

AN ANALYSIS OF THE WORKS OF TILLIE OLSEN WITH PARTICULAR  
EMPHASIS ON THE IMAGE OF THE MOTHER

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A THESIS  
in  
The Department  
of  
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Canada.

April, 1975

ABSTRACT

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The aim of this thesis is to examine and analyze the works of Tillie Olsen. Her non-fiction essays and articles are discussed in the context of her intentions as a writer and a literary historian. In the analysis of her fiction, the greatest emphasis is placed on "Tell Me A Riddle." There is a particular exploration of the image of the mother in her fiction, and the textual examination of each work is concerned mainly with the development of the female characters.

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Introduction

Tillie Olsen was born in Nebraska in 1913. She grew up in Omaha, and she has lived the larger part of her life in San Francisco.

She left high school during the Depression, and never returned to complete her formal education. As a young woman, she became involved in radical movements, primarily in labor and union activity. She married in 1936. Early in life she was bound to the responsibilities of raising a family. In her free time she devoted herself to political and community activity. It also was necessary for her to work outside the home during the next twenty-five years. She worked most of these years as a typist, transcriber, or secretary.

She had begun to write in her youth, but the realities of day-to-day living--working at a regular job and bringing up four children--in time compelled her to postpone her pursuit of writing.

Twenty years later, when pressures and obligations began to ease, she retrieved her writing self. Various fellowships and grants gave her enough uninterrupted time to complete the four stories collected in Tell Me A Riddle. "Tell Me A Riddle" itself won the O. Henry Award in 1961 for the year's best American short story, and has been widely anthologized. It is primarily on this story that

her reputation has been based. Her subsequent publication has not been large: one story which is part of a yet unpublished larger work, two articles, a biographical interpretation of the life and work of Rebecca Harding Davis, and Yonnondio, a novel begun in 1932.

While her output and her readership have been small (though both are growing at an increasingly rapid rate), her potential impact is enormous. She is an extraordinary prose stylist. However, she is more than a great crafts-woman: she is also a trailblazer. The dedication of Florence Howe's Presidential Address at the 88th Annual Convention of the MLA is not idle flattery:

I want to dedicate the talk . . . to Tillie Olsen, the teacher of us all. Her fiction, her life, and her learning sustain us, and inspire us to continue the work she has begun.

Tillie Olsen writes about the "ordinary" lives of "ordinary" women with a stunning perception and subtlety. The female lives in the four stories in Tell Me A Riddle form a panorama of female experience from early childhood to old age.

But Olsen's merit is not based only on her transmutation of woman's experience into literature. Her writing on women is profound and rare, but it is not unique. Another important aspect of "the work she has begun"

<sup>1</sup> Florence Howe, "Literacy and Literature," PMLA, 89 (May 1974), 441.

is her dynamic approach to literature. This approach is, reflected in her fiction, and also goes beyond it. In her teaching, writing and research, Olsen is committed to excavating and reconstructing the lives and literature that are recorded somewhere in time, but have been lost or neglected because they were the lives and work of the dispossessed and powerless: women and the poor.

This approach to literary history is dialectical and exciting. Implicit in her attitude is the belief that in the reclamation of a buried history there is a vital tradition to be salvaged, and a wealth of experience from which to learn. The theory is not new, but Olsen is not theorizing. She is digging.

## I. Roots

In 1934, Tillie Olsen (then Tillie Lerner), was twenty-one years old and deeply involved in the San Francisco General Strike. This was also the year of her first publications. In April, Partisan Review had printed her story entitled, "The Iron Throat." A few months later, Olsen wrote a remarkable piece of reportage--"The Strike"--also printed in Partisan Review, which chronicled the early days of the General Strike. Accompanying her article in that issue was the editorial note:

Tillie Lerner, arrested during the raids in San Francisco, has been recently released on bail, and is now completing a novel, part of which appeared in the April-May issue of Partisan Review. This fragment was singled out by Robert Cantwell as "a work of early genius" . . . .<sup>1</sup>

The "fragment" referred to is, in fact, the first pages of Yonnondio. This was the novel she was then in the process of completing. It was never actually finished. However, forty years later, the manuscript was retrieved, and "in arduous partnership" with an older self, painstakingly reconstructed and published as Yonnondio. Perhaps the closing lines of "The Strike" provide a clue to the reason for the forty year break between initial undertaking and eventual publication:

<sup>1</sup> Partisan Review, September 1934, p. 2.

