

CYNTHIA OZICK'S SACRAL AESTHETIC

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation proposes a new way of understanding Cynthia Ozick's aesthetic project. I argue that her short stories and novels are engaged in untangling her self-styled contradiction between the creative impulse and Jewish observance. That is, while her non-fiction essays argue that story writing is akin to idol-making and studying literature akin to idolatry, her fictional narratives escape such censure because they are intended to work in the service of God, not to transgress God's commandments. In her fiction, Ozick employs narrative strategies that challenge what she has labelled the impious impulse of art. Such strategies include her characterizations, which often feature pious intellectuals, her narrative structures, which are often *midrashic*, and her language, which is frequently liturgical and exalted. These strategies point to Ozick's return to the Hebrew covenant.

Chapter One lays out the paradox Ozick creates in several her essays and introduces those essays and short stories that illustrate her competing claims. Chapter Two discusses the early stories "The Pagan Rabbi" and "Envy; or, Yiddish in America" as meditations on the Fifth Commandment through an investigation of parenthood and

the transmission of tradition. Chapter Three examines the novellas “Bloodshed” and “Rosa” as explorations of the possibility of a post-Holocaust renewal of Jewish faith. Chapter Four reads the novels *The Cannibal Galaxy* and *The Puttermesser Papers* as interpretations of the key Jewish concepts of *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, and *arevut*, the Jewish notion of social responsibility.