CHAPTER IV
A COMPARATIVE STATEMENT

Cynthia Ozick is a latter-day intellectual as well as a writer of fiction. But here, too, she is a Jewish critic with a difference. She has commented on politics but never from within the half century debate among Jewish intellectuals about Marxism and anti-Marxism. That debate specifically about Stalinism has been the indispensable context for understanding the work of critics like Lionel Trilling and Irwing Howe. It’s beside the point for understanding Ozick. Here, too, history favors the new departure she represents. For just as the end of the immigrant experience and the inexorable assimilation of the Jews have made the older style of ethnic novel appear pale and dated, so the end of the cold war has made the older terms of cultural debate less relevant to the present. Ozick represents a new kind of Jewish writing we could call it a kind of Jewish post – modernism and a new Jewish attitude.

Erica Jong is a well known poet and feminist. She says that “there are many people who will never forgive me because I am a woman and I present woman as self-affirming in my books. But being attacked is a sign that you have disturbed the status quo in some way, its an accolade of sorts”. Targeted by traditionalistic critics for being too subversive and targeted by radical critics for
being too reactionary, Jong has been wounded but not vanquished. She has dealt with change in her life, in American society, in gender relations, in women’s roles in our culture by writing about it. Although in her fame, her visibility and her achievement as a writer surely Erica Jong is exceptional in her ‘fears and feelings’ but she still has not received the literary acceptance and place of honour as Cynthia Ozick has received.

To write as a woman is to write from an extreme situation: the assumption behind Erica Jong’s writings could be this. It gives energy to her lines. Jong is quick, easy, raunchy and her personality so fills her writings that its difficult sometimes to see around her to her meaning. It permits the reader easy access to a book through knowing the basic plot and the main character when Fear of Flying ended with the runaway wife returning to scrub her infidelities in her husband’s bathtub. Some feminists saw Erica Jong’s novel as a washout. She may have come to agree with them, for she has since divorced her second husband and written an article in Vogue magazine on the obsolescence of marriage.

It is curious to see in how many ways women have modified Freud’s famous dictum that anatomy is destiny. In their movement toward emancipation, women sometimes see fit to put aside coquetry, to adopt a flat – footed stance of ‘authenticity’. Under the influence of this authenticity, the author tends to blunt her writings –
‘truth is often crude’ – until the message becomes the medium. Confounding truth and writings is one of the fond homilies of our time. Here is the cult of identity again, in one of its many manifestations. Love me, love my identity, and a militant woman’s identity must be seen without embellishment. She refuses any longer to be an interior decorator of the womb. Writing is not a bauble, but a speculum.

In the ‘zoo-prison of marriage,’ the husband sleeps through his wife’s ‘noisy nights of writings’. ‘The pages of your dreams’, she muses in tender condescension, ‘are riffled by the winds of my writing’. The husband dozes like a baby while the wife adventures among emergencies. The supermarket is a concentration camp where ‘the blue numerals’ of the tally are tattooed / on the white skins of paper …….. While men can yearn with infinite emptiness toward the body of a woman, ‘she’ must not only inspire writing, but also type it, not only conceive child, but hear it, bathe it, feed it and carry it everywhere.

In the author’s view of marriage, there are no maids, no day camps, no anti – climaxes. The uncharitable might say that three are no children either, except for rhetorical ones. In a literary tradition where the standard of excellence is synonymous with male, the writer who is also a woman distrusts her own voice, undervalues her own experience and never really achieves a sense of self. According
to Erica Jong, coming to terms with her own body, therefore, is the first corrective step for a creative woman to take and it is demonstrated through her writings. There are some of the women writers, who have explored “the fact of being female and go beyond it, but never deny it. Following their example, Erica Jong boldly incorporates certain private and female symbols, thought unmentionable in the past, into the artistic texture of her work.”

