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The Food of Suffering and Redemption: Gustatory Imagery as a Vehicle for Physical and
Spiritual Renewal in Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*

Gustatory imagery looms large in Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*. In the opening scenes we read: "There was not enough milk; sometimes Magda sucked air; then screamed. Stella was ravenous" (Ozick 3). These words conveying a lack of food denote the theme of hunger and deprivation that define Rosa's own suffering throughout the novella. Food imagery functions as a sort of currency denoting Rosa's physical and emotional deprivation and trauma that eventually turns to hope of her recovery from her traumatic Holocaust experience. Throughout the novella, food marks Rosa's spiritual journey from physical and spiritual bondage to physical and spiritual freedom. It is through food imagery that Ozick overcomes caveats proposed by critics such as Berel Lang (2000) who warn of Holocaust fiction's potential to "deform or debase or diminish the event" (6) causing it to ineffectually capture the depth of human suffering imposed on its victims. Through food imagery, Ozick also challenges the opinion of Holocaust fiction as "idolatry" mentioned by Wirth-Nesher (1998) who posits that Jewish food is a vehicle for conveying not only physical deprivation but spiritual depravation as it "signifies more than its traditional role" (4). Moreover, Emma Parker (2018) advances the notion that food in literature carries "expressions of power" (349) which is depicted in *The Shawl* as a vehicle of spiritual renewal. Additionally, María Jesús Fernández Gil (2012), asserts that "Ozick's use of a pre-eminently metaphorical language [e.g. food imagery] as a matter of fact, aims at opening a path

through which to gain insight into a reality that is said to be irrepresentable” (63). It is through food imagery Ozick demonstrates it is representable and supports the notion proposed by Lawrence Langer (1998), that Holocaust fiction serves as a means to preserve the truth of the Holocaust. As such, food serves as a device that not only addresses aesthetic ethical concerns and measures the suffering Rosa endures, but is a vehicle, even currency, for her physical empowerment and spiritual restoration as well. The sparseness and scarcity of food and its connection to Rosa’s deprivation in the first section of the novella can be juxtaposed with the richness of the food and its religious significance in the second part of the novella that serves as a vehicle of Rosa’s move from physical and spiritual deprivation toward physical and spiritual renewal.

While Ozick’s *The Shawl* stands among of other Holocaust fiction such as *Maus* (1980), *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), *Book Thief* (2005), *Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2006), to name only a few, some object to this sort of artistic representation. While Ozick is indeed successful in portraying the suffering of a fictional Holocaust survivor through food imagery with her character Rosa, Berel Lang, in *Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics* (2000), expresses a number of reservations with regards to the creation of Holocaust fiction. Within the framework of the discussion of art and ethics, Lang introduces the reader to the “quarrel” regarding the notion of “art within limits” (Lang 1). This singular phrase is at the heart of Holocaust art debate. Because of the sensitive nature of the Holocaust, Lang examines numerous caveats when depicting the Holocaust in artistic form—whether literature, motion pictures, or fine arts. The “quarrel” over such art takes on ethical considerations as Lang points out the moral dimensions of creating “art for art’s sake” with little or no regard for “moral judgment” (2). The question posed is whether the artist is excusably exempt from ethics while

exercising his or her “creative imagination” despite whatever “antinomian” sentiments—such as “suspicion” and “hostility” (2)—might be aroused in the minds of the audience. Should a writer or artist depicting the Holocaust use some measure of restraint when depicting such a sensitive subject as the Holocaust? The major caveats Lang seeks to discuss have to do with “conflation” of art forms—when it comes to the Holocaust—in such a way that might historically or morally misrepresent the facts of the event (5). Citing Theodore Adorno “Lyric poetry after Auschwitz would be barbarous” (5), Lang advances the notion that the artistic medium in which the Holocaust is represented must be considered by artists as a matter of decorum. The analogy of lyric poetry being an unsuitable literary container for such a tragic subject is apt—the Holocaust is nothing to “sing about”, as it were. Couching the topic in a musical-poetic format that is typically a vessel for romantic, sentimental themes would be the equivalent to singing “Happy Birthday” at a funeral. As a matter of aesthetic ethics, Lang’s concern is that because the Holocaust is such a sacrosanct subject, it should not be reduced to some form of vulgar entertainment. One of Lang’s caveats having to do with the Holocaust fiction inadequately capturing the human suffering is, to at least some degree correct, but does not diminish the impact of fiction such as Ozick’s *The Shawl* in which food imagery is vividly employed to depict the suffering of a Holocaust survivor—Rosa. The depiction of anguish using this banal imagery has the distinctive effect of extending the suffering beyond the religious Jewish community to the secular Jewish community—that is to say humanity in general. With deference to all victims of the Holocaust, Ozick, through food imagery, succeeds in lifting the conversation to a more “egalitarian” level with respect to all who suffered—religious or not—the horrors of this genocide. Hunger is something with which anyone can identify—thus the reader can readily sympathize with Rosa’s emaciated state. And as Anzia Yezierska observes in Weber’s

Haunted in the New World (2005), there is a juxtaposition of need among Jewish, fictional characters, in this case for Rosa, to ironically “preserve the hunger . . . and to hunger no more” (25) illustrating how the experience of her traumatic past manifests itself by way of her interaction with food.