Listen, it is late, I am feverish and tired. Forgive me that the words are feverish and blurred. You see, If I had time, If I could go away. But I write this on a battlefield.

The rest, the General Strike, the terror, arrests and jail, the songs in the night, must be written some other time, must be written later. . . . But there is so much happening now. . . .

"If I had time, If I could go away . . . must be written some other time, must be written later . . ."--these phrases form a refrain which not only explains the events of Olsen's life in 1934, but many of the years that followed as well. Over the next twenty years the responsibilities of raising a family of four daughters, the necessity of working outside the home at a variety of routine jobs, and the commitments of community activity, constituted and consumed Olsen's life. Time remaining to begin or to pursue writing was never hers.

Years later, circumstances having altered, Olsen salvaged the writer in herself and began again. Her act of personal retrieval, coupled with her attitudes to history and society, blended and meshed to produce a well-defined approach to literature and literary history. Accurately describing this approach, one critic writes:

Tillie Olsen is miner, archaeologist, and museum-curator for a special and growing collection. Special because in it she disdains her role of culture-bearer, of preserving man's culture, and salvages instead the work, the thought, the dream nearly buried beneath it because it belongs to the poor and forgotten, especially women. All her work--editing, compiling bibliographies of working class women's literature,



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essay and fiction-writing--springs from this single goal of reclamation. This involves tireless research and the skill of adjusting our vision so that we can understand and value, see what has been neglected before. The process is<sup>2</sup> conservative, the effect insidiously revolutionary.

This "single goal of reclamation" is not simply an outgrowth of an adopted historical analysis. Olsen is expressing more than an arbitrary choice by assuming the role of archaeologist. Her relation to the past is forged by more than an intellectual curiosity. Olsen rescued herself from the same inarticulate pit in which she now excavates. She identifies: she herself has emerged from the voiceless unrecorded past, and she bears its scars. Now, having emerged, her delving into history is also the telling of her story. She is not merely an interested spectator, but a survivor. During a question period after a reading of "Tell Me A Riddle," Olsen responds to the query, "'Why no bitterness?'":

... "Because I have been so fortunate in my life. I have been able to do something--to make these few stories--when so many like me have been denied the opportunity to come to any expression of their lives. Look at my parents and all those like them--working people--then those of my generation--and even my own children, none of them have come to writing. How can I be bitter when I have been able to do what so few of my sex and class have had the chance to do?"

<sup>2</sup> Bell Gale Chevigny, rev. of Yonnonidio, by Tillie Olsen, The Village Voice, 23 May 1974, p. 38.

And she adds, "You see, I am a survivor. Any woman who writes is a survivor."<sup>3</sup>

Though Olsen did "come to writing," it was a beleaguered and nearly belated arrival. As an artist, literary historian, and enquiring humanist, Olsen is as concerned with the lapses and pauses in a creative life, as with eventual accomplishment. In her view, barrenness and fruition are inextricably connected, the reasons for the former dictating the fate of the latter. In her essay, "Silences: When Writers Don't Write," Olsen explores this subject. Characteristically, she interweaves the evidence of other lives with personal observation and experience, ever seeking to understand and demystify. Stating at the outset of the article that "Literary history and the present are dark with silences,"<sup>4</sup> she makes it clear that her interest is vital rather than academic:

What is it that happens with the creator, to the creative process in that time? What are creation's needs for full functioning? Without intention of or pretension to literary scholarship, I have had special need to learn all I could of this over the years, myself so nearly remaining mute and having let writing die over and over again in me.

In the essay, Olsen is not concerned with the necessary silences "in the natural cycle of creation," nor does she explore the "absence of creativity," the

<sup>3</sup> Sandy Boucher, "Tillie Olsen: The Weight of Things Unsaid," Ms., September 1974, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Tillie Olsen, "Silences: When Writers Don't Write," Harper's, October 1965.