Although Jong concentrates on woman’s body, its hungers, its drives, more centrally the novels are the story of a dying marriage and a woman’s odyssey to love. Both the novels *Fear of Flying* and *How to Save Your Own Life* pose the questions: what is it to be a woman? Where lies salvation? When Jong dares voice her body’s desire and pleasure, she performs a most scandalous operation in terms of moral and aesthetic taboos: the desacralization of the so-called ‘mystery of the Eternal feminine.’ Superwoman Jong, the humorist has turned her sexual energies and formidable vitality as a woman into power; by controlling her anxiety as a female and by assuming the power of her male half, she has proved capable of turning them into the absolute power of making both men and women laugh at their libido. Creating, causing, arousing laughter is her way of bringing them to pleasure— a pleasure whose nature is so close to sexual pleasure. By mastering the taboos of sex, by exhibiting her own sexual drives, desires and perversions, in a
totally unabashed manner, she has risen to the stature of going beyond good and evil, beyond male and female, she has conquered absolute power and willpower. Humor is definitely connected to this notion of power: sexual power as acknowledged and exercised, freely and without shame or guilt. The only source of anguish that remains is death – non – existence. But then, both sexes are equally helpless: and there lies the real equality of sexes.

Maybe Jong has not made a giant leap but just a small step towards this total liberation of woman regarding humor. Yet, female humor will no longer exist as such after her if women exercise their powers as human beings and as producers of comedy. They will regain power through creation and recreation – once they have gotten rid of procreation; which means simply the end of the human species: if humor is at this cost, who said it was a problem?

Erica Jong has one fictional heroine, brave, bookish, beautiful and indefatigably libidinous, poet of the erogenous zone, priestess of the Great Goddess, whether the heroine is Fanny, the 18th century whore – turned – pirate – turned – writer, or Isadora, the much married best – selling novelist of the wing trilogy (a Jew from the west 70’s) or the much – married international star Jessica Pruitt (a WASP from the East 70’s, who sometimes think ‘being a Jew would be so cozy. They seemed to have more blood, more poetry, more sensuality than my people’). Like her predecessors, Jessica loves
sex, her art, her many illustrious friends and her adorable little daughter.

Some critics say that Jong confuses liberation with sexual liberation and confuses sexual liberation with the freedom to act and talk like a man, but the bold language that so impressed readers masks a conventionality, a failure to imagine otherwise. Isadora is right – she does ‘talk a good game,’ Erica Jong has very good observations on feminism. In an interview with Lynn Spampinato (19th April 1994) she says that we went through a period when we had a tremendous split in the feminist movement, between those women who believed that feminism should reach out and embrace homemakers, women with children, women who didn’t have the posture of separatists, and those feminists who were very hard line and hard core, and didn’t want to open the tent to everyone. And that split Jong perceived to be one of the problems of the backlash era. But in a sense we also opened ourselves to it, because as feminists we didn’t spread out tent wide enough. In the 70’s there was a tendency to exclude women who wanted to have children and who loved men. ‘Where do I fit into this movement?’ they asked. Some of them felt they were treated very badly. You don’t have to be one kind of feminist only to be included. Its hopeful that we have more inclusiveness and kind of ‘big tent’ feminism now, because that
gives us the hope of creating a mass movement, rather than an exclusionary movement.

Sexuality is not a matter of bowing down to male subjugation – not at all. Sexuality can be female. Women have been deeply split, their minds have been split from their bodies, their sexuality has been split from their intelligence:

Liberated sex means an end to the double standard about who can enjoy sex and who can’t and how much, or who can initiate sex and who can’t. It means an end also to the dehumanizing effect of the double standard, which detaches sex from a relationship of respect and caring. It means an end to ‘nice girls don’t’ and ‘real men must’.

Isadora, Jong’s protagonist is often regarded as her alter ego. It refers to How to Save Your Own Life. The passionate response of its first readers, including the typesetters who refused to set it in type, the publisher’s employees who passed it from hand to hand before it had become known through reviews and advertising. The passion it excited, sometimes the exhilaration of self – recognition, sometimes disgust, fear and loathing (and sometimes a milder response somewhere in between) is evident in the number, the variety and the emotional nature of the reviewers. Many reviewers, whether they loved the novel or detested it. For those who liked Jong’s novels, it was useful as a way of understand and ordering reality, and, for some feminists, the impetus for an exuberant flight of self-affirmation. For those who disliked, it was useful for
clarifying some aspects of modern culture and as a vehicle for exploring, or expressing their views. The reviewers project a deep uneasiness with changes that have characterized modern life, and in their indictment of modern culture, they associate feminist with what they view as degenerative changes. For a number of reviewers, aggressive female sexuality and aggressive female authors are associated with a modernity that deconstructs fundamental verities: the ‘natural’ roles of men and women and even the ‘natural’ institutions of a mythic past. Jong’s literary reputation is thus tied up with the phenomenon of fame. Our society requires a constant supply of people to fill the difficult, if envied, role of the famous. It is the nature of American, or perhaps all modern, capitalists societies that certain of our desires be projected onto the famous. In a society committed to progress, the seeking of fame, the climbing of the ladder of renown, express something essential in that society’s nature. Fame offers the opportunity to be liberated from the anonymity all citizens of a complex would are condemned to.