Food imagery punctuates Rosa’s physical and spiritual deprivation early in the novel while assuaging one of Lang’s (2000) caveats of “aesthetic ethics” (3) to adequately depict the suffering of a Holocaust victim. The gustatory imagery of milk and cannibalism is seen in the story as “Magda [takes] a corner of the shawl and milked it instead. She sucked and sucked the threads with wetness” (Ozick 4). This sucking—reminiscent of nursing—of the shawl that cannot dispense milk, denotes the abject deprivation suffered by Rosa and her baby. The extent of deprivation in the prison camp is conveyed additionally through imagery of cannibalism as Rose thinks “Stella was waiting for Magda to die so she could put her teeth into the little thighs” (5) and later, as implied by the notion that “Stella, would steal Magda to eat her” (6). The extent of food deprivation takes a physical and spiritual toll culminating in thoughts of cannibalism—a last resort of desperation in survival situations and a condition that reduces human beings to the level of animals. The shocking food imagery denotes not only abject hunger and despair with little hope for survival pitting one survivor against the other, but spiritual despair as well. The hints of cannibalism combined with Magda’s death denote the “brutal piercing intensity” of the concentration camp (Gil 66). Because of food deprivation, she is physically alive but emotionally and spiritually dead. As Gil posits in “Allegorical Traces of The Traumatic in Cynthia Ozick’s *The Shawl*” (2012), food deprivation aptly captures the “inhumane conditions” (63) of Rosa’s internment. Additionally, given the rich religious background of milk in Hebrew history—such as the “promised land” said to be “flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:17)—

in *The Shawl*, the fact that Rosa's nipples are dried and "cracked" without a "sniff of milk" (Ozick 4) registers, sadly, with quintessential irony that punctuates the lowly state of her existence both physically and spiritually.

Ozick perennially depicts Rosa's suffering in *The Shawl*, brought on in part by food deprivation, as a means of conveying her physical and spiritual deprivation as we watch her interactions with food throughout the novella. In *The Shawl*, Rosa's food deprivation is heightened by the notion that her shawl "was a magic shawl" (Ozick 5) conveying imaginary, metaphysical connotations—it is merely hoped that this shawl can provide sustenance—but in reality, it cannot. The term "magic" denotes fantasy—an invention of the mind—another means of survival and a means of hope. The fact of the shawl's metaphysical impotence is accentuated when Rosa "lifted, shook, whipped, unfurled" (9) the Shawl as "voices" told her to do. These actions resemble what is done with the *tallit* in the synagogue before praying (Robinson 23). In this religious ceremony the *tallit* is lifted high above the head then ceremoniously whipped around the head and unraveled again and summarily draped on the shoulders in a specific fashion preceding a prayer (Donin 31). This religious ceremony and garment are in keeping with that mandate of Deuteronomy 22:12 which reads, "Thou shalt make thee fringes upon the four quarters of thy vesture, wherewith thou coverest thyself" (KJV). The act of Rosa raising the shawl over her head is performed just before her daughter Magda is killed near the fence and goes "swimming through the air" (Ozick 9). Magda is killed despite the ritualistic, spiritual invocation punctuating the insignificance of the ritual and its lack of metaphysical potency. Rosa's reaction is related through more gastronomic imagery as she stuffs the shawl into her mouth and "[drinks] the shawl until it dried" (10) to keep herself from screaming—Rosa suffers a loss too great for words. The gustatory imagery of "[stuffing]" (9) the shawl into her mouth to

suppress her screams denotes the suppression of verbal expression—a subduing of physical and emotional release. Harriet Blodget in “Mimesis and Metaphor: Food Imagery in International Twentieth-Century Women's Writing” (2004) notes that women use food in writing for a variety of purposes including “to speak of personal and social behaviors and psychological problems, art, sexual politics, poverty nationalism, murder mysteries . . . and domesticity” (262).

Following this gustatory trope, Ozick succeeds in using food to portray Rosa’s physical suffering as well as her spiritual deprivation.

