

Article

A Mother's Revenge: Gendered Mourning, Voicelessness, and the Passing Down of Memory in Cynthia Ozick's Short Story "What Happened to the Baby" (2006)

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Abstract: This article focuses on a little-studied short story from Jewish American writer Cynthia Ozick, "What Happened to the Baby?" It explores the narrative elaboration of a distinctly feminine trauma—that of a mother in mourning whose grief is not acknowledged in a patriarchal context. My approach uses close readings and psychoanalytical insights to understand the female protagonist's voiceless rage. The narrator of the framing narrative is a young woman trying to understand a mysterious family trauma—how little Henrietta, the daughter of her uncle Simon and his ex-wife, Essie, died. The starting point of the story is a distorted version of the accident, told to the narrator by her mother, Lily, and according to which it is Essie's mistreatment that caused the little girl's death. Through the narrative, the narrator encourages Essie to tell her own side of the story. In the embedded narrative, the mother reveals that it was in fact the father's negligence that caused the death of their child. Father and mother subsequently develop differing models of mourning. Simon, a linguist, creates a whole new idiom enabling him to keep commemorating the dead child. In contrast, Essie, the mother, is determined to destroy any discourse that might account for her trauma, and to undermine the father's very public mourning process. The narrator acts as a kind of therapist, allowing Essie's discourse on loss to emerge after decades of repression. On the masculine/feminine, father/mother binary axis, I will observe, based on the study of this fascinating short story, that the father's mourning involves mastering language, while the mother experiences loss through the sheer inability to speak up—at least until the narrator, Vivian, empowers her by giving her a voice.

Academic Editors: Irene Mizrahi,
Claire Sorin and Kumiko Saito

Received: 3 January 2024

Revised: 14 January 2025

Accepted: 27 January 2025

Published: 31 January 2025

Citation: Ackermann-Sommer, Myriam Marie. 2025. A Mother's Revenge: Gendered Mourning, Voicelessness, and the Passing Down of Memory in Cynthia Ozick's Short Story "What Happened to the Baby" (2006). *Literature* 5: 3. <https://doi.org/10.3390/literature5010003>

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Keywords: women's studies; motherhood; gender; Jewish American literature; trauma literature

1. Introduction

Jewish American writer Cynthia Ozick has written several works of short fiction that are centrally concerned with the subject of maternal bereavement, focusing on the trauma of losing a child as it is experienced by a mother figure. The goal of this article is to explore one of them in depth, "What Happened to the Baby". This narrative uniquely tackles the problem of maternal voicelessness and gender inequality in a Jewish family, where the mother is typically expected to be the sole caregiver.

In order to understand how this narrative inserts itself within the larger corpus of Ozickian tales, I shall start off by stressing similarities between this little-studied short story and the author's other narratives of maternal grief. In each instance, the mother finds herself deprived of the means to express herself and is essentially rendered voiceless. The necessity for the mother to reclaim her voice is always at the heart of the narrative. In Ozick's tales, the dead infant recurs with similar features as if it were the same ghost-like presence

crossing the intertextual space of the author's corpus—a *corpus* which seems *haunted by a corpse*. In “The Shawl”, *Rosa*, “What Happened to the Baby?” and “An Education” (a short story in which the topic of mourning is present but peripheral¹), all the victims are baby girls. That all three² are female is of importance: *their voice, not unlike that of their mothers’, is muted*, as they all die on the verge of speech. They are all approximately one year old, they are described as being very beautiful, and, in all three cases, born to a Jewish mother. The baby girls embody the notion of *promise*—they could be, and become, *anything* (for instance, in *Rosa*, the eponymous protagonist imagines that her dead child, Magda, grows to become a wealthy and successful doctor). They all die violently and unexpectedly: Magda (*Rosa* and “The Shawl”) is executed by Nazi soldiers; and Retta (“What Happened to the Baby”) is found dead in her cradle, and there is no clear explanation of “what happened to the baby”. In fact, the trauma of the baby's unexplained death is the enigma that lies at the heart of the narrative. As for Christina (“An Education”), she catches a cold that rapidly degenerates and, despite her parents' hopes, dies suddenly after a brief hope of improvement: “they couldn't tell Una much about Christina. She was better, they murmured—she was definitely better. (...) The Chimeses' relief was clear. (...) In the middle of that same week Christina died”³ (Ozick 2007, p. 226).

This brutal ending parallels the scene of Retta's death in “What Happened to the Baby?” which briefly toys with the impossible hope of the child's survival. However, in the narrative, the reader knows that the child is doomed from the outset—the narrator reveals this fact early enough in the framing narrative. It is to this short story, first published in the *Atlantic* in 2006 and in Ozick's *Collected Stories* that same year, and republished in a second collection, *Dictation: A Quartet* (Ozick 2008), that I chose to devote this analysis. Indeed, while the diptych “The Shawl”/*Rosa* has been much anthologized and studied in depth by Ozick critics, there is as of yet no academic literature on the short story “What Happened to the Baby” and only a few cursory book reviews of the short-story collection *Dictation: A Quartet*.⁴ The short story under scrutiny, in particular, was little appreciated by the critics and, it seems, misunderstood by some. For instance, Abraham Socher argues the following, unconvincingly in my opinion:

The story that rounds out the quartet, “But What Happened to the Baby?” does not really fit the pattern. It is also, as it happens, the least successful of the four stories: a dark joke about Esperanto in the Catskills with an O. Henry twist that doesn't quite carry narrative conviction.