In the estimation of Cynthia Ozick, Jewish – American authors have too often bought literary success at the price of an internal colonialism or – to use a more ozickian term – at the price of an idolatry by which they eschew that which is historically Jewish in favor of the ephemera of Jewish ethnicity while Jewish writers maintain an ethnic exoticism that is currently attractive to an
American audience in Ozick’s view they have lost a full blown Jewish identity.

To be a Jew is to be old in history, but not only that; to be a Jew is to be a member of a distinct civilization expressed through an oceanic culture in possession of a group of essential concepts and a multitude of texts and attitudes elucidating these concepts. The centrality of Jewish historical memory to Ozick’s imagination suggests her commitment to the central traditions of Jewish religious thought and practice. Jewish memory, in Ozick’s estimation, has faced a number of threats in contemporary culture, not least of which is the threat of assimilation as she forges a fiction that is at once contemporary and memorial in keeping with the history of Jewish religious practice.

The collective memories of the Jewish people were a function of the shared faith, cohesiveness, and will of the group itself. The decline of Jewish collective memory in modern times is only a symptom of the unraveling of that common network of beliefs and praxis whose mechanisms the past was once made present. Therein lies the root of the malady. Ultimately, Jewish memory cannot be ‘healed’ or rejuvenated. Memory cannot be evoked by fiat. Thus, Ozick’s call for an aesthetics of memory rooted in Jewish tradition may be a call sounded in vacuum if those memories are as broken and fragmentary as Ozick and many others seem to think. These
problems with the loss of memory and the possibilities or impossibilities of repairing that loss are foregrounded everywhere in Ozick’s fiction. Ironically, though the structure of her thinking about ethnicity emphasizes descent, Ozick’s historical situation places her in the role of evangelist or prophet, calling for an alternative form of consent by which her Jewish audience, and whatever gentiles are moved to do so; might come to inhabit Jewish memory anew. The strain of evoking memory where memories are scant forces. Ozick to recreate the past as invention, and as invention it appears as the fantastic. In a world for which memory has little meaning, memory tends to appear as that which disturbs the placid surface of the everyday – this disturbance serving both as a cautionary mechanism and a pedagogical means of renewing cultural memory.

Throughout Ozick’s fiction, memories of the past of the characters or the characters who embody the past appear in fantastic guise to warn of the consequences of forgetfulness or to provide some fragmentary instruction about the past. Ruth Puttermesser, a character to whom Ozick has returned in several stories is one character in need of such cautionary reminders. Puttermesser is a character in search of history, or more precisely, an ancestry, a living connection to the past that will give her life meaning beyond her mundane efforts in a civic bureaucracy. Even in the stories that
are largely realistic, connections with the past are often bizarre and nearly fantastic. For instance, in *The Messiah of Stockholm*, it becomes impossible to identify with any certainty the characters who are trying to convey a purportedly valuable manuscript to a book reviewer, Lars Andemening. The story hinges on whether characters can reliably identify a manuscript as a masterpiece or a forgery. This identification, in turn, depends on the veracity of those trying to sell the manuscript to Andemening, characters whose very physical appearance seems to shift and change.

This fantastic trafficking in past and present in Ozick’s fiction suggests not so much the slaying of precursors as the difficulties of bringing the past to bear on the present, particularly in the American context. Jewish memory appears as a fantastic rupture that breaks the seamless and numbling quality of American life devoted to the everyday present. Indeed, Ozick’s writings are largely populated by people without a past, who are brought into contact, however briefly with embodiments of Jewish history and memory. Ozick uses fantastic elements of Jewish memory to disrupt the ongoing patterns of the everyday the bureaucratic middleness of Puttermesser’s work, for instance, Ozick’s stories are carried out through the wedge of the past, rather than through romantic attention to the present that opposes tradition as such. That is, in Ozick the past confronts the present, in oedipal literary history the present destroys the past
Ozick’s fiction disrupts this everyday idolatry to which many of her characters, and much of her audience, are devoted.