In addition to her imprisonment, this singular, climactic event of Magda’s death propels Rosa into a spiritual wilderness, framed by food imagery, from which recovery, or redemption, will take many years. In this scene, she cannot express her horror without sacrificing her own life. Rosa’s emotional release is “bottled up”—arrested by ingesting the shawl—an effect seen earlier when Magda also “put the shawl in her mouth and turn[ed] dumb again” (Ozick 8). Gustatory imagery registers loss and conveys how the voices of both Magda and Rosa are silenced. Their suffering is conveyed through food deprivation, and spiritual deprivation and suppression, and for Magda, deprivation of her very life. This scene further denotes Rosa’s powerlessness against her enemies. As Emma Parker observes “Women are rarely depicted eating in literature because . . . consumption embodies coded expressions of power” (349). Since the shawl Rosa stuffs in her mouth is devoid of both nutritional and spiritual value her “consumption” expresses not power, but powerlessness. It is the oxymoron of “black milk” of Paul Celan’s poem—“Todesfuge” (providing the epigraph of the novella)—“milk blackened by the murderers’ monstrous design” (Weimer 87). The consuming of the shawl is a type of cannibalism as it “taste[s]” of “cinnamon and almond depth of Magda’s saliva.” By consuming Magda’s saliva, Rosa is in effect, consuming her daughter “[swallowing] her . . . back into her

own body . . . taking the child's muteness into herself" (Wirth-Nesher 324). This quasi-cannibalism—associated with paganism—denotes the lowest state of both physical and spiritual existence for Rosa. As she watches Magda die and is powerless to intervene or even express her horror, she is now completely powerless and is essentially depraved physically and spiritually—resorting to a desperate act of cannibalism by “drink[ing] Magda's shawl until it dried” (Ozick 9). The “dried milk” motif—that is Rosa's own breast milk has dried up, and now the “milk” of the shawl is dried—completes the section. This drying effect now leaves Rosa in a spiritual wilderness reinforcing the perception, on another metaphysical level, that drinking the shawl dry denotes an impotent, empty communion. In antiquity, milk was conceived of as a sacramental element among Gnostics with powers to procure “eternal life” (Kittle 1: 647). This notion of milk as communion can be seen in the Apostle Peter's words, “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby: If so be ye have tasted that the Lord *is* gracious” (1 Peter 2:2-3, KJV). Drinking dry the milk of the shawl signifies Rosa's depleting not only its nutritional value, but this also implies that its spiritual, communal worth, is dried up as well—that is to say, communion with God is now broken.

This bitter cup of milk Rosa drinks furthermore, metaphorically emulates the black milk of the epigram from Paul Celan's “Todesfuge” particularly with respect to the repeated line: “Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening / we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night / we drink and we drink.” The imagery of black milk is again noteworthy as milk is typically white. As an Old Testament trope, white milk commonly refers to purity and innocence such as in the verse “Her Nazarites were purer than snow . . . whiter than milk” (Lamentations 4:7, KJV). Israelite princes are described as pure, but this milk being black creates a foil to that particular trope and denotes something imbibed that is impure. In the

cultural milieu of the poem, Celan is capturing the foreboding tone of the Holocaust through food imagery. One might see the device of “black milk” versus white milk as denoting good versus evil—certainly a notion that applies to the Holocaust. Rosa’s imbibing the milk—metaphorically “black milk”—is suggestive of the Old Testament Hebrews’ situation in Jeremiah (of impending doom) (Weimer 90) and Rosa’s situation in the prison camp. Swallowing the milk (or metaphorically “black milk”) of the shawl carries a sense of judgment, abandonment by God, and spiritual death.

Conversely, and ironically, food imagery also carries hope for physical and spiritual renewal. The “peculiar smell, of cinnamon and almonds” emanating from Magda’s mouth (Ozick 5) decidedly “out of place in this demonic hell of Death Camps” is reminiscent of the Jewish *besamin* (spice) box used during the *Havdalah* service (Gil 69). The pungent aromas associated with *Havdalah* serve as a revival of the soul and a “taste from God . . . of the World to come, of paradise, a time in which it will always be Shabbot” (Robinson 88). As Meisha Rosenberg (1999) points out “The ‘cinnamon and almond’ smell is also a Midrashic link to a famous Yiddish song, *Rozhinkes mit Mandlen* (Raisins and Almonds)” (6). Alluding to Jewish spirituality, the food imagery—the olfactory imagery—of the cinnamon and almonds hold a promise for Rosa of a better future—of physical and spiritual renewal.

The ritualistic significance of food imagery used in the second part of *The Shawl* indicates the process of a gradual spiritual renewal as it evokes the Passover meal. Rosa’s spiritual renewal begins in “Rosa”, which is also rich with food imagery as it projects the latter half of her life as a “survivor” of the Holocaust. However, at first, food imagery denotes Rosa’s deprived physical and spiritual state as she “stayed in her room and ate two bites of a hard-boiled egg in bed” (Ozick 14). The hardboiled egg (*Beitza*) that Rosa bites is an element of the Seder

plate—the Passover meal—(and is typically not eaten), which symbolizes the circle of life and death (Podwal 10), but additionally denotes Rosa’s continued food deprivation. It is significant to Rosa’s life—now living in Florida with her memory of suffering and subsequent redemption from the prison camp. The food also signifies Rosa’s spiritual journey—her own exodus and subsequent wandering in the wilderness.