(Socher 2008)

I disagree with this appreciation. Moreover, it is my conviction that reading the story as a mere “dark joke” misses the point and the centrality of the theme of mourning in “What Happened to the Baby”. While the comic mode is not absent from the narrative, its tragic undertones should not be downplayed, especially as it pertains to the description of the mother's silent grief. Art Winslow's *Chicago Tribune* review is more eloquent:

“I had heard about the baby nearly all my life. Uncle Simon and Essie had not always been childless. Their little girl, eleven months old and already walking, had died before I was born”, Phyllis⁵ says, and yet what she thought she knew will change in ways that make the reader wonder whether grief is the universal language, and the turns of life its syntax.

(Winslow 2008)

My analysis will focus on the clear distinction that is drawn in the narrative between the mother's and the father's methods of coping with trauma and mourning the dead baby. It becomes clear towards the end of the narrative, as the narrators unveil, that Simon, the baby's father, created a whole language around his dead child to mediate, channel, and

work through his grief, while Essie remained essentially powerless and voiceless through most of her life and turned to a destructive rage to reenact the trauma of Henrietta's passing. However, it is my claim that Vivian, the narrator, by allowing the mother to bring the experience of that night to the surface of her consciousness without interrupting her, pulls her out of a decades-long silence and leads her towards a more harmonious resolution of her inner conflict. In that sense, the narrator plays the role of a therapist and shows female support for a mother who was undermined throughout her entire life.

2. Materials and Methods

Due to the lack of academic material on "What Happened to the Baby", this analysis will consist of an introductory summary and analysis of the short story, using close readings to shed emphasis on the ramifications and idiosyncrasies of Essie's mourning process as it is portrayed by the narrator. I will draw on psychoanalytical definitions of trauma, and especially on Cathy Caruth's approach, applying psychoanalytical insights to the reading of literary works, as it laid out in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996). I hope that this study will shed light on a critically important piece of Cynthia Ozick's short fiction and will encourage other literature students to delve into this complex and fascinating narrative. I also believe that it will shed light on Ozick's literary depiction of a Jewish mother's trauma and will lay emphasis on the cultural, sociological implications of Jewish motherhood.

3. Results

3.1. *What Happened to the Baby: Figuring out the Enigma*

3.1.1. The Official Version: A Mother's Guilt

In Ozick's "What Happened to the Baby", the young narrator, named Vivian, a college student, introduces the reader to her mysterious uncle, named Simon, an old and eccentric linguist who spent his whole life trying to impose a language that he himself created as the new universal language to replace Esperanto (for reasons unknown at this point in the narrative). Towards the beginning of the story, the narrator mentions learning from her mother, Simon's cousin, that he had a daughter who died when she was eleven months old. Lily always explicitly accused Simon's ex-wife, Essie, the mother of Retta, of having caused her baby's death due to her negligence.

So far, the equation seems simple: What happened to the baby? Her mother killed her, while Simon, the endlessly grieving father, is fully exonerated. But the mystery of the title is not so easily solved. From the very beginning of the story, there are indications that Lily's testimony is not believable, which makes her an *unreliable narrator*. The first major clue is that Vivian points out that some of the details of the story, which is retold several times, change over time.

"Leave it to Essie, would any normal mother drag a baby through a tropical swamp?"

"A swamp?" I asked. "The last time you told about the baby it was a desert".

"Desert or swamp, what's the difference?"

(Ozick 2007, p. 424)

The fact that the narrator stops believing her own mother over time and turns to another, darker mother figure reflects her growth, but also the loss of innocence at an age where children start disbelieving their parents' tales and questioning their "side of the story". Indeed, the narrator later learns that Retta did not die in the jungle or the desert, but on American soil, in a cottage in the Catskills, which she does not doubt *is* the truth. It is quite noteworthy that Lily is so imaginative in her rewritings of Retta's death as to describe a tragic end in a swamp or wasteland. This makes the guilty mother entirely responsible,

unnaturally careless (“would any normal mother...?” Lily is a judgmental mother who uses a rhetorical question to make sure that her daughters shares in her condemnation of the “negative” mother figure embodied by Essie, who proved less successful at motherhood than herself) and fosters a single explanation for the baby’s death. It also enables Lily to tone down the violence of loss in the version of the story that she passes on to her own daughter, distancing both herself and her daughter from those tragic events: in her version, it happened far away, in some exotic place. This indistinguishability of place (“desert” or “swamp”), intended to soften the blow of a sudden and inexplicable death, is also the sign of an incoherence that will drive Lily’s daughter to look elsewhere for the answer to the question that the title alludes to.