"ceasing to create literature, though the books keep coming out." Instead, she surveys the "unnatural silences" of known artists, quoting from journals, letters, and diaries. She discusses the predominant types of these "unnatural silences": the hidden silences of the famous, the silences of religious, political and self-censorship, the one-book silences, and the "foreground" silences. The compilation of the descriptions of various silences illustrates the tenuous bond between artist and creation, and demonstrates how easily a writer can be disturbed, distracted and disrupted. By extending the gist of these commentaries, Olsen is able to suggest a relation between these partial silences and a silence which is never pierced:

Very close to this last grouping are the silences where the lives never came to writing. Among these, the mute inglorious Miltons: those whose waking hours are all struggle for existence; the barely educated; the illiterate; women. Their silence the silence of centuries as to how life was, is, for most of humanity.

This establishes a tie between those who achieve in spite of obstacles, and those who never overcome the limitations of their condition. From the descriptions provided by various artists, Olsen then distills the fundamental reason for the success or failure of "the work of creation and the circumstances it demands for full functioning." On the basis of their statements--a repetition of the theme of "constant toil," "Without duties," "unconfined solitude,"

"a depth and continuity of attention and meditation" she concludes: "So there is a homely underpinning for it all, the even flow of daily life made easy and noiseless." To this conclusion she adds:

... substantial creative work demands time, and with rare exceptions only full-time workers have created it. Where the claims of creation cannot be primary, the results are atrophy; unfinished work; minor effort and accomplishment; silences.

From a variety of interpretations and experiences, Olsen has extracted the one crucial point on which all the writers she has quoted agree: the necessity of full time for full self. She rejects the theory that "starving in the garret makes great art" and views it as an impractical notion of limited applicability. She also emphasizes that while creative work can be postponed perhaps indefinitely, this is true only when the pace and length of time are controlled by inner direction rather than outside circumstance:

Subterranean forces can make you wait, but they are very finicky about the kind of waiting it has to be. Before they will feed the creator back, they must be fed, passionately fed, what needs to be worked on. . . . And when the response comes, availability to work must be immediate. If not used at once, all may vanish as a dream; worse, future creation be endangered, for only the removal and development of the material frees the forces for further work.

Having pieced together a model of the structure necessary for the pursuit of self-expression, and having

revealed that this structure rests on a foundation of a full-time full self, Olsen then examines the particular situation of women authors in the light of this knowledge. Since she subsequently devotes an entire essay to this subject, her comments in this article serve more as preamble than as exposition. In the context of "Silences: When Writers Don't Write," the conditions Olsen describes are of primary interest because they function as a springboard to, and reinforcement of, her own story, which she recounts so that "the individual experience may add." She explains her own history, a microcosm of the lives of so many women in the past and present:

In the twenty years I bore and reared my children, usually had to work on a job as well, the simplest circumstances for creation did not exist. Nevertheless writing, the hope of it, was "the air I breathed, so long as I shall breathe at all." In that hope, there was conscious storing, snatched reading, beginnings of writing, and always "the secret rootlets of reconnaissance."

According to Olsen, both male and female artists suffer from the disabling effects of having to work at everyday jobs. She maintains, however, that motherhood requires an unparalleled devotion, and therefore places a crushing burden on the individual artist-mother. For Olsen, and for countless other women writers whose art has been crowded out by their responsibilities as mothers, motherhood signals the death knell of creation:

Not because the capacities to create no longer exist, or the need (though for a while, as in any fullness of life, the need may be obscured) but because the circumstances for sustained creation are almost impossible. The need cannot be first. It can have at best, only part self, part time. . . . More than in any human relationship, overwhelmingly more, motherhood means being instantly interruptible, responsive, responsible. Children need one now. . . . The very fact that these are needs of love, not duty, that one feels them as one's self; that there is no one else to be responsible for these needs, gives them primacy. It is distraction, not meditation, that becomes habitual; interruption, not continuity; spasmodic, not constant toil. The rest has been said here. Work interrupted, deferred, postponed, makes blockage--at best, lesser accomplishment. Unused capacities atrophy, cease to be.

The article "Women Who Are Writers in Our Century: One Out of Twelve," continues the thematic thread of "Silences: When Writers Don't Write." In this essay, she develops her analysis of the circumstances which keep writers from writing, and explores the circumstances particular to women writers. Olsen's discussion of the suppression and perversion of the woman artist's attempts at self-expression also illuminates the characters in her fiction, primarily the mothers.