The purpose of this disruption is, ultimately to bring the past into a living relationship with the present a move which Ozick understands as desperately necessary for the continuation of a viable and recognizable Jewish community. The emphasis must be on a ‘living relationship with the present.’ Since characters in Ozick’s fiction who simply ignore the present in favor of the past are also recipients of her pedagogical iconoclasm. One such character is Rosa Lublin, a survivor of the Holocaust, whose life is created in the stories collected in The Shawl. Rosa in a certain sense, embodies the past, because her experience in the camps—particularly witnessing the brutal murder of her small child has left her incapable of functioning in the present. Ozick’s work represents one form of creative response to the historical rupture. Her texts are a call to cultural memory and are themselves threads of cultural memory, threads that lead readers backwards and forwards to other threads of tradition. While her work does not by itself heal or rejuvenate Jewish collective memory and a force that speaks the continuity of Jewish tradition in the contemporary world.

What others have to say about Cynthia Ozick:

a. While arguing the issue of the fundamental assumption governing western literature which Ozick challenges and calls into
question, none of these critical works engages Ozick’s power as a wordsmith and maker of meaning. That is, while Ozick is a difficult writers, she is also one who astounds by her daring. Despite its cultural and literary pyrotechnics, her writing is accessible to a very wide audience because, like the artists of the circus, it acrobatic daring entrances us as it challenges the standard rules that bind the less gifted, less trained to the pedestrian reign of gravity.

- Murray Baumgarten, Contemporary Literature (Summer / 1996)

b. She is as authentic a voice of New York as was Edith Wharton before her, but Ozick’s New York is an affair of battered suburbs, of cavernous municipal buildings, of ancient Hebrew teachers living above Cuban grocery stores of public libraries wily lovers and miraculous if inconvenient apparitions.

- Anita Brookner, The Spectator (19/06/1999)

c. One thing Cynthia Ozick’s characters do well is to evoke in the reader an instructive mix of sympathy and irritation. Her characters push against our limits of patience and compassion, and it makes us feel somehow larger to care about these lives, up to and beyond the point of seeing some of ourselves in them.

Pros and Cons of the author’s work:

Pros:
- Profound intellect
- Dazzling imagination
- Writing is precise, clever, often witty
- Ozick always seems in complete command

Cons:
- Jewish Focus, preoccupation, and references
- Sometimes too stern
- Sometimes too sweeping in her judgements
- Focus on and fascination with idolatry

Cynthia Ozick is a brilliant writer. Her writing sparkles, glows, resonates. She tells good stories and she tells them spectacularly well. Chiselling them down to their bare bones, the stories and novels are wonders of precision, she has a marvelous command of the language, and she does wondrous things with it. Ozick’s writing is also profound. She ponders the larger questions – specifically about the nature, purpose and possibility of art, as well as questions of morality, and does so without alienating the reader.

Her New York – Jewish background also marks much of her writing. In many instances the writing transcends this, most notably
in *The Puttermesser Papers*, but for those not familiar with this tradition aspects of the writing may be baffling. In a sense, much of Ozick’s writing is provincial, which can be problematic for those not from the same provinces. The religious focus is also not to everyone’s taste, but Ozick’s arguments and expression are thoughtful and refined and generally fascinating to follow, regardless of the subject.

Ozick is also an excellent essayist, though occasionally too strident in her arguments, offering sweeping judgments without adequate explanations. Her essays in support of subjects tend to be greater successes than those in which she expresses a negative opinion, despite the pleasure to be had in seeing her cut someone down to size with her razorsharp comments. She is knowledgeable about a wide variety of subjects and especially about literature and her writings are pleasure to be read for their style as much as their arguments.