One may note that the naming of the mother as the culprit, while suggesting that the father was not responsible at all for their baby’s well-being, must be replaced and understood within a patriarchal context. It is even more meaningful, as Essie and Lily are *Jewish* mothers dealing with communal representations of idealized motherhood. In traditional Jewish communities, women are often portrayed as nurturers and caregivers and expected to conform to this predefined role. The mother also plays a pivotal role in ensuring Jewish continuity, as Jewish identity is traditionally matrilineal (i.e., passed down through the mother). The loss of a child may feel like a personal and collective loss for the Jewish community, especially given that Ozick’s mothers systematically lose their female babies, who could have embodied, in turn, the possibility of transmission. Tamar Ross, in her seminal essay *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism*, notes that women are legally exempt from most of the time-bound commandments mentioned in the Torah (such as donning phylacteries or a prayer shawl), which is typically understood as related to the constraints of their role as a wife and mother (Ross 2004), whose time is never truly hers. Feminist theorist Adrienne Rich also critiques how the ideal of motherhood limits women’s autonomy by confining them to the domestic sphere, where their value is tied to their service to others rather than their personal growth. This phenomenon is perhaps even more marked in patriarchal Judaism, where the religious status of women seems determined by their functions and duties within the home—the Aramaic phrase through which the Sages of the Talmud referred to their wives was indeed *deveiteihou*, “she who is my home”. The loss of a child can challenge this nurturing role within the home, represented by the sewing machine in our narrative, leading to feelings of inadequacy or failure as a mother and woman. It can also entail, as it does in the context of the story, the severe and unjustified condemnation of her relatives—as is explicit in Lily’s narrative, through which Essie is clearly made responsible for Simon’s mistakes. Moreover, the idealization of mother figures may pit women against one another in a pointless competition, which may explain Lily’s distorted narrative, implying that *she* has a thriving daughter and was successful in raising her, as opposed to Essie.

3.1.2. In Essie’s Voice: A Mother’s Pain

However, a new story arises when Vivian turns to Essie herself. Many years later, the now-grown narrator finds visiting this somewhat pedantic “uncle” increasingly burdensome, and she feels (in a somewhat childish manner) that reuniting Simon and Essie would help lighten her own load. According to the young woman, they divorced because of the many love affairs of her “uncle” (in fact, her mother’s cousin—another half-truth about the family that is, in fact, a mere lie), a notorious philanderer who also touches even the narrator inappropriately. It is important to note here that Vivian is not protected by her own mother, who keeps downplaying Simon’s actions, merely describing him as a ladies’ man and not taking him seriously, thereby working as an enabler of abuse within the framing narrative, which further deconstructs her opposition between the “negligent

mother” and the “good mother” that she seems to suggest she is. When she turns to Essie, the narrator does not yet know that she is going to find out “what happened to the baby”. It is important to note that the notion of *responsibility* (determining who should *care for others*, a responsibility that is typically defined as feminine) is seminal here and foreshadows the question of who was responsible for Retta when she died. Vivian, not unlike Simon in the past, wants to designate Essie as the one responsible for a task that she is unwilling to carry out herself—and, as the reader will later come to realize, Simon did the exact same thing when he left his wife with two sick babies for a night with his paramour.

The narrator’s visit to Essie’s house, a visit which focuses on the question of responsibility (who is going to take care of the declining old man?), leads her to discover that she did not have a proper understanding of Henrietta’s story. But Essie’s testimony provides a way out of the deleterious logic of the family secret. She begins by evoking the wounds of grief and her envy of the narrator and her mother: “Lily had her kid [...] She had you, and by then what did I have? An empty crib, and then nothing, nothing, empty” (p. 435). This notion of physical emptiness reflects the psychic experience of the silenced mother in a patriarchal society where mothers are systematically blamed for “what happens to their babies”, while fathers benefit from the sympathy of others (family members, in this instance). This means that, while the grief of men has visibility in a patriarchal society and can be processed publicly with the help of others, Essie was condemned to stay silent and endure the pain. However, even her violent and helpless outburst, and her parallel use of rhetorical questions (similar to Lily’s), such as “what did I have?” suggest that she is more transparent in her speech than Vivian’s mother was, directly admitting her envy.

In Essie’s representation, the parallel between the two daughters (Retta and Vivian) makes the narrator an uncanny double of the dead child who survived and, therefore, the person best suited to act as an outlet and confidante for Essie in her old age, a substitute daughter of sorts. The narrator hints at this mechanism whereby she, in a way, also becomes Essie’s daughter: “she gave me her life. She made me see, and why? Because her child was dead and I was not (...)”? Who could really tell why? I had fallen in on her out of the blue, out of the ether, out of the past (it wasn’t my past)” (p. 435). “She gave me her life” implies total confidence: but if one removes the pronoun “her”, one finds the statement “she gave me life”, as though Essie had become a more reliable mother figure. Similarly, Vivian is a Retta who survived, approximately her daughter’s age, thus facilitating the processes of projection and identification. That is why the narrator becomes a privileged interlocutor for the resentful Essie, who had been forced to silence her truth for so many years. In terms of intertextual echoes within the Ozickian corpus, we may note that her doubling of the daughter—both dead and alive—is similar to what happens in *Rosa*, as the mother figure also imagines her daughter at different ages after her death.