Olsen begins the article with a concise recapitulation of the conditions and attitudes that have molded women's history, emphasizing that the situation of contemporary women can be understood "only in the context of this punitive difference in circumstance, in history, between the sexes."<sup>5</sup> She then adds:

<sup>5</sup> Tillie Olsen, "Women Who Are Writers in Our Century: One out of Twelve," College English, 34 (October 1972).

How much it takes to become a writer. Bent . . . circumstances, time, development of craft-- but beyond that: how much conviction as to the importance of what one has to say, one's right to say it. And the will, the measureless store of belief in oneself to be able to come to, cleave to, find the form for one's own life comprehensions. Difficult for any male not born into a class that breeds such confidence. Almost impossible for a girl, a woman.

There is an important parallel between the stress Olsen places on self-awareness and self-assertion in the evolution of the creative artist on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the search for identity and meaning which forms the crucial driving force in most of her female characters. Writer and character meet and merge in the experience of being female: just as circumstance and conditioning hamper the creative development of the woman writer, they similarly retard self-discovery in the fictional character. Olsen describes the origins of a woman's suppression of self in the denial of her

power to do, to make, to investigate, to invent, to conquer obstacles; to resist violations of the self; to think, create, choose; to attain community, confidence in self.

It is precisely the knowledge of this thwarting of self that precipitates the conclusion of "I Stand Here Ironing," when the mother extracts from her contemplation of her daughter's past the basic hope that her daughter will transcend negative influence and become self-determining:

There is still enough left to live by. Only help her to know--help make it so that there is cause for her to know--that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron.

In "O Yes," Carol and Helen, daughter and mother, struggle together to "resist violations of the self," to achieve understanding and maintain integrity:

Mother, I want to forget about it all, and not care,--like Melanie. Why can't I forget? Oh why is it like it is and why do I have to care?

Caressing, quieting.

Thinking: caring asks doing. It is a long baptism into the seas of humankind, my daughter. Better immersion than to live untouched. . . . Yet how will you sustain?

Olsen does not denigrate motherhood, even though she recognizes that it is often the greatest deterrent to the individual woman's self-realization. In both her essays and her fiction, the diminishment of self is viewed as socially or circumstantially induced rather than inherent; a consequence of how our society defines the role of mother rather than an inescapable inevitability. She catalogues the names of great woman writers, all childless. But instead of accepting this list as undeniable testimony of a pre-ordained necessity, she laments that women have been compelled to choose between children and writing, and hypothesizes that their abilities might have been enhanced rather than destroyed had they been free to choose to nurture children as well as art:



Might there not have been other marvels as well, or other dimensions to these marvels? Might there not have been present profound aspects and understandings of human life as yet largely absent in literature?

She expresses similar sentiments in her fiction. The mothers in her stories and novel, while burdened and often stifled by their responsibilities, while separated from the needs of self by devotion to the needs of others, never denounce their motherhood. In "Tell Me A Riddle," Eva, though alienated from the members of her family and resentful of their perception of her, does not reject them in her search for identity, but waits until "the need was done" to begin the reconstruction of her self:

Somewhere an older power that beat for life.  
Somewhere coherence, transport, meaning. If  
they would but leave her in the air now stilled  
of clamor, in the reconciled solitude, to journey  
to her self.

In the essay, Olsen invokes Virginia Woolf's phrase to describe the way in which women are bred to be self-effacing and conciliatory in their family relationships: "The Angel in the House." She then uses this term as a stepping-stone to explicate a more fundamental role:

There is another angel, so lowly as to be invisible, although without her no art, or any human endeavor could be carried on for one day--the essential angel, with whom Virginia Woolf (and most women writers, still in the privileged class) did not have to contend--the angel who must assume the physical responsibilities for daily living; for the

maintenance of life.

Almost always in one form or another (usually in the wife, two-angel form) she has dwelt in the house of men.

This angel, "so lowly as to be invisible," is a central figure in all of Olsen's work. By bestowing on the housewife a crucial position in her fiction, Olsen is recording a neglected and major aspect of women's experience.

