

Questions about Philip Roth's story, "The Conversion of the Jews" (1959)

The page numbers below refer to a reprinting of "The Conversion of the Jews" in *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, Shorter Seventh Edition, edited by Richard Bausch and R. V. Cassill (2006). In the All Souls Book Group in Asheville, North Carolina, we read this anthology for a course we did on the short story, in the fall of 2009.

These questions were composed by Emilie White, who directs the Kay Falk Literary Project at the Cathedral of All Souls in Asheville NC.

1. A god who makes light

What especially impresses Ozzie Freedman about God—in the Jewish or Christian conception—is that He made *light*. "But making light," he says to his friend Itzie Lieberman, "I mean when you think about it, that's really something." (This moment falls on p. 683, *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, Shorter Seventh Edition, eds. Richard Bausch and R. V. Cassill, 2006.) It is that God could make light that convinces Ozzie that God can therefore "do anything" (such as conceive a child without intercourse.) Why do you think it is this of all God's creative abilities that Ozzie focuses on? It could be argued that once you've made light, you can make the whole world—and you can also unmake it. Do you sense this radical, original kind of power—both creative and destructive—elsewhere in the story?

2. What Ozzie wanted to know was different

This description of Ozzie's religious inquiry, an inquiry undertaken most consequentially with Rabbi Binder, occurs four times between the bottom of page 683 and the top of p. 684. In repeating the descriptor that many times in so short a space, Roth makes sure that his reader hears it—that it sinks in. What is being said about the nature of Ozzie's inquiry with this description? And what is being said about the religious inquiry going on around Ozzie with this description? How is Ozzie's question "different" from the ones being asked around him?

Question for personal reflection: Have you ever found yourself asking a question that was different from the questions being asked by the institution in which you were worshipping or studying or working? Or perhaps it worked the other way around; perhaps you found yourself trying to hold and/or respond to the “different” question of a child, friend, family-member, student, and didn’t know how. Where did these “different” questions lead you? Where did the difference itself lead you?

3. The significance of Ozzie’s mother’s candle ritual

Ozzie’s mother’s candle ritual is of little consequence to the larger narrative of the story, yet Roth spends a lot of time describing it. “When his mother lit the candles she would move her two arms slowly towards her, dragging them through the air, as though persuading people whose minds were half made up. And her eyes would get glassy with tears. Even when his father was alive Ozzie remembered that her eyes had gotten glassy, so it didn’t have anything to do with his dying. It had something to do with lighting the candles” (684). Indeed this moment is the quietest and softest in the story, a kind of respite in an otherwise precipitous-feeling narrative. What is important about this moment? Or, more particularly, what does Ozzie recognize as important in it?

4. “Is it me?” “Is it us?”

One of (for me) the most exhilarating moments in this story, the moment that cracks the story open for any kind of reader—religious, secular, young, old—is when, kneeling on the locked trapped door, so as to keep Rabbi Binder from reaching him on the roof, Ozzie finds himself wondering, “Can this be me?”

“A question shot through his brain. ‘Can this be *me*?’ For a thirteen-year-old who had just labeled his religious leader a bastard, twice, it was not an improper question. Louder and louder the question came to him—‘Is it me? Is it me?’—until he discovered himself no longer kneeling, but racing crazily towards the edge of the roof, his eyes crying, his throat screaming, and his arms flying everywhichway as though not his own.

‘Is it me? Is it me ME ME ME ME! It has to be me—but is it!’

It is the question a thief must ask himself the night he jimmyes open his first window, and it is said to be the question with which bridegrooms quiz themselves before the altar.” (p. 687, near the top of page.)

How does this question—*Is it me?*—reverberate across the story as a whole? One way it does so is to grow very much bigger, as, seeing the “strangeness” in his friends urging him to jump off the roof, a prospect which Ozzie recognizes as making them “happy”; and, seeing beside those friends the “even greater strangeness” of Rabbi Binder “trembling” on his knees, Ozzie understands that the question “now” is not “Is it me,” but, “Is it us ... Is it us?” (691). How does *this* question reverberate across the story? These questions—*Is it me, Is it us?*—are radical, subtending ones, the kinds one probably shouldn’t be asking if one wants the world to keep seeming like itself. To ask them with any dedication could mean finding oneself outside of one’s life, wondering at its very facture--outside of those customs and conventions by which we are habituated to our lives and which perhaps make those lives habitable in the first place. Ozzie seems to have found himself at such a precipice, as so many thoughtful adolescents do. What are your thoughts, here?