Furthermore, the elements of the Seder plate memorialize the “Exodus” and subsequent Jewish wondering of forty years—marking an extensive spiritual journey culminating in entering the “promised land.” In the book of Exodus we read: “And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey” (3:8, KJV). In this context, the word ‘milk’, חָלָב (*chalab*), also denotes sour milk, cheese and notably, as a metaphor, abundance of the land white (as milk) (Botterweck 4: 389). The milk motif in the epigraph and in the first section of the novella is now juxtaposed with the Seder plate and its memorialization of the Hebrews’ forty years of wondering and arrival in the “promised land flowing with milk and honey” and Rosa’s life some forty years after the Holocaust. So, while Rosa’s eating the egg indeed denotes her continued deprivation, it simultaneously denotes the promise of a better future. In addition to allusions to the “land flowing with milk and honey”, the Seder egg carries connotations of fertility (Robinson 122)—which is to say lushness and abundance. All of these connotations—milk, honey, and fertility—hold promises of a brighter future for Rosa despite her current emaciated state. However, it is worth noting that Rosa is alone at this point. The Jewish Seder is notably a celebration of community. The Seder meal is traditionally joyous occasion shared with family and friends (122). The fact that Rosa is unmarried and is living alone—hence eating alone—denotes another dimension to her deprivation. She is without family—without

community. Like the Jews of antiquity, she is in a sort of exile living in Florida while her nearest family member (Stella) lives in New York.

Cannibalistic food imagery frames the fact that while Rosa is physically free from the prison camp, she is arguably not emotionally or spiritually free at this point. Again, Rosa's struggle to be liberated on all these levels is conveyed through cannibalistic, gustatory imagery when she "dreams about Stella: [who] was boiling her tongue, ears, her right hand" (Ozick 15). This gruesome imagery denotes Rosa's physical and spiritual deprivation in light of her current "liberated" state. Her spiritual suffering related through thoughts of cannibalism—associated with paganism (Wagemakers 343)—is juxtaposed with the rich and nourishing food imagery of "Flowery green heads of romaine lettuce, his glowing strawberries . . . sleek avocados . . . in the perpetual garden of Florida" (Ozick 16). This registers as a type of Eden—that is to say paradise. Compared to the prison camp, Florida should be paradise. But Rosa is in a spiritual wilderness, like the Jewish exodus from Egypt and subsequent wandering for, as Stella notes, "thirty . . . [or] forty" years (31) as a consequence of unbelief. This imagery of cannibalism denotes the depth her physical spiritual deprivation in this metaphysical wilderness.

Food imagery is used to generate a "nostalgic" that is to say "idealized" past in addition to serving as a vehicle for spiritual renewal. A turning point in the story marking spiritual redemption is framed by food and begins when Rosa meets Persky—a kindred Pole—that is to say, a kinsman. Some remediation begins with Rosa when Persky reproves, "You can't live in the past" (23). This chastisement is punctuated by gustatory imagery as the two catch a whiff of aromatic foods when passing a Kosher café and Rosa reads: "Kollins Kosher Kameo / Remembrances of New York and the Paradise of your Maternal Kitchen: / Delicious dishes of Ambrosia and Nostalgia" (23). The words "ambrosia" and "nostalgia" denote something ideal—

heavenly food or food of an idealized past. Persky's statement "you can't live in the past" registers as ironic given the notion of "dishes" meant to be "nostalgic" (reminiscent of the past) in nature. This irony conveys the notion of food imagery replacing a "traumatic" past with an "idealized" past—if there is such a thing (if such a thing were possible). The sign is auspiciously therapeutic countering the aspects of cannibalistic deprivation and loss suffered by Rosa, and offering good memories—from an idealized past in the form of "Ambrosia"—food of the gods. Additionally, word "Kameo" is an alternate spelling of 'cameo' denoting a picture—or a picture of remembrance—emphasizing connotations of nostalgia—that is to say "better times" as it were. Persky's remonstrative "a little forgetting is necessary" (58) might be inverted in light of the nostalgic food, to mean that perhaps "a little remembering is necessary." This scene is a contrast with the women's nostalgic reminiscing of food earlier that Rosa denounces as "[pitiable]." Rosa willingly enters into kosher café with Persky as the wistful advertisement complements Persky's urging to "come in" and "cool off" (Ozick 23). The "dishes of ambrosia" conjuring nostalgic—that is to say and "ideal"—ambiance, together with the "cool" interior of the restaurant, work to create a heavenly atmosphere compared to the hellish "furnace" outside. By leading Rosa to this café, Persky is rescuing her from the self-imposed social exile she has inflicted upon herself. The food that Rosa found "pitiable" before now seems inviting and Persky's linguistically primitive imperatives, "you'll stay, I'll get [food]" (24) denotes the relationship of food as a "metaphor for power" (Parker 349). However, while an act of "power", Persky's presentation of food is not an act of dominance or control; the food is a vehicle—even currency—by which he will redeem Rosa from her physical and spiritual deprivation.