However, it is not her intention to idealize the labor of the housewife/homemaker. In her article she states:

. . . the disregard for the essential angel, the large absence of any sense of her in literature or elsewhere, has not only cost literature great contributions from those so occupied or partially occupied, but by failing to help create an arousing awareness (as literature has done in other realms) has contributed to the agonizingly slow elimination of this technologically and socially obsolete, human-wasting drudgery: Virginia Woolf's dream of a long since possible "economical, powerful and efficient future when houses will be cleaned by a puff of hot wind."

Housework is the never-ending routine from which it is impossible to derive any sense of real or lasting accomplishment, particularly in the context of poverty: decaying dwellings, cramped quarters, and large families. Yet countless women's lives are consumed by this "human-wasting drudgery." Olsen writes of it, not out of any desire to elevate or legitimize the labor, but rather to give it the dignity of recognition, and the criticism of exposure. In her fiction, the housewife's tasks are portrayed as Sisyphean, necessary but futile. In

Yonnondio, Anna struggles valiantly:

The weariness. The ghastly nausea in her belly (in all their bellies) from the stench. Ben feverish in bed with it. And her banner of defiance--up the first day--the clean cheese-cloth curtains, yellowing, browning. All that scrubbing to make a whiteness inside--and the stubborn walls and floors only a deeper smoke color. Even the cardboard tacked for a carpet in the front room so Jimmie crawling around would cease to be a graveyard for splinters--even that was damp and soggy and would have to be ripped up again. How the house resisted her.

In "Tell Me A Riddle," Eva's attempt to maintain order and cleanliness is recalled as a battle between herself and her family, which transforms the labor into meaningless obsession:

Tranquility from having the empty house no longer an enemy, for it stayed clean--not as in the days when it was in her family, the life in it, that had seemed the enemy: tracking, smudging, littering, dirtying, engaging her in endless defeating battle--and on whom her endless defeat had been spewed.

In the article "Women Who Are Writers in Our Century: One Out of Twelve," Olsen draws a parallel between her own search for a center, a "selfness," and Eva's "journey to her self." Both writer and character are mothers and have suffered the permanent damage of having been compelled to be "instantly interruptible." Olsen's attempt to salvage and discipline the writer buried in her, requires the same patient and painful process of uninterrupted solitude which Eva craves:

The years when I should have been writing, my hands and being were at other (inescapable) tasks. Now, lightened as they are, when I must do those tasks into which most of my life went, like the old mother, grandmother in my "Tell Me A Riddle" who could not make herself touch a baby, I pay a psychic cost: "the sweat beads, the long shudder begins." The habits of a lifetime when everything else had to come before writing are not easily broken, even when circumstances now often make it possible for the writing to be first; habits of years: response to others, distractibility, responsibility for daily matters, stay with you, mark you, become you. The cost of "discontinuity" . . . is such a weight of things unsaid, an accumulation of material so great, that everything starts up something else in me; what should take weeks, takes months to write; what should take months, takes years.

And in "Tell Me A Riddle," Eva wonders: "How was it that soft reaching tendrils also became blows that knocked?"

Eva is molded from Olsen's own experience. The product of Olsen's retrieval of her writing self--the character of Eva--recapitulates, in her search for self, the very process which culminated in her creation.

In this article, as in "Silences: When Writers Don't Write," Olsen emphasizes the bond between the innumerable women who do not achieve selfhood, and the multitude of writers who do not achieve creation. It is from their ranks that she emerged and was able eventually to "come to writing," and it is this fundamental human struggle that her writing commemorates:

I speak of myself to bring here the sense of those others to whom this is in the process of happening (unnecessarily happening, for it need not, must not continue to be) and to remind us of those (I so nearly was one) who

never come to writing at all.

We cannot speak of women writers in our century (as we cannot speak of women in any area of human achievement) without speaking also of the invisible; the also capable: the born to wrong circumstances, the diminished, the excluded, the lost, the silenced.

We who write are survivors, "onlys." One--  
out of twelve.

\* \* \*

In the notes to "A Biographical Interpretation" accompanying the reprint of Rebecca Harding Davis' "Life in the Iron Mills," Olsen explains her relation to the work:

I first read "Life in the Iron Mills" in one of three water-stained, coverless volumes of bound Atlantic Monthlys bought for ten cents each in an Omaha junkshop. I was fifteen. Contributions to those old Atlantics were published anonymously, and I was ignorant of any process whereby I might find the name of the author of this work which meant increasingly more to me over the years, saying "Literature can be made out of the lives of despised people," and "You, too, must write."

