

Questions for Cynthia Ozick's "Rosa"

1. The narrator of this story stays very, very close to Rosa, revealing to us intimate details about both the life of her mind and the life of her body. For instance, a significant portion of the story is devoted to Rosa's pursuit of a single pair of her underwear. We hear much about her unmade bed (pp. 186-187); her laundry (p. 188); her hair, "stragglings" loose from its bun (p. 192); the odors she fears are "flying up" from her body (p. 193); the Kleenex "pushed up into her sleeve" (p. 193). Also note that although the story is told in the third person—she did this, she did that—occasionally the narration slides into the first person. Here's an example from page 193: "If she moved even a little, an odor would fly up: urine, salt, old woman's fatigue. She left off panting and shivered. What do I care? I'm used to everything. Florida, New York, it doesn't matter."

Why do you think the narrator hovers so close to Rosa; why, for the story to be successful, must we experience her almost as though we shared her body? To me, Rosa's body is a kind of responsibility the story is bequeathing to us. Do you agree? Disagree? Why?

2. To me, one of the deepest subjects of this story is shame—a kind of radical, essential shame that Rosa is trying to suppress and vanquish with nearly everything she does, says and thinks. Furthermore, it seems that the story is making a proposal about the Holocaust and shame—that no matter what happens to you after escaping an experience like that, no matter how extensive and substantial the support you may receive in its aftermath, and no matter how far away, both in space and time, you may travel from the experience, you will always feel, at some level, degraded and ashamed. Do you agree with this estimation of the story? Disagree? Why?

I also wonder why it is that at the end of the story, Rosa perceives *Magda* as feeling ashamed. "Magda did not even stay to claim her letter: there is flickered, unfinished, like an ember, and all because of the ringing from the floor near the bed. Voices, sounds, echoes, noise—Magda collapsed at any stir, fearful as a phantom. She behaved at these moments as if she were ashamed, and hid herself. Magda, my beloved, don't be ashamed! Butterfly, I am not ashamed of your presence, only come to me, come to me again, if no longer now, then later, always come." (p. 221). Why do you think Rosa would envision Magda as being ashamed?

3. A question for Mother's Day: It seems that "Rosa" has something very interesting to say—something, by the way, I genuinely don't understand—about the relationship of mothers and motherhood to our ability to retrieve the variety and beauty of our life through language. Or maybe it's that Rosa, the character, has something interesting to say about this subject, something her life-experience has taught her. What do you think she's proposing to us? What is it that mothers understand—or that we understand through our connections to our mothers—that can result in a kind of linguistic genius that others, outside the relationship, don't share?

4. What do you think will happen between Rosa and Persky? Please answer this question in terms that are specific to the story.

Questions about Philip Roth's "Defender of the Faith"

1. Does Marx's final action in the story—to send Grossbart to the Pacific—surprise you? Does it not surprise you? Why do you think he sends him there? Try and answer this question only in the terms offered to you by the story.

2. On page 309, in a scene of conversation between Grossbart and Marx, Grossbart offers a definition of the Messiah that he learned from his friend, Mickey. Here is the definition:

“Who can tell? Maybe you're the Messiah—a little bit. What Mickey says is the Messiah is a collective idea. He went to Yeshiva, Mickey, for a while. He says together we're the Messiah. Me a little bit, you a little bit. You should hear that kind of talk, Sergeant, when he gets going.” (309, middle of the page)

If we asked Philip Roth whether or not he believes it's possible, in the military, to live by that conception of the Messiah, how do you think he would answer? Please reflect upon this question exclusively in terms of this story.

3. This is a complex and maybe wrong-headed question; and if it IS wrong-headed, tell me so in our meeting, for the process by which we'll sort out just why it's wrong-headed will probably teach us something.

It seems that Philip Roth has tried to portray Grossbart in two very different, maybe even opposed, ways: First, as a distinct and unique human being whose point of view is legitimate precisely because he is a distinct and unique human being; AND, secondly, as a stereotypical “Jew.” And it would seem that it's this latter Grossbart, the stereotypical “Jew,” that ultimately repels Marx, causing him to reject Grossbart's wish to be sent near his family. Do you agree that Roth has tried to figure Grossbart in these two different ways? And—this portion of the question may prove the toughest to wrestle with—did you find yourself, at moments in the story, responding to Grossbart as a stereotypical “Jew” (whatever that is)? Did the story stimulate in you reactionary and prejudiced responses--despite, of course, your best intentions otherwise?

Another way to think on this question: How do you think *Grossbart* would define what Jewishness is? On page 313, Grossbart says (tears are coming to his eyes) “It's a hard thing to be a Jew. But now I understand what Mickey says—it's a harder thing to stay one.” What does that mean? What is it about “being a Jew” that's hard to maintain in the world of the post Holocaust, modern military? Can this question ever be answered definitively?