In fact, this presentation of food is arguably quite benevolent as, in this café, Persky acting as a sort of "kinsman redeemer" offers Rosa rich food consisting of "two cups of tea . . .

eggplant salad and Danish” (Ozick 25). This bountiful table is in sharp contrast with the lack of food in her prison camp and the “monotonous and sparse and often stale” (31) food of her hotel and her appearance of “Skin and bones” (26). The contrasts depict Rosa as barely surviving. Her appearance is of one who is famished. By offering her food, Persky is redeeming her both physically and spiritually. In Jewish culture, the act of providing food is an act of restoring, repairing, and protecting found in key biblical passages such as: “And he blessed Joseph, and said, God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk, the God which fed me all my life long unto this day” (Genesis 48:15, KJV). The word fed from the Hebrew נָחַם (ra ‘ah) means to “pasture, tend, graze, feed” (Botterweck 2: 353). The notion of a kinsman acting as a shepherd, a protector is found in Psalm 72:14 reading: “He shall redeem their soul from deceit and violence: and precious shall their blood be in his sight” (KJV). The word used here for “redeem” in Hebrew is גָּאָל (*ga'al*) meaning to act as a kinsman redeemer (Botterweck 2: 353). This food offering arguably reflects the biblical story of Boaz rescuing Ruth from famine in the Old Testament recording, “And [Ruth] went, and came, and gleaned in the field after the reapers: and her hap was to light on a part of the field belonging unto Boaz” (Ruth 2:3, KJV). The same word גָּאָל (*ga'al*) is used in the book of Ruth to describe Boaz reading: “And the women said unto Naomi, Blessed *be* the LORD, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel” (Ruth 4:14, KJV). As Boaz becomes Ruth’s “kinsman-redeemer”, so Persky becomes a kinsman redeemer to Rosa. The title “kinsman-redeemer” is a Christ-type (Ryken 501) denoting Persky’s role in bringing physical restoration and spiritual restoration to Rosa. By presenting her with food and thus preserving her life, Persky becomes Rosa’s kinsman-redeemer. As Boaz rescued Ruth, she called him “near kinsman” (Ruth 3: 9, KJV). Just as Boaz in the Old Testament redeemed Ruth from deprivation, so Persky redeems Rosa by providing

both physical and spiritual sustenance. Additionally, this meal with Persky's establishes a friendship—with a fellow Jew—that also reconnects Rosa to community so she is no longer isolated.

The motif of Persky as kinsman-redeemer through the provision of food is established just before this scene, during his first encounter with Rosa, as he “flirts” with her saying “Two people from Warsaw meet in Miami, Florida” (Ozick 18). During his initial dialogue with Rosa, Persky's role as kinsman-redeemer is established with his quip “Wherever is your home is my direction I am going anyhow” (21). This phrase is formulaic of a biblical oath in the book of Ruth when Ruth says “for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people *shall be* my people, and thy God my God” (Ruth 1:16, KJV). Ozick has shrewdly borrowed the formulaic structure of biblical oath (Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky 44) to establish the relationship of the reluctant but needy Rosa and flirty but helpful Persky framed in an allusion to the book of Ruth in which the term “kinsman-redeemer” appears the most frequently in the entire Bible and that “providing for a needy relative is a crucial aspect . . . in this book” (Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky 44). Even Rosa's pessimistic “Your Warsaw is not my Warsaw”, repeated three times, does not deter Persky, who chastises, “What is this? A song with one stanza?” (Ozick 22). It is immediately after this exchange that Persky and Rosa enter the Kosher café and Rosa is treated to “Delicious Dishes of Ambrosia and Nostalgia” (23).

Persky's offering of food as a type of kinsman redeemer invites Rosa to cross a social threshold to alleviate not only physical hunger, but also provide communal restoration. This move is couched in the term *ga'al* which denotes a “person responsible for a relative” (Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky 44). There are essentially three responsibilities of a kinsman: one having to do with blood vengeance (see Numbers 35 and Deuteronomy 19:5-14) and the other two have to

do with “helping a destitute relative” (Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky 44). These responsibilities are alluded to during the Seder meal celebrating God as redeemer when reciting “I will redeem you with a stretched out arm” (Exodus 6:6, KJV). Moreover, in addition to its redemptive properties, the eggplant in this scene might be equated to the egg on the Seder plate representing fertility. This notion of fertility carries implications of restoration. In her article “Deciphering a Meal” Mary Douglas observes that in literature, food is “code” and “the message it encodes will be found the pattern of social relationships being expressed” (Douglas 249). Rosa’s burgeoning (albeit reluctant) friendship with Persky clearly conveys a Jewish social code of hospitality—reiterated by Douglas’ observation that “the meal expresses close friendship” (256). By accepting Persky’s offer of food, Rosa has crossed a social “threshold” and moves into a more intimate, redemptive relationship with Persky (257)—summed up by the Hebrew term *ga’al* (redeemer).