Instrumental in the reissuing of the Davis piece, Olsen, "miner, archaeologist," retrieved the story from an "ever deepening neglect" of one hundred and eleven years, and wrote a long biographical reconstruction, explaining and interpreting both Davis' life and work. She traces the growth of "the life of a daughter of the privileged class" who observed and absorbed with "quiet intensity" the world of the "yeasty, booming industrial town" of

Wheeling, West Virginia in the mid-1800's. In the beginning of her essay, Olsen insists that:

"Life in the Iron Mills" was not written out of compassion or condescending pity. The thirty-year-old Rebecca Harding who wrote it, wrote in absolute identification with "thwarted, wasted lives . . . mighty hungers . . . unawakened power"; despised love; circumstances that denied use of capacities; imperfect, self-tutored art that could have only odd moments for its doing--as if these were her own. And they were, however differently embodied in the life of a daughter of the privileged class.

In the subsequent piecing together of Davis' life, Olsen develops her assertion that Davis wrote "in absolute identification." According to Olsen's analysis, this identification was rooted in the situation of Davis' life which, while so obviously different from the condition of Hugh Wolfe, the impoverished mill-hand, nonetheless reveals a fundamental similarity in that there was a necessity "to tame and bind to some unfitting work the power within." Olsen emphasizes that Davis was constrained and repressed by the social forces of the day, forces which limited both the mental and physical horizons of a young "lady," and fostered instead a helplessness and naiveté which made ignorance fashionable and curiosity or creativity unwomanly. Unfortunately, however, there is no data recording

. . . how she faced down the harms and maimings of her personal situation, the self-scorn, the thwartings, and--fitted in between tasks and family needs, in secret and in isolation, without

literary friendship and its encouragement--  
developed an ear, a discipline, made of herself  
a writer . . . .

There is no proof that Davis was conscious of this  
bond of oppression. Somehow, "against the prevalent,"  
she "found her own subject." What Olsen quotes as Davis'  
own shred of explanation for the choice of "massed, vile,  
slimy lives" is her statement: "I live in the commonplace."  
Olsen points out that the correlation is not as obvious  
as Davis would have it appear:

But this "commonplace" was outside the permitted  
sphere. She was house-bound, class-bound,  
sex-bound; there was no way of natural, direct  
(participatory) access to the worlds of work  
and power for her.

Davis herself never benefited from what Olsen says  
she achieved: "Vision." While testifying to the half-lives  
of the mill workers, she was unable to make a leap to  
identification, and to demand her own right to "denied  
circumstances for full development":

Violations of human potentiality which she  
refused to accept as natural, as ordained,  
in "Life in the Iron Mills," she accepted  
as natural, as ordained, in the situation of  
women (including her own).

Because she believed in the "glories of keeping to woman's  
sphere," Davis' writing self suffered. Following "Life  
in the Iron Mills," Olsen claims that "She never wrote

anything of its classic quality after." Both the writer and her writing sank into oblivion.

Olsen salvaged the work, and laboriously reconstructed the life of the author. Partially, her motive was that the story had been such a major influence on her personal development as a writer: "You, too, must write." But Olsen also credits "Life in the Iron Mills" with more than a sentimental significance:

Myriads of human beings--those who did the necessary industrial work in the last century--lived and died and little remains from which to reconstruct their perished (vanished) lives. About them, as about so much else, literature was largely silent, and the charge can be levied: Nowhere am I in it. Unlimn'd they disappear.

No picture, poem statement, passing them to the future . . .

To those of us, descendants of their class, hungry for any rendering of what they were like, of how they lived, Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" is immeasurably precious. Details, questions, Vision, found nowhere else--dignified into living art.

Olsen quotes from the Whitman poem "Yonnondio"-- "Unlimn'd they disappear"--to convey the historical importance of "Life in the Iron Mills." She again borrows from this poem to title another labor of reconstruction, a work of her own retrieved from the past: her novel Yonnondio.

