricket spitting in the field.’ “‘That,’ said the dryad, ‘is your soul.’ And was gone with all her odours.”

Conclusion I

Cynthia Ozick as a Jewish writer: Bonnie Lyons

What can we say about Ozick as a Jewish writer? Her strength as a Jewish essayist is neither the consistency nor logic of her often polemical essays, but her passionate groping, her wholehearted grappling with Judaism - now trying to make it consistent with feminism, now trying to convince assimilated or nominal Jews of the continuing truths and ethical power of Judaism. And at their best, her brilliant, inventive stories and novels are deeply informed by Judaism and suggest that American Jewish fiction can not only explore the lives of Jews, probe what it means to live as a Jew in America, but also explore Judaism itself - its ideas and lore, its history and moral vision. In this she demonstrates both the continuing vitality of American Jewish literature and maps out possibilities for new directions as well. Perhaps consistency and logical rigor are irrelevant to artistic creation, and we are ungrateful to complain that as a thinker this tempestuous and iconoclastic writer does not provide us - or has not yet provided us - with a guide to the perplexed.

Conclusion II

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/26/magazine/cynthia-ozicks-long-crusade.html>

..we see how deeply Ozick's being is suffused with Jewish thought. For Jewishness, her work also insists, depends upon the principle of *havdalah*, or distinction making. Jew and gentile, God and man, or (to recall the terms of her "amiable discussion" with Bloom), God and idol: These are categories that should not be muddled. The same goes for literature, and for the judgment of literature. According to Ozick, literature is different from all other human activities, and its singularity consists in its recognizing and honoring human difference. Its purpose, she has said, is "to light up the least grain of being, to show how it is concretely individual, particularized from any other."