This role as redeemer is seen as Persky’s various presentations of food to Rosa register as divine intervention—as they are not only physically therapeutic but spiritually healing as well. Persky’s food “therapy” has immediate effect to whet Rosa’s appetite as finds herself at home “spread[ing] jelly on three crackers . . . in spite of Persky’s Danish, empty inside” (Ozick 34). While Rosa seems to have a new interest in food, the words “empty inside” registers as not only physical hunger, but also spiritual deprivation. Rosa’s interest in food is a reversal of Stella’s observation that “Rosa eats little by little, like a tapeworm in the world’s belly” (34). When Persky presents Rosa with crullers again when visiting her apartment encouraging “eat up the crullers . . . You’ll feel better” (61) signifies the medicinal effect of such rich fare. This gift of crullers frames Persky’s words of encouragement to Rosa that “sometimes a little forgetting is necessary . . . if you want to get something out of life” (58). The offering of crullers is also

pregnant with spiritual imagery since crullers resemble challah bread—rich Jewish bread eaten on the Sabbath; it is often circular in shape and sweet (Roden 1). This bread is additionally significant as representative of manna bread given to the Israelites by God during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness (Exodus 16:15) and anticipation of the messianic era (Roden 1). As Botterweck, et. al. points out, *manna* מָן (or *maneh*) is a “gift” “allotment”, or “prepared food” (Botterweck 8: 390). By eating the food, given to her by Persky—her kinsman redeemer—Rosa is becoming physically and spiritually strengthened to find her way out of the spiritual wilderness of the past forty years. This presentation of food carries rich imagery of promise just as the Israelites escaped bondage and subsequent forty years of wilderness wondering to enter the land “flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8, KJV). Moreover, as Hubbard observes: “Though ambiguous on the surface, God’s ‘visitation’ of Israel by providing food seemed a harbinger of that invention” (65). That is to say, God has historically been a “provider” (specifically of food) in times of Israel’s need. Rosa’s chance meeting with Persky—who provides her with food—might be seen as an act of God’s provision for Rosa’s physical and spiritual needs.

Additionally, Persky’s food serves as a foil for the pessimistic and emaciated Rosa who continues to live in her past despite the absence of her oppressors, starves herself. Persky compliments her apartment as cozy to Rosa’s observation of “cramped” (Ozick 56). Persky must teach her that “For everything there is a bad way of describing, also a good way” (56). Again, the object lesson is framed by food—rich crullers with “vanilla icing” and “chocolate icing” (56) denoting a luxuriant, sweet feast as if to woo Rosa out of her miserable, deprived, and cynical state of mind and withered body. It is the nourishment of Persky’s presence as kinsman redeemer and his offering of food (reminiscent of *challah*, Sabbath bread) that functions as a

vehicle—a spiritual currency—by which Rosa will find redemption from the past that haunts her. The offering and consumption of food is also an act of empowerment—Rosa is empowered by Persky after eating the food he offers (Parker 351). This empowerment and the psychological and spiritually redemptive effects of eating Persky’s food will be fully realized in the final scene of the novella.

Rosa’s meetings and meals with Persky frame the food imagery denoted in Rosa’s letter from the “Department of Social Pathology” (Ozick 35)—significant to Rosa’s emaciated state. Among other psychological conditions noted among Holocaust survivors is “malnutrition” (35). This particular condition applies directly to Rosa as one of the “survivors.” The fact that the letter is signed “Dr. Tree” is noteworthy since some trees are of the food bearing variety. However, the food that Dr. Tree offers is simply food of knowledge—he wishes to observe “survivors” of the Holocaust for purposes of “metaphysical” knowledge (37). The offensive suggestion is punctuated by Rosa’s exclamatory protests of “Drop in a hole!” (38) and “Angel of Death!” (39). This “Tree” (Dr. Tree) ironically provides nothing nutritive or curative. The title “Doctor” denotes someone with healing skills. Added to his name “Tree”—with connotations of sustenance—it seems that Dr. Tree is a perfect metaphor for healing. But Rosa rejects Dr. Tree’s healing propositions. Dr. Tree’s self-serving quest for knowledge is exploitive, causing Rosa to revisit—or regurgitate—her past; it is not spiritually substantive or redemptive for Rosa and—as the “forbidden fruit” in Genesis—will only lead to death. That is to say, “eating” what is forbidden will only exacerbate her spiritual deprivation and lead to spiritual death.

This food imagery of “forbidden fruit” denotes a quest for knowledge which carries not only cerebral, scientific connotations, but metaphysical or spiritual connotations as well. Moments of “gustatory weakness” mark crucial moments in the biblical narratives (Levin 2).