Ozick’s critics reduce her fictions to a set of attitudes and orthodoxies, but even when they are more skillful, Ozick’s playful, richly textured imagination ends up sounding more formulaic than it is. There is a series of glimpses into Ozick’s fiction that concentrate on structure, the shape and ring of its well-crafted sentences, the ways that complexity inextricably leads to qualified, often ironic, closures and most of all the insistence that stories occupy a realm
quite different from life. Far too much of contemporary literary
criticism operates on very different principles, ones more interested
in the litmus tests of race, class, gender and sexual choice than on
the actual story before one’s eyes. Thus a good story confirms
preconceptions while a bad one is filled with unpleasant surprises.
This is to grab hold of the wrong end of the stick, for what fiction of
any consequence does is; first surprise and then convince, The
artfulness of Ozick’s art remains constant. Whatever else fiction
might be, it is not life, even when, at its most accomplished, it
provides the illusion of life. Put a slightly different way, serious
fiction happens when the real is transmogrified into the Real How
this happens is a question neither writers nor their critics can answer
with anything like precision, but at its vital center is surely the
imagination – ungendered, classless, and willfully ignorant of
everything that makes for oped opinions rather than stories. Ozick’s
best fiction strikes us as a case of the imagination freed from the
voices even the commandments, that govern her life as wife, mother,
citizen, defender of Israel, and cultural conservative. In the world
her imagination creates, aesthetic principles dictate the endless array
of choices a writer must make to end up with characters who are
credible and stories that are satisfying.

Ozick remains true to her upbringing as a literary modernist.
But what radiates at the very core of her fictions is she is also a
collector of sorts, albeit of those moments in her life when she was ignored, underappreciated, jilted, or otherwise disappointed. Satire, thus, becomes a way of tonguing a sore tooth, just as it temporarily relieves that suffering in the sheer joy of crafting sentences crackling with revenge. Ozick’s fiction really stands on its own feet. One does not normally think of Ozick as the sort of writer who would easily sign her name on any kind of manifesto, but the freedom of literary artists to go wherever the imagination takes them and to think of the life of Art as the only life that truly matters has become much more attractive to Ozick. As with everything about Ozick and her work, one must allow ample room for nuance, and this is certainly true for the contention that, in the final analysis she is most accurately written down as an aesthete. Because the term carries a good deal of cultural baggage, Ozick might well prefer the plainer less troublemaking word ‘writer’. What matters, however, is that her critics dampen their enthusiasm for making facile connections between the pronouncements occasioned by the life she leads as public citizen and committed Jew and the fiction she produces.

In an interview with Atlantic Unbounds Katie Bolick on May 15th 1997 Ozick said that she was a fiction writer, she writes essays, but she was not a poet. And she absolutely rejected the phrase woman writer’ as anti-feminist. It was becoming apparent then that there were going to be two categories of writers – writers and
women writers and in fact, this has nearly come about. Perhaps she rejected the phrase women writer and not the phrase ‘Jewish writer’ because ‘Jewish’ is a category of civilization culture and intellect and ‘woman is a category of anatomy and physiology. It’s rough thinking to confuse vast cultural and intellectual movements with the capacity to bear children.³

As for the Jewish tradition of memory informing her outlook, absolutely, yes. History is the ground of our being, and together with imagination, and that is what makes writing. Writing without history has been epidemic for some development to put all experience in the present tense, without memory, or history, or a past. What is ‘the past?’ one damn thing after another. What is history? Judgement and interpretation.

Ozick disapproves of the art of fiction not only on aesthetic and ethical grounds. For the Jewish writer, fashioning a make-believe reality through words is an idolatrous act, in direct violation of the Second Commandment. But her greatest objection to storytelling is its usurpation, since the author appropriates from God the role of Creator. She suggests that as long as the Jewish storyteller writes in this world, where he is exposed to an alien culture and must employ a secular language, he will be an idolatrous fiction-monger. And if he chooses to write about the heathen rather than the holy in the next world, than the pagan inhabitants of Paradise, like
Hitler in this world, will not allow him to forget that he is a Jew. He will be caged and instructed, ‘All that is not Law is levity’:

Mostly its lies, writing novels. You set out to tell an untrue story and you try to make it believable, even to yourself. Which calls for details. Any good lie does.  
- Anne Tyler

We write because we die. We write because we must let go, take leave, pass on. Words are an attempt to hold the moment, though even as we hold it, it passes – and we know it.

Writing is balm for grief. Its only two real subjects are death and love or love and death which are aspects of each other. We only grieve when we have loved, and only love where there is potential for grief. Yet we also know that life is a process of learning non-attachment because all things pass, flow, elude our grasp.