Essie proceeds to tell Vivian her whole story (who is initially reluctant: it is not “her past”, after all. Once again, the narrator is reluctant to take responsibility for another’s loneliness, but she eventually agrees to share this burden with the mother). The protagonist does so partly to rectify Lily’s story and partly to take revenge on her by forcing the surviving child to share this unwanted burden of grief. Her pain has accumulated over the decades and taken concrete form in the preservation of relics, in particular, a sewing machine that Essie had acquired shortly after the birth of little Retta, and which once symbolized the now destroyed marital harmony and encapsulates the ideal of traditional femininity both in its American and in its Jewish iterations (in the Talmud, TB Yoma 66b, one may read the proverbial saying: “a woman’s wisdom is in the spindle”): “one August afternoon he arranged to have a second-hand sewing machine delivered to the cottage. Essie jumped up and kissed him, she was so pleased; it was as if the sleek metal neck of the sewing machine had restored them to each other” (Ozick 2007, pp. 437–38). The joy of the

housewife feels almost cliché, and the sewing machine will be kept by the grieving mother, not as a fond memory but as a constant reminder that she had failed in the role that the object encapsulates.

3.1.3. “Like an Angel”: A Mother’s Trauma

When it finally comes to recounting “what happened to the baby” on that fatal night, Essie shares a narrative that the narrator will interestingly identify and name as *the truth* about little Retta’s fate, therefore validating her voice and her feelings, an acknowledgment that Essie had never experienced before. In one of her statements, she echoes the title: “when I left Essie four hours later, I knew what had happened to the baby” (p. 435). Essie’s perspective, which she shares in an embedded narrative that is the central part of the framing story, is the following: a few months after the birth of the child, the couple rented a cottage in the Catskills and met a group of Esperantists. Among them was a brilliant young woman, Bella, who had an excellent command of the language. She was the mother of a baby boy of Retta’s age. Simon and Bella became close. Eventually, Bella left her own baby with Essie while going with Simon on a walk that serves as a prelude to their love affair. Simon then came home, and Bella, finding the two babies sleeping together (which mirrors closely the adults’ experience later that same night), stated her intention to leave her son with Essie overnight. During the night, the lover’s little boy woke up screaming with a high fever, and Essie begged her husband to call the doctor as soon as possible. Simon decided that he should go to Bella first and slept with her while Essie looked after the baby all night, doing everything she could to bring the fever down and essentially ignoring her own sleeping baby. It is only the following morning that the two lovers return with the doctor to an exhausted Essie, only to discover that Bella’s son is faring much better and is no longer all ill. Against all expectations (at least from the point of view of the mother’s embedded narrative, since it is obvious by virtue of the circular construction of the story that it is Retta who is going to die), and while Essie thought that her own daughter had been faring well, it is Retta who is found dead at the end of the night.

This substitution of one baby (the one who should have lived) for the other (the one who was expected to die) harks back to Essie’s bitter remarks: how come Lily, the narrator’s mother, still has a living child? And why did Bella’s son survive instead of Retta? This question also comes up in Ozick’s *Rosa*, where the bereaved mother blames her niece, Stella, for having survived the Holocaust: could her baby, Magda, not have come back from the camps instead? Why should only one survive and the other perish? In the mother’s mind, *there is no room for two live children*, as in the traumatic scene of her daughter’s death (“Retta’s crib was too narrow for the two of them”, Ozick (2007, p. 438): the most likely explanation for Retta’s death, which remains unconfirmed, is that little Retta was smothered in her crib, lying too close to the other baby). Essie’s hatred of Vivian and Lily is therefore linked not only to the fact that Vivian’s mother made up a version of events where Essie was the culprit, but also to the fact that Lily is, in her eyes, a second Bella who managed to keep her child alive and chose to love and support Simon instead of her. From Essie’s point of view, Lily is also a woman and a mother who chose not to believe her, jeopardizing her ability to share her story, even though she should have identified with her plight.

This is how the mother discloses to the narrator that her daughter, Retta (the diminutive form itself may allude to a life cut short ahead of time, for her full name in Henrietta), died shortly after the infant that was sleeping next to her, Simon’s lover’s baby, is seized with a violent attack of fever.

Retta had long since grown quiet: she lay in the tranquil ruddiness of waxworks sleep, each baby fist resting beside an ear. (...) At half-past eight the doctor came, together with Simon and Bella. He had driven them both up from the village

in his Ford. The child was by now perfectly safe, he said, there was nothing the matter that he wouldn't get over (...). "While I'm here", the doctor said, "I suppose I ought to have a look at the other one".

"She's fine," Essie said. "She slept through the rest of the night like an angel. Just look, she's still asleep—"

The doctor looked. He shook Retta. He picked up her two fists; they fell back.

"Good God," the doctor said. "This child is dead".⁶

(Ozick 2007, p. 441)

The tragic effect here lies in the inevitability of the baby's death (and the irony of the mother's choice of the word "angel" to describe her daughter, as though she could partly anticipate her fate), which is vehemently denied by the parents at first. This is the very source of both parents' trauma: a breach in daily experience and the horror of a sudden, unexpected death. And yet, as in many tragedies, the narrative suggests an outcome other than the one that was announced from the start (the child is sleeping, safe and sound, which almost reads as a euphemism for death in this context). That this passing is hard for the parents to process is in keeping with the workings of trauma. Psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi notes that trauma defines a type of shock that is so crushing and unwarranted that it anesthetizes one's consciousness (Ferenczi [1932] 2006, p. 143), making it impossible to express what was truly experienced. According to critic Cathy Caruth, "the most direct seeing of an event may occur as an absolute inability to know it" (Caruth 1996, pp. 91–92). Therefore, the subject is often led to reiterate the context surrounding the trauma in the hope of reaching the origins of the concussion, of living it *for real*. That is why the story of the baby's death is presented in several different versions by several characters.