Moses struck a rock twice to produce water against God's command (Numbers 20:11). Esau sold his birthright for some lentils (Genesis 25:29-31). And Eve ate from the forbidden tree (Genesis 3:6). In addition to scientific knowledge, Dr. Tree is offering to Rosa an alternate spirituality—that is to say “forbidden fruit”—namely Buddhism. The “Eightfold Path”—offered by Dr. Tree is the “forbidden fruit” that Rosa resists. Food as a seducer is “a primal need humankind is literally unable to resist—the stuff, in other words, of great fiction” (Levin 2). Dr. Tree offers that through “penetrating summary of the fruit of craving there will be ‘rebirth’” (Ozick 37). Dr. Tree is leading Rosa to Buddhism—the knowledge of Buddhism—as a means of healing. Adding to the spiritual, gustatory imagery, this Buddhist “fruit of craving” directly challenges the Jewish spirituality in which the story is framed and is summarily rejected by Rosa out of hand as she “lit a match and enjoyed the fire” (39). This small bonfire is an ironic discarding of Buddhism as one of Buddha's teaching was in fact called the “Fire Sermon.” This micro holocaust in Rosa's sink is punctuated with Rosa's apocalyptic comments “The world is full of Trees! The world is full of fire! Everything, everything is on fire!” (39). But as in the book of Revelation predicts, the apocalypse is not the final end, but a new beginning where evil things are burned by fire (see Revelation 19:20). With Rosa's basin ablaze, she resists the “forbidden fruit” and is in effect “reborn”—without the help of Buddhism, or perhaps any other religion—having been revitalized by her relationship with Persky.

This food metaphor of “forbidden fruit” segues into the conversation of idolatry denoting spiritual deprivation. Rosa's struggle with idolatry, “forbidden fruit”, mirrors her struggle with food deprivation. Observant Jews will naturally be familiar with the Second Commandment reading, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness *of anything* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth” (Exodus

20:4, KJV). Some will interpret the term “graven image”, *לִפְסֵל* (*pecell*), as extending to works of fiction literature as well (Wirth-Nesher 127). Thus, the problem of idol worship something with which Ozick must contend as a Jewish writer, and with which her character, Rosa, must contend as a Holocaust survivor. What is further interesting about Ozick is that she is Jewish, but not a Holocaust survivor herself. And she does not have an issue with writing Holocaust *per se*, as “her main concern is the tension between Jewish and non-Jewish cultures” (Alkana 965). However, religious and cultural tension is definitely a part of Rosa’s psyche when she quips “I don’t believe in God, but I believe like the Catholics, in Mystery. My mother wanted so much to convert” (Ozick 41). The conflict of religion and idolatry is also seen in Rosa’s many conversations with her dead daughter Magda “Everywhere there are slanders, and sometimes—my bright lips, my darling!—the slanders touch even you. My purity, my snowqueen!” (Ozick 42). Through her character Rosa, we see Ozick’s reservations about Holocaust literature that merely focuses on individual human suffering and acknowledges the conflict for Jewish writers who engage in idolatry when creating art (Alkana 966-967). She engages the conflict through her character Rosa who idolizes her dead daughter using emotionally charged names such as “snowqueen” denoting both perfection (purity) and royalty—godlike qualities. Her own sister, Stella, essentially accuses her of idolatry calling her a “parable-maker” (teller of fictional tales) (Ozick 41) and writing “your idol is on its way” (31) (Alkana 967). This idol worship serves as another indicator of Rosa’s physical and spiritual deprivation. Rosa’s idolatry—partaking “forbidden fruit”—and her emaciated physical state mirrors her “emaciated” spiritual condition adding another metaphysical dimension to Ozick’s use of “forbidden fruit” imagery to depict Rosa’s suffering.

Conversely, the scene might also be seen as a sacrificial offering in which food—(here “fruit of craving”) is burned as an offering to God. This can be seen as a reversal of the “broken communion” with God in the beginning of the novella where the shawl is swallowed in despair and an act of reestablishing communion with God. In keeping with the Judaic motif of a spiritual wilderness (such as the eating of Seder food), Rosa makes a ritualistic burning as found in the book of Exodus reading: “An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings” (20:24, KJV). This sort of offering was prescribed as one of true worship as opposed to idolatry—rather than “gods of silver or gold” (Exodus 20:23, KJV). The food imagery of the “fruit of craving” and subsequent offering of Buddhism by Dr. Tree is a type of “false food”—false worship—in conflict with Judaic teachings—that is to say, an embracing of a “false god.” Ritualistically burning the letter is a symbolic rejection of Dr. Tree’s “false god” and concurrently a soul cleansing, spiritual renewal for Rosa. Furthermore, this burning is reminiscent of Moses’ existential revelation of God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 3:2) who led the Jews out of bondage (Kauvar 119). In this way Rosa presents a food sacrifice to God and is liberated from “idolatry and yoked to Mosaic command” (Kauvar 119)—that is to say obeying the command “Thou shalt worship no other God before me” (Exodus 34:14, KJV).