This is our human dilemma. We are attachers who must learn the deep joy that underlies all grief. So, we patch grief with proverbs, knowing that the patches barely cover our wounds. The wounds themselves are precious. They hurt us into healing.

Erica Jong has written about the grief and joys of human life. She has also proved to be an inspiration for upcoming writers. On the website [http://www.ericajong.com/tipswriters.htm](http://www.ericajong.com/tipswriters.htm), she has given tips or rules for writers.
Erica’s 20 rules for writers:

1. Have faith – not cynicism.
2. Dare to dream.
3. Take your mind off publication.
4. Write for joy.
5. Get the reader to turn the page.
6. Forget politics (let your real politics shine through)
7. Forget intellect.
8. Forget ego.
9. Be a beginner
10. Accept change.
11. Don’t think your mind needs altering.
12. Don’t accept approval for telling the truth – (Parents, politicians, colleagues, friends etc.)
13. Use everything.
14. Remember that writing is Heroism.
15. Let sex (The Body, the physical world) in!
16. Forget critics.
17. Tell your truth not the world’s.
18. Remember to be earth – bound.
19. Remember to be wild!
20. Write for the child (In yourself and others)
Jong’s literary reputation is tied up with the phenomenon of fame. Our society requires a constant supply of people to fill the difficult, if envied, role of the famous. It is the nature of American, or perhaps all modern, capitalist societies that certain of our desires be projected unto famous.

The theme of creation (who creates? What is created? how does creation take place?) runs through Ozick’s work like a scarlet thread. She is a Jewish writer not preoccupied with her characters’ gender identity and more sure of her artistic identity. Finding the designation ‘woman writer’ too confining and essentially discriminatory she regards the entire range of human experience as the fit subject matter for her fiction. Exploring the consciousness of both male and female characters, she doesn’t mind being considered a betrayer to the feminist cause or a trespasser in male territory. What does concern Cynthia Ozick is that her fiction retain on authentically Jewish nature.

Erica Jong’s poetry and fiction – particularly her 1973 bestseller *Fear of Flying* ignited impassioned debate. Was it art? Was it pornography? And what was a woman doing writing this stuff, anyway? More than any other writer of this era, Jong came to embody the impulse to break out of the stultifying conventions that had so severly limited the roles women could play in American
letters. Despite the freshness of her work, however, she is actually heir to a long line of women writers in America.

Self-consciousness about writing fiction can lead to over indulgent prose and the substitution of egoism for ideas. Cynthia Ozick is the most self-conscious writer. Yet she steadfastly shuns overindulgence of any sort, and instead does what few contemporary fiction writers do on a regular basis – think. Ozick is obsessed with the words she puts on paper, with what it means to imagine a story and to tell it, with what fiction is.

Jong has pushed American letters to be more open to the idea of a woman writer’s aspirations to come out of the kitchen and dine at the table of literature in her own right. Her poetry, fiction and essays, as well as her much-profiled personal life, depict a particularly robust version of ‘having it all’: bread and roses; work and love: poetry and prose, children and career, laughter and lust; fortune and fame and fun.

Cynthia Ozick is a carver, a stylist in the best and most complete sense in language in wit, in her apprehension of reality and her curious, crooked flights of imagination. She is terribly smart, to the point where it is just a little dehumanizing. Each time we think we have understood her, after considerable labor, she refines her analysis once again, climbing one more rung on her ladder to some ultimate perspective. One wonders, if she were to have her way,
whether fiction could survive her demands, whether she might not intimidate it out of existence.

Jong’s famously autobiographical fiction, jarringly honest poems, and compellingly candid memories have been taken to heart by women readers around the world struggling with the age – old challenges that Jong’s mother faced, and that Jong herself negotiated with such aplomb. There is the challenge of how to have life and love, a satisfying role in the world and satisfying someone to share it with. And there is a challenge, ultimately, of forging a sense of identity as a woman in the modern world. It is Jong’s sensitive exploration of all these challenges that allows her to connect so deeply with her readers.