Significantly enough, in the scene under scrutiny, everything is done to recreate the sense of shock suffered by the parents: ambiguity about the referent ("the child was by now perfectly safe": this refers to the *other* child, who was severely ill. This device contributes to the aforementioned sense of interchangeability between the two babies and purposefully fosters confusion within the narrative), falsely reassuring words ("she's fine"). One can easily be fooled by the apparent harmlessness of the situation. The reader's inability to prepare for the child's imminent death echoes the parents' reaction, as if the reader were reliving, or reenacting, the parental trauma. Retta is thought to be safe (in Essie's memory) only to die again and again.

The return of the traumatic experience (...) is not the signal of the direct experience but, rather, of the attempt to overcome the fact that it was *not* direct, to attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place. Not having truly known the threat of death in the past, the survivor is forced, continually, to confront it over and over again.

(Caruth 1996, p. 62)

This artistic choice also has an impact on reception. Indeed, the reader knows from the beginning of the story that Retta is to die, since the episode was already told to the narrator by her own mother, but in very vague terms. Essie's version of events, on the other hand, ended up being silenced for decades. The fact that the same story is told and retold several times in the same narrative and constitutes the central mystery that the title refers to is typical of the way that trauma functions. The question for the reader, then, is not "Will she die? but rather "How did she die?" "Traumatic experience (...) is an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs" (Caruth 1996, p. 5): because the truth of the event itself is inassimilable, the reader never learns "what happened to the baby"—only that *Essie did not, in fact, kill her*.

I hinted at the fact that there is something in trauma that can never be fully assimilated by the subject, which gives rise to attempts to relive it in the hope of giving it a happier resolution. “This repetition at the heart of catastrophe (...) emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind” (Caruth 1996, p. 2). As I will illustrate, both Essie and Simon remain deeply obsessed by this event which, in a way, *never happened*. In other words, the baby *should have lived*, and the fact that she died is an anomaly, a “breach” (Freud 1991, p. 103) in understanding—in other words, a trauma. To quote from Freud directly, “we describe as ‘traumatic’ any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield” (Freud 1991, p. 103). This breach is due to a combination of unexpected, unprocessable shock, and, especially in this instance, *guilt* (since “what happened to the baby?” eventually becomes “who killed the baby?”).

The question of maternal guilt is key to understanding the prioritization of the voice of the bereaved father, Simon, leading to the silencing of the mother. From the outset, the narrator, Vivian, mentions Simon’s total devotion to his language, “GNU”: the capitalization reflects the pervasiveness of the linguist’s obsession for his newly created idiom, but also the space that his mourning process takes up in the story, as opposed to Essie’s prolonged silence. Simon is very much a man of words—as a linguist, he seems to *master language*, and, as a lecturer, he has the additional power to express himself publicly and intelligibly, while Essie was merely his assistant when they were married, in a subservient position as a mother and as a wife. The first origin of the name GNU mentioned in the story is linked to Simon’s many travels (“in Africa, in a tiny Xhosa village nestled in the wild, he was inspired by observing an actual yellow-horned gnu” (Ozick 2007, p. 420)). However, a second reference supplants the first towards the end of the story.

Knowing very little about her family (and the real meaning of GNU), the narrator sets off in search of the genesis of the family trauma. She originally learns that Simon still visits the baby’s grave every Tuesday, decades after the tragedy, in a perpetual state of mourning. The narrator adds: “I had heard about the baby nearly all my life. Uncle Simon and Essie had not always been childless. Their little girl, eleven months old and already walking, had died before I was born” (Ozick 2007, p. 424). In fact, the narrator had never heard about the baby (her name was not even mentioned), but mostly about the grief of the baby’s father, while the mother’s grief was utterly ignored.

3.1.4. Shifting the Blame: A Mother’s Rage

According to Essie, there *is* a real culprit—the baby’s father. “Simon was to blame” (Ozick 2007, p. 444): this sentence reappears like an angry litany in the mother’s speech, many years after the little girl’s death. In the years that follow Retta’s passing, Essie uses multiple stratagems to make Simon miserable. When he creates the language of GNU to counter Esperanto, which reminds him too much of Bella and his own remorse, she never ceases to ruin his lectures by sending hordes of Esperantists to scorn him. Everything, right down to her involvement in his conferences, which she deliberately sabotages, points to one and the same destructive grief, to an undying grudge: “her performances in the cold hall (...) were her own contraption, her secret derision, her revenge for what happened to the baby” (Ozick 2007, p. 444). Her vengeful fury is also her own way of mourning her baby: never forgiving Simon implies never forgetting the child, constantly reliving the fatal night.