In fact, there is a complex connection between "Life in the Iron Mills" and Yonnondio which goes beyond this



incidental invocation of the poem. First, both works were salvaged from the past, a past in which Olsen's manuscript was buried and "Life in the Iron Mills" was forgotten. Both are the early products of young, relatively uneducated women. And both works share a similarity of subject matter. Olsen and Davis are concerned with the same class of people, and focus particularly on poverty's brutalization of the human spirit. They both aim to evoke how it feels to be poor, rather than to describe only the physical hardships of an impoverished existence. One critic comments that "when she describes Davis' attempt to find a vision in poverty-twisted existences, Olsen could be describing Yonnondio."<sup>6</sup> There is even a resemblance in stylistic structure:

The cadences of Yonnondio seem almost a development of the structure of "Life in the Iron Mills." Lyrically brutal scenes are followed by pleas that the reader connect these lives with his own. Sentences break off midway; transitions are surprisingly abrupt. But what is a losing struggle with words in Davis is distinctively rhythmic in Olsen.

The crucial distinction between "Life in the Iron Mills" and Yonnondio (aside from the obvious differences as works of literature), is the position each work has in the life and career of the individual author. "Life in

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Yardley, "Yonnondio: From the Thirties," The New Republic, 30 March 1974, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

the Iron Mills" was published when Davis was thirty. It won her instant acclaim, and no subsequent endeavor equalled it in quality or fame. Olsen, however, has done a rare thing by publishing a forty-year-old manuscript at this point in her creative life:

So many of our writers of stature suppress, hide the books which were the very touchstones for discovery of their talent, the first books which went unread, unpublished. . . . Though a public now exists which would read these books with interest, they are turned aside as bastard children, unworthy of their author's current reputation; in consequence, we are too often left with the impression that important writers spring like Minerva, from the head of Jupiter, full-grown, replete with wisdom and skill. Tillie Olsen would no longer write a book flawed in the ways of Yonnondio but she has sent it forth, and it stands as a frank encouragement to younger writers to see, to learn, to know that even great talent is not always perfect in its inclination, in its shape, and that what inspires those imperfect efforts is not of itself less worthy than what will be said later with great finesse. <sup>8</sup>

It is impossible to be certain whether or not Olsen intended the publication of Yonnondio to be an inspiration to "younger writers." But what can be stated with certainty is that the retrieval and reconstruction of the manuscript is consistent with Olsen's historical approach to literature. It is not only proof of her artistic integrity, but also a reflection of her commitment to resurrect "the dream nearly buried beneath . . ." The publication of Yonnondio--like the themes of her essays, the characters

<sup>8</sup> Scott Turow, rev. of Yonnondio: From the Thirties, by Tillie Olsen, Ploughshares, 2, No. 2 (1974), 116-117.

in her fiction, and her interpretation of Rebecca Harding Davis' life--testifies to the human and historical importance of reclaiming what is forgotten or buried in the past in order to understand the complex realities of the present.

## II. Yonnondio

The circumstances leading to the publication of Yonnondio are in striking parallel to the actual content of the novel. In "A Note About This Book," Olsen explains the losing and finding of the work:

This book, conceived primarily as a novel of the 1930's, was begun in 1932 in Faribault, Minnesota, when the author was nineteen, and worked on intermittently into 1936 or perhaps 1937. . . . Unfinished, it yet bespeaks the consciousness and roots of that decade, if not its events.

Thought long since lost or destroyed, some of its pages were found intermixed with other old papers last winter, during the process of searching for another manuscript. A later, more thorough, search turned up additional makings: odd tattered pages, lines in yellowed notebooks, scraps. Other parts, evidently once in existence, seem irrevocably lost.

Pages nearly lost forever, and in those pages characters nearly destroyed, their existence precarious, their story barely remembered in the annals of history. The history of the manuscript, lost and then retrieved many years later, echoes the themes and characters of the novel, dramatically emphasizing the proximity of the oblivion above which the Holbrooks continuously battle to maintain themselves.

While the parallel between buried lives and buried manuscript is perhaps only an interesting coincidence, the choice of title is deliberate, consciously intertwining content and circumstance. The Whitman poem, "Yonnondio,"

("Lament for the aborigines"), 'can be related equally to the odyssey of the Holbrook family and to the history of Olsen's manuscript:

No picture, poem, statement, passing them to the future:  
Yonnondio! Yonnondio!--unlimn'd they disappear . . .