The variety and consistent mastery of styles have made Ozick’s works successful. Her lengthening caravan of original and unforgtably individualized characters; her eloquent dramatization through these characters of significant themes and issues; her absorbing command of dialogue and narrative structure; her penetrating and independent intellect undergirding all she writes – these characteristics of her art perform a unique service for her subject matter, extracting her from her Jewish heritage a vital significance unlike that transmitted by any other writer. In the American tradition, Cynthia Ozick significantly enhances our national literature by so rendering her Jewish culture.
Jong’s strategy for overcoming the obstacles (ambivalence, mixed signals, timidity, fear) that threaten to thwart the aspiring woman writer involves a combination of artistic innovation, humor, courage, brutal honesty, and an unsparing willingness to mine her personal past for the stuff of poetry and fiction. This approach has been both highly effective – and costly. As she observed in Fear of Fifty, she has:

Written openly about sex, appropriated male picaresque adventures for women, poked fun at the sacred cows of our society, divorced, remarried, divorced, remarried and divorced again, and still worse dared to write about my ex-husbands! That is the most heinous of my sins – not having done these things, but having confessed to them in print. It is for this that I am considered beyond the pale. No PR can fix this! It’s nothing more or less than the fate of rebellious women. They used to stone us in the market place. In a way, they still do.\(^5\)

Steeped in the Jewish tradition and aware of its conflicting viewpoints, Ozick deftly reveals the very paradoxes through her writings. She argues about the Holocaust, Jewish assimilation and much modern literature, all of which are the result of substituting ‘aesthetic paganism’ for moral seriousness. Ozick potrays as expansive that Yiddish – language culture long patronized by emancipated westernized Jews as narrow. What rationalist, assimilated Jews have dismissed as parochial she celebrates as truly universal.
Here are some excerpts from the interview of Cynthia Ozick with Elaine M. Kauvar in this interview she has offered her views on Jewish culture, her role as a Jewish writer and the importance of Holocaust.

“American Jewish writers too often face the unreasonable demand that they be responsible for reinforcing and revitalizing Jewishness. To yield to such a demand is to renounce the freedom of imaginative writing, an unthinkable sacrifice for a serious writer. The definition of ‘Jewish culture’ has changed and our understanding of what the content of ‘Jewish culture’ might be is significantly different from the old inherited definition. Jewish mainstream culture was once confined to the context of the traditional religious texts, hundreds of classics that were oceanic enough even without novels and secular poetry, and which of course preceded the existence of such forms, and, when they arose, never dreamed of admitting them.”

While talking about her role as a Jewish writer she said that, “As a writer of fiction I know today that I essentially don’t want to be responsible for Jewish culture. Responsible that is within the fiction itself, in the sense of being a spokesperson or assuming the task of carrier of a tradition – because when you write fiction your method and goal must be freedom freedom and more freedom.”
Cynthia Ozick mentioned Erica Jong in an answer to the question on Holocaust. She said that “Holocaust preoccupies the imaginations of American Jewish writers. Even in the novel with the very different intent of Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* the protagonist goes through Germany and remembers with razorlike pertinence.

Erica Jong has strong views about feminism and these she has expressed in an interview that could be read on the website [http://www.ericajong.com/interviewwithERICA.htm](http://www.ericajong.com/interviewwithERICA.htm)

“I have been a feminist my entire life. I read *The Second Sex* when I was 13 and know De Beauvoir was right. All I had to do was listen to my mother’s rage, the ambience in which I grew up. I marched with the sisters on August 20th 1970 and discovered that sisterhood left a lot to be desired.” (Erica in the interview).

**Conclusion :**

Much Jewish – American literature is about the sociological and psychological dimensions of Jewish life, about being Jewish in America and focuses on the Jew as Everyman, an ethnic one, but an Everyman. But some of the writing has been more particular, more specifically Jewish, and has emphasized the Jewish quality by relying on Jewish roots or sources. Cynthia Ozick’s self-definition as a Jewish writer (a more pronounced and conscious identification than has been made by any other major Jewish-American writer) is reflected in her brilliant use of Jewish sources.
Like many good jokes, the old joke that cosmopolitanism is Jewish parochialism hits a nerve. Despite traditional Jewish particularism, one significant aspect of Jewish thought, especially in this century, has been an emphasis on the similarity of all human beings in their essential humanity and a commitment to one world brotherhood that transcends all distinctions and unites all human beings as human beings. Early in this century, both in eastern Europe and in U.S.A. a considerable portion of the Jewish community considered itself socialist. The important point is that their was a socialism that was more than political and economic; it was founded on a profound idealism, an idea of human liberation and secular utopia. Opposed to traditional Judaism, socialist Jews transferred messianism, one of the traditional elements of Jewish experience to secular dreams while deeply grounded in Jewish life and feelings, much contemporary Jewish – American fiction links its particular Jewishness to a quest for the universal, that is, it affirms things Jewish but as one – albeit, one special thread in the human fabric.