According to Essie, the baby’s memory and the process of mourning *belong to her, and to her alone*, because she has been deprived of the opportunity to grieve. She resents Simon’s ability to mourn openly and publicly through the invention of GNU, whose genesis is closely tied with his memories of the baby. In her interaction with Vivian, Essie goes so far as to question that Simon was indeed the baby’s father, hinting at the fact that she also had

an affair. Later in the story, when Vivian announces that Simon has died, she immediately asks if he has been buried next to the little girl: “if he’s buried there, next to Retta, I swear I’ll have him dug up and thrown out!” (Ozick 2007, p. 448). This trait of post-mortem resentment would be hard to comprehend if Essie had simply blamed her ex-husband only to still suffer after decades of mourning. In reality, Essie claims an exclusive right to the child’s memory, denying Simon paternity of Retta even in death, pursuing her revenge beyond the grave. As was the case with the living and the dead baby, *there is no room for two*, neither in the cradle nor in the grave. That is also why Essie jealously guards the secret of Retta’s burial place, adding in reference to the narrator’s mother: “well, at least that, she doesn’t know where Retta is” (Ozick 2007, p. 444). The insistence on the pronoun can be understood as a concession (Simon had access to the grave, which she very much resented) or as a final allusion to the person she considers indirectly responsible for the child’s death, Bella, her husband’s mistress.

Essie’s resentment and sense of injustice are fanned by Simon’s constant visits to his daughter’s grave: “at first Essie went with him; but after a while she stayed away. How he wailed, how he hammered and yammered! She could not endure it: too late, that spew, too late, his shame, his remorse, his disgrace” (p. 441). Interestingly enough, Essie blames her ex-husband for being too *loud*. Henceforth, Essie will devote her life to taking revenge on Simon, who is, in fact, at least responsible for the event that remains linguistically unnamable and is only referred to through a periphrase (“what happened to the baby, maybe it wouldn’t have happened”, p. 442) whose meaning is none other than “Retta’s death”. Indeed, if, for the father, the little girl is irretrievably gone, so much so that Simon’s entire life is devoted to keeping the memory of the child alive, Essie resembles Ozick’s Rosa in the eponymous novella in that, in her eyes, the little girl could just as easily have remained alive *had things been just a little different*. It could have been Stella and not Magda, insists the mother in “Rosa”; it could have been Vivan or Bella’s son and not Retta, if only, suggests Essie: in both cases, there is the same dream of substitution, the same sense of injustice and speechlessness. The death of both female babies is caused by a man—in a direct manner in “The Shawl”, where a Nazi soldier hurls little Madga against an electric fence, and indirectly in “What Happened to the Baby”, where the cause of Retta’s passing may well be a father’s extreme negligence, which caused Essie to have no choice but to provide unsafe sleeping arrangements for her child. In her old age, just after Simon’s death, Essie goes so far as to accuse her ex-husband of murder: “you don’t think I’d let anybody know my own husband managed to kill off my own child right in my own bed, do you?” (p. 448). Admittedly, it was Simon’s absence that caused the doctor’s delay and undoubtedly hastened Retta’s death. However, Essie goes so far as to present him *actively* murdering his daughter. This phenomenon testifies to the fantasized accretion of Simon’s guilt (“Simon was to blame”, p. 444), which leads the mother to reimagine the moment when the tragedy occurred, altering the details as the narrator’s mother, Lily, had done earlier in order to regain control of the narrative of her own life.

Indeed, throughout her years with Simon following the passing of Retta, Essie’s grief takes the form of *hidden* anger (she acts *underhandedly* to undermine her husband but claimed to support him and help organize his lectures) that ravages everything in its path; Simon’s grief takes a complementary but symmetrically opposite form. The father’s mourning is accretive and constructive, for he can afford to build a system upon the memory of the baby’s death—GNU, which he framed as a counter-Esperanto, which also reads as a way of undoing the fatal choice made the night Retta lost his life, spending hours discussing Esperanto instead of caring for his baby girl. Thus, he *also* refuses to forgive himself for the child’s death, which places him in a relationship of complementarity with Essie. Their expiatory rituals differ, but, together, they mimic the impossibility of fully

rebuilding one's life after a tragic loss: Simon endlessly tries to verbalize his grief and share it with the public, thereby attempting to work through his traumatic experience, and Essie no less relentlessly shatters his hopes and makes sure that his GNU conferences fail—in the name of her own brokenness.

3.1.5. The Failure of Language: A Mother's Silence

Interestingly, the reader learns the true origin of the name GNU towards the end of Essie's story, shortly after the little girl's death: "and all the while Simon was concocting GNU. He named it, he said, in memory of Retta at the zoo" (Ozick 2007, p. 443). The name itself encodes a memory, that of an afternoon spent with the child. More specifically, it refers to a key moment when Simon had shown his daughter a gnu at the zoo and tried to get her to repeat the word, but all she came up with was a "moo", which her parents found very humorous. In this context, what they are mourning is the loss of language on the threshold of expression. "Gnu" encapsulates the sweet tenderness of a simple afternoon before the heartbreak of loss, but it is also the word that the little girl never said, never could say, the potential of language (like the word "mama" in "The Shawl", which Magda is about to utter when she is savagely electrocuted). It is interesting to note that in English, the word "gnu" carries this ambiguity between what is said and what is written, since its phonological realization (/nu:/) does not correspond to its spelling.

