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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

The author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a work of fiction. One practice of examining a literary work, biographical criticism, looks through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to more fully understand *The Shawl*.

Born in 1928 to a family of Russian immigrants, Cynthia Ozick spent her childhood in the Pelham Bay area of the Bronx. Her parents owned a neighborhood pharmacy. Ozick spent afternoons and evenings reading and re-reading such favorites as classic fairy tales and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Acceptance to Hunter College High School in New York, an academically competitive school for young women, gave her the confidence she needed to pursue her goal of becoming a writer.

Discussion Activities

Listen to the Big Read CD. Students should take notes as they listen. Copy and distribute the Reader's Guide essays "Cynthia Ozick" and "An Interview with Cynthia Ozick." Divide the class into two groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what they learned. Ask students to add a creative twist to make their presentation memorable.

Writing Exercise

Cynthia Ozick knew from the time she was a very small child that she would be a writer. Have students write a three-paragraph essay on the career they plan to pursue or another goal that will define their lives. When did they first become aware of their desire? Did they find encouragement from family, friends, or teachers? Was there pressure for or against their choice? If so, why? Ask students to consider what provides them with the confidence and discipline needed to achieve their dreams.

Homework

Read the opening short story, "The Shawl" (pp. 3-10) and Handouts One and Two. Ask students to make a list of ten adjectives or phrases Ozick uses to describe Rosa's, Magda's, or Stella's experience in the death camp.