And this thread is beautifully woven in the writings of both the authors, Cynthia Ozick and Erica Jong. Cynthia Ozick and Erica Jong. Cynthia Ozick’s novels, stories and novellas are not only steeped in internal Jewish life and lore to a degree that sets them apart from the work of her contemporaries and predecessors; they
are actually Jewish assaults on fields of Gentile influence. Though she admires the transforming magical kind of art, Ms. Ozick is in fact an intellectual writer whose works are the fictional realization of ideas.

But for Erica Jong, to write as a woman is to write from an extreme situation. Her two novels *Fear of Flying* and *How to Save Your Own Life* end with a kind of symbolic ritual baptism in celebration of the female body. Although Jong concentrates on woman’s body, its hungers, its drives, more centrally the novels are the story of a dying marriage and a woman’s odyssey to love. Jong’s writings pose the questions: what is it to be a woman? Where lies salvation?

Let us see what others have to say about Erica Jong;

a. Jong’s novel is triumph of fact as well as integrity, there are no wrong notes, and every detail is fully dramatized and completely functional. Each one is necessary to the central action at the same time that it reveals the nature of the characters; each is historically typical, and each also functions on a symbolic or mythical level.

b. “History has many cunning corridors, as T.S. Eliot remarked, and in the history of the feminist movement Ms. Jong’s corridor probably has a cunning peculiar to itself.


Cynthia Ozick`s reader is expected at the conclusion of her writings to have an insight, to understand the point of events rather than to respond to their affective power. Because she is a Jewish writer who prides herself on the ‘centrally Jewish’ quality of her work, she has hit a curious snag.

All the heroines of Erica Jong suffer due to their womanhood, but on the other hand also extract earthly pleasures. They represent modern woman, her plights, sorrows and also tremendous capacities. Erica Jong is always criticized for her free thoughts and writings on female sexuality. Yet, it is a dominant factor in all her works. But that does not mean that she is a porne or cheap writer. Apart from this one factor there are many more ones on which she focuses. Quest for identity, struggle for existence making a bright career in the age of male domination, celebration of motherhood and above all preservation of Jewishness, Jewish identity are also the elements on which she has written extensively in her five novels which we have considered here for discussion.
The problems of loss of memory and the possibilities or impossibilities of repairing that loss foregrounded everywhere in Ozick’s fiction. Ironically though the structure of her thinking about ethnicity emphasizes descent, Ozick’s historical situation places her in the role of evangelist or prophet calling for an alternative form of consent by which her Jewish audience and whatever gentiles are moved to do so – might come to inhabit Jewish memory anew.

Throughout Ozick’s fiction memories of the past or characters who embody the past appear in fantastic guise to warn of the consequences of forgetfulness or to provide some fragmentary instruction about the past.

I would like to conclude the discussion on comparison of writings of Cynthia Ozick and Erica Jong by saying that Ms. Jong and Mr. Ozick are two very famous Jewish – American writers Ms. Jong is a strong feminist and writes openly about sex and man – woman relationship, while Ms. Ozick writes about the traditional and modern Jewish morals and values. Erica Jong is a Jew, but a woman first, and being woman is a sin according to the males of the world. But Cynthia Ozick is a Jew, a staunch Jew.
NOTES:

1. The review of Anatole Broyard dated 11th June 1975 appeared in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* Vol. 13 P. No. 290

2. *Meet me in the Middle*, Charlotte Holt Clinebell. 1973, P.No. 70


6. Ozick Cynthia and Elaine M. Kanwar. *An interview with Cynthia Ozick* contemporary Literary criticism 34, No. 3 (fall 1993) P.No. 358-94.
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1. The Many Faces of Cynthia Ozick http://www.nge.peachnet.edu/academic/arts/Langlit/aproval/ozick.htm


5. An Interview with Cynthia Ozick conducted by Elaine M. Kauvar, Contemporary Literature vol. 34, No. 3, The University of Wisconsin Press Fall 1993.

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