The redeeming relationship formed by eating with Persky is now demonstrated with Rosa’s empowerment—signs of her physical recovery and spiritual healing start taking shape when she does not subject herself to reliving the Holocaust for sake of scientific knowledge; or succumb to an alternate spirituality—namely Buddhism. Metaphysically, she resists Dr. Tree’s offer of a new religion—not finding her salvation in Buddhism—but in her friendship with Persky, her “kinsman redeemer.” This demonstration of empowerment is clearly a climactic

point in Rosa's recovery. The rejection of the "fruit of craving"—hence false god—illustrates Ozick's "didactic purpose" of capturing the physical and spiritual devastation inflicted on Holocaust survivors (Rovit 34).

The final food image of the novella demonstrating Rosa's move toward physical and spiritual renewal is framed by the shawl, which is flung over the phone that "announce[s]" (through the Cuban operator) Persky's arrival—the arrival of her redeemer. The shawl at the beginning of the novella is stuffed into her mouth to silence her screams, depriving her of emotional release, now in another reversal with its "ardent . . . cry" (Ozick 70) heralds—like a biblical proclamation of the messiah—Persky's arrival as her personal redeemer. With subtle reversal of gustatory imagery, the shawl as an instrument of oral suppression at the beginning of the novella, depriving Rosa of nourishment and emotional release, now orally announces—spews out—her imminent salvation. Her choice to "let him [Persky] come up" (69) is an empowered choice of release—release from her past and embrace of redemption.

Additionally, by way of food imagery, the passage can be seen as spiritual renewal by breaking an idolatrous relationship with the shawl (Kauvar 117). The communion Rosa has with the shawl in the beginning of the novel "sucking its milk dry" becomes an obsession—an idol of her lost daughter—that must be broken for Rosa to achieve spiritual and psychological renewal. This consuming of the shawl is arguably a form of cannibalism at the beginning of the novel conveying desperate physical deprivation that materializes also as spiritual separation—broken communion with God. Now the shawl has consumed Rosa, evolving into outright idolatry by the novella's end as "part of the ritual of her romantic religion" (117) that is diametrically opposed to Jewish sensibilities—"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" (Exodus 20:4, KJV). The word for "graven" is from the Hebrew word *לִפְסֵל* (*pecel*) meaning "idol" or "image"

(Davidson 628) and this prohibition forbids worshipping any sort of “heathen materials” (Durham 287). The “communion” (a form of spiritual food imagery) of the shawl that evolves into idolatry denotes another dimension of Rosa’s spiritual degeneration from which she needs redemption. The spiritual redemption is denoted by a sort of exorcism with the mention that “Magda [is] not there . . . Magda [is] away” (Ozick 69). This release of Magda completes Rosa’s spiritual journey marking her redemption from the past by “taking the shawl off the phone”—thus depriving it of life (69). This final scene marks Rosa’s spiritual renewal as seen through the food imagery. In conjoining metaphors, we have the “Burning Tree”—the “forbidden food” of “false religion”—that is now burning up while the “spirit” of Magda—the “forbidden food” of idolatry—which is exorcised (at least temporarily), while Persky, who, by way of food offerings, is a type of kinsman-redeemer, makes his way up to Rosa’s apartment signifying Rosa’s move toward physical healing and spiritual renewal. But, as promising as this seems, Langer aptly maintains the story is not a “triumph of the human spirit” (Langer 123). And Gil also observes: “As for Rosa, she has exchanged one form of death in life for another, which proves that she has found it all but impossible to adapt to life after her traumatic experience” (Gil 63). While these observations are true, there is, arguably, woven into the novella’s often bleak vignettes, promises of hope for Rosa’s physical and spiritual recovery by way of food imagery. It is through Ozick’s use of food imagery the remembrance of the Holocaust and the struggle of survival continues for Rosa. As such, the novella serves as an historical reminder as well as a fictional tale about the Holocaust and the physical and spiritual impact it has (and continues to have) on its survivors.

I have argued in this paper that in Ozick’s *The Shawl*, food imagery is a gauge for Rosa’s desperate physical and spiritual condition at the beginning of the novella and a vehicle by the end for her move toward physical and spiritual redemption. I have demonstrated that it is through the

providing of food, Simon Persky models the kinsman redeemer motif in the Old Testament Book of Ruth. Persky is a Christ-type—a salvific figure who, like God, redeems his people—his kinsman—from deprivation, by sometimes, providing food. I have demonstrated that Persky’s providing of Rosa with food spiritually empowers her to reject the “false religion” of Dr. Tree and reestablish communion with God. Additionally, this empowerment allows her to finally put aside her shawl—that is her “false food” of idolatry that was, in essence, “black milk”—a “spiritual death”—that marked breaking her communion with God—and embrace Persky’s admonition of “sometimes a little forgetting is necessary” (58).

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