
Selfishness And Suffering In The Short Story The Shawl

Selfishness has been a problem for a very long time. For instance, bullies stealing lunch money are selfish, the jocks who won't let the newbie on the field, those stuck-up rich kids shown in movies, and especially the popular kids. All of mankind can be selfish, no matter how hard they try not to. There are many people in history who conquered land or businesses for their own personal gain. And those people hurt others around them because of their selfishness. They sometimes destroyed homes, tore apart families, and often killed others because of it. Take, for example, Pancho Villa. He attacked Columbus with his troops of many men, leaving many people dead and others without family. In the short story "The Shawl" by Cynthia Ozick, Rosa shows that being unselfish can spare a lot of trouble and pain as well as benefit one's self and others through giving Magda almost all of her food, through not giving Magda to a woman in one of the villages they passed by, and through suffering because of Stella's selfishness.

Rosa's unselfishness in giving Magda almost all her food keeps the child alive as well as shows that unselfishness can benefit one's self as well as others. Magda has grown old enough to walk, and so she needs actual food and not milk. Rosa's nipples are dry anyway, so she is not able to produce milk for her, which is why it makes sense that Cynthia Ozick states that "Rosa gave almost all her food to Magda"(86), and that benefits both Magda and Rosa. The sacrifice of her food benefits Magda by keeping her alive for longer than if Rosa did not share, while benefitting Rosa because she is delaying the heartache and sadness of losing a child. In a poem titled "To A Mouse", by Robert Burns, he adds "lea'e us nought but grief an' pain for promis'd joy!". In order to know joy, one must first know grief or pain. Rosa must suffer through more hunger than others did due to the sacrifice of her food. But in exchange for that, there is more of a possibility for her to get the chance to watch Magda grow, which would bring happiness to any mother.

Every mother makes an unspoken promise as soon as their child takes their first breath, and due to this promise, Rosa resists stepping out of the formation and relieving herself from the burden of protecting and caring for Magda by giving her to a woman in one of the villages they pass by. Ozick tells us that "Rosa... dreamed of giving Magda away in one of the villages. She could leave the line for a minute and push Magda into the hands of any woman on the side of the road" (86). But she can't. Because if she does, she will be overcome with the guilt of breaking that promise which is most important to every mother who cares for her child. Because if she does, they will shoot. And if she does, the woman might not take her. A poem by Robert Frost, titled "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" once stated, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep"(4). If Rosa steps out of line and heeds the temptations telling her to give Magda to a woman in the villages they pass by, she will be breaking a promise she made the moment Magda took her first breath, the promise every mother makes to their child: to protect them through whatever afflictions may come. She has a long time to wait before she can let her little baby bird leave the nest.

Because of Stella's selfishness in taking the shawl from Rosa and Magda, both are forced to suffer. Stella makes a selfish choice and "took the shawl and made Magda die"(Ozick 87), for the no more reason than because she is cold. Which causes Magda to wander out to the square outside the barracks. Rosa sees her and follows, and when she sees Magda, she is

“wavering in the perilous sunlight of the arena... Magda was grieving over the loss of her shawl” (Ozick 88). Because of the loss, screaming, and mourning of the young girl, Magda is taken and thrown onto the electrical fence surrounding the camp. After Magda’s body hit the fence, Rosa went into a state of mourning, as Magda had just a few moments before. Rosa has to shove Magda’s shawl, which she had loved so dearly when she lived, and sucks on it to keep the piercing sounds of sadness and mourning to escape her. Magda loses the shawl, and Rosa loses Magda. They both must suffer because of one person’s selfish decision. Rosa does not go to Magda, because “If she ran they would shoot, and if she tried to pick up the sticks of Magda’s body, they would shoot”(Ozick 90). She wants to run to her, to hold her in her arms one last time, but she can’t. She needs to live, to prove that she is not so weak that she would give up instead of struggling through the hardship.

Without a doubt, Rosa and Magda both had to suffer because of one single selfish decision by Stella. But that is most likely not the only reason they were forced to suffer, they had to suffer because of Hitler, too. He is the reason the Holocaust even happened, all because he is selfish enough to believe that the Jews deserve to be tortured and killed in his concentration camps. Suffering is everywhere, which is almost always caused by someone else’s selfishness. People are patronized and abused because others think that they don’t matter as much as they do. People are jobless because others think they don’t have enough skill to complete the job, sometimes before even seeing what they can do. The only reason people become rich, move into mansions, eat expensive food, spend a ton of money, and other things is because they were selfish. They must be selfish in order to gain all that they have. But that doesn’t mean people shouldn’t be selfish at all. Being selfish is basically required if one wants to stay alive. Though the world would be much less of a cruel place if everyone was a little less so.