Question for Personal Reflection:

Have you ever found yourself asking the question “Is it me,” or “Is it us”? Were you able to keep asking it? Who or what supported your asking it? What might support the question now? Does literature help you ask it? How?

5. Why is Blotnik in the story?

Why do you think Blotnik is in the story? He is almost *only* a stereotype (and therefore perhaps a risky sort of figure for Roth to have included.) (Though it should be said that if Roth saw such a risk, he may not have cared about it.) How do you think Blotnik’s almost-only-stereotypical presence plays upon the imagination of the Jewish reader, the Gentile reader, and on the imaginations of the story’s other characters?

6. When this story is taking place; the recentness of the Holocaust.

Crucial to any reading of this story is a persistent awareness of when in Jewish American history it takes place, which is only fifteen years after the Holocaust. If we fail to remember when this story is taking place, we may miss what’s at stake for the adult figures in the story, especially Rabbi Binder and Ozzie’s mother. Indeed if we fail to remember when this story is taking place, we may miss the whole story.

This is to say that the questions posed so far try to open the story to multiple religious perspectives. But to fail to treat the story as one of Jewish experience and identity, esp. American Jewish experience and identity, is to disregard just how high the stakes are for Rabbi Binder, for Ozzie's mother, for Ozzie, and really for nearly every character in this story. What are your thoughts, here?

7. The imagery in the story

Several times in this story we see things given attributes or capacities they can't possibly have, given the laws of their physical existence. Light, for instance, at three points in the story, "clicks": "He [Ozzie] stood against the low, clouded, darkening sky—light clicked down swiftly now, as on a small gear [...]. (690) (For other moments in which light "clicks", see p. 686, bottom, and p. 691, bottom.) So, too, the sky is, for Ozzie, something he wishes he could "rip open" and "plunge his hands through," at which point he would "pull out the sun," which would be "like a coin," and on which would be "stamped" "JUMP or DON'T JUMP." (691, middle.)

What is going on in this story that Roth (or Ozzie!) repeatedly figures this world in this way—meaning, by making non-solid things solid, by making silent things make sound, by making non-comprehensible things, borderless things, have borders, be comprehensible? The world here feels as if being RE-made, RE-figured, almost made mechanical, modern, fixed, fix-able. Why?

8. A God who can make anything He wants to make

"Why can't He make anything He wants to make?"

This is what Ozzie "blurts" to Rabbi Binder when, "trapped," he is forced, in "free discussion" time, to speak. "Why can't He make anything He wants to make?" In insisting within himself that such a God might be possible, Ozzie opens himself to the possibility of Jesus Christ, a child of God engendered outside physical laws--though the point here is not that Ozzie is about to become a Christian. No, what Ozzie wants to be allowed to entertain is "different" than a God designated as either Christian or Jewish. What Ozzie wants to entertain is the possibility of a "God who can make anything He wants to make." It is a purely logical question Ozzie is asking, and it's almost as though the logic itself sends Ozzie paradoxically into a logic-less zone, resulting in an existential crisis that is shot through the story in general--like a kind of light, we might say. Indeed, it is just now occurring to me that though only thirteen, Ozzie deserves fellowship with those other metaphysical and/or

theological thinkers we've encountered in the All Souls Book Group in our four and half year history: among them, The Misfit, from Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find"; Ruth, from Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*; Jack Boughton, from Marilynne Robinson's *Home*; Ling, from Marjorie Kemper's "God's Goodness"; and Binx Bolling from Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*. (And yet Roth never lets us forget that Ozzie is also only thirteen, which is one of reasons, for me, behind the story's pathos.)

What are the implications of a god "who can make anything He wants to make?" Please try to answer this question not in terms of your own experience of God, nor in terms of the experience of anyone else you know or have heard/read about, rather *exclusively in the terms of this story*. Restricting your observations to the story *will* lead you to a larger, extra-story theological encounter, but you won't arrive at this encounter--nor will we, as a group, arrive *together* at such an encounter--unless we start, and stay, with the story.

9. A reading of this story that focuses not on theology, but on politics.

One of the book group members at the Cathedral of All Souls made a game-changing and very productive statement during our meeting, which was that the story's most powerful "critique" is not of religion, rather of politics. What do you think?

10. What, for you, is the most exhilarating/ interesting moment in this story? Why?

11. And where in the story, for you, is the writing in this story especially fine/ "beautiful"/ effective? Why?

Looking forward to seeing you Monday,

Emilie