In the same way that there is a comic discrepancy between the cow imitated by the child's onomatopoeia and the description of the animal seen at the zoo, there is something in "gnu" that must be left unsaid. The Yiddish word *nu*, which has a similar pronunciation, is used to express impatience. *Nu/nu:/* could mean "when?" (a question asked by Retta's parents, who are eager for her to access language—which she never does fully, dying too early), but also "so what?" So, what happened to the child? This question harks back to the title of the story. The reader is left wondering and finds no explicit answer other than this failed syllable that the father attempted to make into a language, constantly undermined by Essie.

The gnu/nu symbolizes what the little girl *almost* said and, by extension, everything that she could never become. It is fascinating that both little girls and their mothers are forcibly silenced in "The Shawl", *Rosa*, and "What Happened to the Baby?" Indeed, in a patriarchal society, young girls are bound to become women whose power to speak and share their own narratives is often taken away from them. Thus, Retta's lost word (similar to Magda's first "mama", which dooms her in "The Shawl", as it draws attention to her presence and leads to her capture and execution) becomes the symbol of the workings of loss itself, an animal metonymy of Simon's own process of accretive mourning and the focus of Essie's ire. It is only towards the end of the story that the reader understands why the linguist scoured the planet for words or syllables that could "feed and fatten his GNU" (Ozick 2007, p. 445).

GNU is an attempt at constructing a language of mourning, a language that is incomprehensible to the uninitiated (it is "his gibberish", Ozick 2007, p. 445), a language that could be shared but the secret of which, in the end, belongs only to Simon and his daughter, excluding the mother: "Simon moaned out his gibberish beside Retta's grave in the misty night air" (Ozick 2007, p. 445). It is a language that claims to be a universal idiom, but, in fact, it only ever expresses an individual's pain, and it does not survive when its creator dies. The narrator notes that, the more Simon feeds his GNU, the more he is drained of his own resources: "some inner deterioration, from a source unknown to me, was gnawing at him" (Ozick 2007, p. 447). The old man, the readers learn, is the victim of a tooth abscess, the psychosomatic nature of which is all the more marked as it eventually spreads to his heart. Once more, there is a connection between the expression of one's emotions and the

(im)possibility to express them verbally (through the tooth, which is part of the mouth). Simon's attempt to externalize and universalize mourning fails. This over-investment of his linguistic resources in the process of mourning ultimately translates into physical and psychic decline. Simon's appearance deteriorates shortly before his death, and his shaggy appearance can be seen as the beginning of an animalization whereby he turns into the gnu's starving double, a wildebeest of sorts himself: "he was unshaven (...). His toenails were overgrown (...). His breath was bad" (Ozick 2007, p. 447). In the same vein, Simon is described throughout the story as driven by almost insurmountable sexual instincts, almost as if in rut—an animal of sorts. GNU, a metonymic animal, withers and dies, and Simon has failed to impose his own language of mourning.

The narrator observes in the embedded story that Simon's death comes just before the disappearance of one of the most memorable objects in Essie's home, the sewing machine that she bought when she moved with Retta and Simon to the Catskills and that had enabled her to feed her family for a while, when she was still fulfilling the role that was expected of her. With Simon disappears the lingering part of Essie's devastating grief, as she gets rid of the object that reminded her of her failure to embody the ideals of motherhood and finally moves on, free from the trapping of the representation of herself as housewife and sole caregiver, and having been able to pass on her own story through the narrator.

4. Conclusions

I have shown that the short story under scrutiny significantly explores the gendered workings of grief through the very different lives and mourning processes of two fictional parents, Simon and Essie. While, for Simon, GNU carries the hope of redemption, it is precisely this public outpouring of Simon's grief that Essie finds repugnant. Her process of mourning is defined for most of the embedded story by repressed hatred and grief, and she testifies to the impossibility of voicing her pain during her whole life—up until she meets the narrator, who gives Essie her voice back by not only listening to her story but including it in her framing narrative and acknowledging it as true.

Perhaps it is this secret language of mourning that is the subject of the mysterious ending of the story. Essie asks the narrator a final question, the answer to which will remain ambiguous: "that goddamn universal language, you want to know what it is? Not that crazy esperanto, and not Simon's gibberish either. (...) Everyone uses it (...). Everyone, all over the world" (Ozick 2007, p. 449). The narrator reflects in the last sentence of the story: "lie, deception, illusion (. . .) was that it truly, the universal language we all speak?" (p. 449). Ozick's narrative, significantly enough, ends with another enigma. It may well be, as I hypothesized, that mourning is a form of universal language—and yet it remains highly individualized in its discrete utterances. Literature, however, may help bridge the gap between different experiences of grief and help one work through one's trauma.

