Two Cousins and a Sister’s Soul.

An analysis of a counter intuitive decision.

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Whenever one looks at their sibling, one is prone to do so with jealousy. How could they have given her a car while I just got a Play Station? Why did he get congratulated for getting and B+ while I get A’s all the time? Why did they like their significant other while they hated mine? When will they be proud of my achievements as they are proud of theirs? But a question one won’t tend to ask is when the other sibling will die.

In Cynthia Ozick’s *The Shawl*, the author laments herself on the dreadful acts against humanity that lead to a girl’s morally questionable acts. The first character who is introduced in Ozick’s short story is that of Stella, a thin girl of fourteen with thin breasts. As the young teen walks with her mother, Rosa, and the baby, Magda, she is introduced to the reader as a girl who looks at Magda jealousy. “Stella wanted to be wrapped around in a shawl, hidden away, asleep;” as she presumably was when she was a younger child. Anne Frank would agree that central Europe in the late 1930s was not a welcoming place for a Jewish teenager, but Stella would be fond to remember her years as a child who was not on the brink of starvation, a child who was deeply loved by her mother and who would feel safe in her arms. Stella looks at Rosa and see’s someone else’s mother, Magda’s mother; and she looks at the shawl and see’s someone else’s, Magda’s shawl. Stella sees Magda’s comfort and very existence as a threat to her own.

The reader understands that any “thin girl with thin breasts” in a concentration camp would be a girl who is starving. It would be overtly obvious to assume as a reader that any prisoner in this situation would be slowly dying, but the author in multiple instances shows how Stella is starving and close to dying in a more specific way. When Stella is described as a “ravenous,” “thin girl with thin breasts” who “did not menstruate,” our attention is drawn to Stella’s struggle to stay alive.

Both Rosa and Stella were slowly dying, but Magda was not. Magda was being cared for by Rosa, but Rosa was guilty of tending to Magda and almost neglecting Stella. Magda had a belly, and although it was almost “filled with air,” it was a belly nonetheless.

Rosa “looked at Stella’s bones without pity,” almost as if her motherly mind would drive her to make a choice. Rosa had to choose between her newborn baby who would be immediately killed without her care, or a thin girl of fourteen who was slowly dying. But Rosa’s choice could be simplified by the fact that Magda was her girl and Stella was a girl.

In the ethical dilemma that one finds when being prompted to divert a train from a track with five restrained people who would be killed onto another track with one person, the very logical action would be to pull the lever and let the train kill one person rather than five. But multiple questions arise with this dilemma. One’s act of pulling the lever could be translated to letting the train kill one person, but it could also be seen as saving four. Likewise, one’s lack of action could be one letting five people die, but it could also look like actively killing four people, as the opportunity to directly save four people was there. The dilemma takes a more familiar position when one places a mother on the train’s control panel, her baby daughter on one side, and a dying niece on the other.

This dilemma is ubiquitously known in ethics, and although it sparks a sizzling moral and ethical debate, Ozick almost teases this issue only to discard it by revealing Stella as Rosa’s niece rather than her daughter. A very symmetrical and conflicting debate would occur when a mother must choose between her one-year old daughter and her teenage sibling. It is more of a question of instinct as to who should be tended to, and a mother’s instinct would be a strong motivator to sacrifice the older girl to protect the weaker baby. But a mother should also know that a baby’s likelihood of surviving under the conditions of a concentration camp is much lower due to its inherent weakness. This is the beautiful symmetry of the dilemma of two sisters; who does the mother save? The weak and defenseless baby or the strong and safe child? What will win; Magda’s ability to appeal to her mother’s human instinct, or Stella’s maturity to survive independently despite her mother’s neglect.

Rosa’s choice in this two-sister dilemma portrays the rawness of human emotion and the careful innocence in a mother’s actions. Although she has carefully mothered Magda while passively looking over Stella, the way she yanks the shawl away from Stella was her decision of Magda over Stella, in a way, motherly instinct over careful thought, subjectivity over objectivity.

This is what Ozick may have intended to convey with her first draft of The Shawl, but a very interesting choice is made after Stella is revealed as Rosa’s niece. Why not go with the almost perfect philosophical and ethical symmetry that is very organically bred when Stella and Magda are sisters? When one thinks about how the story almost writes itself by letting one’s imagination connect all the small details and nuggets of each character’s situations.

Assuming Stella’s upbringing in a prosperous Warsaw with two loving parents, Stella’s development takes a very symmetrical and almost perfect arc. Stella could have been a very loved young girl who remembers her childhood fondly, in a peaceful and prosperous Warsaw, with two loving parents who would care for her like any middle class Jewish European family. But when the Germans invaded Poland, everything shifted. She may have seen her father killed by anti-Semitic soldiers and been imprisoned in a concentration camp alongside her mother. Stella may have watched as a German soldier raped her mother nine months before she helped her mother survive giving birth to her sister Magda in the middle of the death camp; hence how Stella snarls the word “Aryan” at her sister, possibly referring to her Aryan father. How can a young woman go through such hardship and not want to kill her own sister? “In the madness of despair lies the the sanity of hope.” Perhaps we may justify the cannibalistic thoughts of Stella as she starves and feels absolute hatred toward the Aryan race, the race of the anti-Semitic rapist and genocidal father of her sister. But conversely, how can a young woman go through less hardship and want to kill her own cousin?

One would prefer to be idealistic towards the short story to think that this decision was made as an author’s bid for respect towards the holocaust. It appears that Ozick does not want to romanticize this event as this opportunity to dissect the human soul and examine it’s darkness in a philosophical and ethical conundrum, it appears that she simply wanted to write a story about the horrors against humanity, in all of its perfect asymmetrical and hairy imperfection.