Indeed, one could argue that Essie's narration is, in a way, curative. Firstly, there is something therapeutic about the narrator's enquiry, leading to something more than the sheer devastation of grief that the mother had experienced and expressed so far. The story succeeds where GNU had failed—it *does, in fact, allude to a language of mourning whereby one can work through one's trauma*. Cathy Caruth notes that "the repetition at the heart of catastrophe (...) emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (Caruth 1996, p. 2). If the event itself remains inaccessible and readers never learn what happened to the baby, it is because "traumatic experience (...) is an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs" (p. 5). However, as she relives and retells that fateful night, and learns that *she is finally believed* not to be the sole culprit of her baby's death through the benevolent agency of Vivian, Essie processes her trauma and is able to speak up and retell the story in her own voice: "the story of trauma, then, as the narrative

of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality, rather attests to its endless impact on a life" (p. 7).

We have also observed that, for Jewish mothers, the death of a child may carry an additional layer of trauma tied to the interruption of generational continuity, which is especially poignant in a culture historically shaped by survival and the preservation of heritage. The loss of a child can therefore lead to a spiritual and existential crisis, where a mother may feel that she has failed in her divine purpose. This institutionalized version of motherhood can be extremely guilt-inducing, as Essie points out throughout her narrative. Therefore, it is only through her speaking up, naming her feelings and handing down her intimate narrative of loss and grief to the next generation, that she can truly start the work of mourning.

I hope to have demonstrated that this understudied short story by Cynthia Ozick shares common themes with some of her major, most anthologized fiction (mostly *Rosa* and "The Shawl"): through the use of fragmentation, ambiguity, unreliable narrators (in this context, very meaningfully, a woman undermining another woman, a mother blaming another for her child's death), shifting perspectives and conflicting narrative reminiscent not only of post-modernism, but of the traditional midrashic saying (Numbers Rabba 13:15) *shivim panim laTorah*, "the Torah has seventy facets" (or faces), and intertextual references to Jewish cultural themes (such as the Judgment of Solomon, which is its most easily identifiable hypotext in my opinion), it enables readers to reconstruct a coherent version of the story, process Essie's mediated trauma, and gain awareness of the unhealthy emotional, psychological, and social consequences of Jewish and non-Jewish narratives that glorify the roles of motherhood and the housewife without acknowledging their complexities, leaving mothers with no help and overwhelming responsibilities while fathers are free to desert their home and explore other sexual relationships.

This short story should also be replaced within the concerns present in the canon of Jewish and Jewish American literature. Jewish writers such as Cynthia Ozick, Bernard Malamud, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Chaim Potok, and Sholem Aleichem explore the trauma of child loss within Jewish families, often framing it as a metaphor for broader cultural or historical loss. In Ozick's "The Shawl", Magda's death symbolizes both maternal grief and the destruction of Jewish potential, mirroring the compounded pain Jewish mothers may feel in losing both a child and a legacy. Jewish mothers may face the expectation to continue fulfilling familial and communal duties despite their grief, leaving little room for personal mourning. Only through sisterhood and the female passing down of Jewish traditions and personal history could they expect to surmount their voicelessness—as they have to this very day.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ This is true insofar as the maternal figure, Una, who is the real caregiver of the child, mourns the loss of her idealization of Christina's parents even more than Christina herself.

² Magda is the lost baby both in "The Shawl" and in its sequel in America, *Rosa*, which focuses on the eponymous character of the mourning mother.

³ All my subsequent references to Ozick's short stories are from her 2007 *Collected Stories*.

- 4 Four important reviews of the collection are as follows: (Socher 2008; Benfey 2008; Winslow 2008; Upchurch 2008).
- 5 In the 2006 version of the story published in *The Atlantic* and in my reference edition (Ozick 2007) the narrator's name is Vivian instead. It seems that the names were changed when *Dictation: A Quartet* was published (2008). It is indeed the book of collected stories that Winslow writes his piece about. In this later version, the names of the narrator and her mother are, respectively, Phyllis and Ruby. It is possible that Ozick changed the narrator's name for reasons related to onomastics: Phyllis, in Greek mythology, is a girl who killed herself for love and turned into an almond tree. Both the symbolism of nature and the notion of dying for love are Ozickian themes; see for example "The Pagan Rabbi" and "The Dock-Witch" in the *Collected Stories* (Ozick 2007). Ruby seems to allude to a flashy jewel, which may have to do with how tempting it is to believe the narrator's mother's narrative—despite its blatant falsehood. In contrast, in the original version, the mother's name was Lily, which seems even more adequate, as it connotes both innocence (the feigned innocence of the mother, that, very real, of her child before she learns what *really* happened to the baby) and death (lilies are typically associated with grief and death). Similarly, the first name Vivian has fascinating implications, since it comes from the Latin *vivo* or *vivere*. The narrator is specifically described as *the child who is still alive*, as opposed to baby Henrietta—this is indeed how Essie perceives her in the narrative.
- 6 This story is reminiscent of 1 Kings 3:16–28, which also mentions the substitution of infants by the two prostitutes who come to consult King Solomon. In both cases, two children sleep in the same room, but only one of them is alive at the end of the night while the other is dead. In the Biblical narrative, the mother of the stolen child is just as shocked as the doctor in Ozick's tale when she realizes that the baby is no longer breathing ("As I prepared in the morning to nurse my child, behold, he was dead! I examined him carefully when it was broad daylight, and this was not the son I had borne", 1 Kings, 3: 21). Given Ozick's extremely rich Jewish culture, the reference certainly seems deliberate.

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