By using the title of the poem, Olsen links story to author, simultaneously recognizing that her entire manuscript narrowly avoided being lost forever--still it is incomplete --and that history has scarcely recorded the innumerable lives carved out of poverty. This novel is only/a fragment, and a rare one.

The stylistic details of Yonnondio foreshadow later techniques. There are passages of lyric intensity which transport the reader into the consciousness of the characters. The language is vivid and metaphoric. Olsen uses repetition of words and phrases to create and reinforce effect. Emphasis shifts often and abruptly from one character to another, forming a panorama of impressions.

The stylistic structure of Yonnondio provides insight into the evolution of a craft. While in later works Olsen's style is purified of the excesses and awkwardness present in Yonnondio, it is clear that a fundamental manner of presentation was fashioned in the writing of this first work. The manipulation of multiple viewpoints--a technique which is crucial to the formation of her later stories--

is anticipated in Yonnondio. Even the language of the novel is a precursor of the distinctive pattern of her diction in evidence in her later stories; for example: "the words, the words leaping" in Yonmondio, compared to "the songs and phrases leaping" in "Tell Me A Riddle"; and the "slit of window" in both Yonnondio and "Tell Me A Riddle."

In Yonnondio, Olsen develops the story mainly through the presentation of numerous characters, as well as, at times, concentrating on one character exclusively. The city's insidious effect on the Holbrooks is conveyed through a composite portrait of the family:

A man's face, heavy and sullen (strange and bright the blue of his eyes), moves here awhile and is gone Jim; a woman's face, thinning, skin tightening over the broad cheekbones, the great dark eyes down a terrace of sunken flesh, fading until the eyelids shut over forever Anna. A child's thin face looks up a moment, wondering dazed eyes Mazie; a boy's face, scowl over the mouth, eyes hurt with the hurt of not understanding, then insane with anger Will. On this face, half baby's, half child's, the breath of fever glows, closing the sober eyes; a tiny boy running along croons a song that is silenced; a tiny girl's fists beat the air, stiffening, stiffened Ben, Jimmie, Baby Bess.

In "Tell Me A Riddle," Olsen perfects this technique.

In that work, she transforms narrative descriptions into voices, and captures the essence of character and circumstance in fleeting conversation and thought.

The role of the narrator in Yonmondio also foreshadows a later refinement. Whereas, in subsequent works, the voice of the narrator blends with the flow of the story, subtly

illuminating, in this novel narrative commentary is set in counterpoint to the text, underlining rather than illuminating:

He didn't know, so the big sap threw it up, he threw up his job, thinking he was flinging his challenge into the teeth of life, proclaiming I'm a man, and I'm not taking crap offn anybody, I'm goin to live like a man. There's more to life than workin everything you got to live with outa you in order to keep a job, taking things no man should stand for to keep a job. So he threw it up, the big sap, not yet knowing a job was a straw and every man (having nothing to sell but his labor power) was the drowning man who had no choice but to hang onto it for notsodear life.

Thus, a retrospective analysis of Olsen's style in Yonnonidio reveals the beginnings of a great talent.

\* \* \*

The poverty in Yonnonidio is pervasive. It follows the Holbrooks from a Wyoming mining town to a South Dakota tenant farm and then to a Midwestern city. The context of the poverty changes with each locale; nonetheless, the effect is unrelenting and uniform. The condition of the family is a constant fragile balance between starvation and subsistence, which compels the Holbrooks to expend every particle of energy and ingenuity on basic survival. The residue of this kind of living is frustration, perpetual insecurity, and haunting fear. One reviewer writes that the poverty in Yonnonidio "does not so much shatter

as grind down to an exhausted dust the vital universe " of its victims."<sup>1</sup> This interpretation is supported by Olsen's consistent emphasis on the corrosive effect of poverty on the human spirit. In the novel, she chronicles not only poverty's destructiveness to the body, but also its brutal assault on the mind:

Your father had dreams. You too, like all boys, had dreams--vague dreams, of freedom and light and cheering throngs and happiness. The earth will take those too. You will leave them in, to replace the coal, to bear up the roof instead of the pillar the super ordered you to rob. Earth sucks you in, to spew out the coal, to make a few fat bellies fatter. Earth takes your dreams that a few may languidly lie on couches and trill "How exquisite" to paid dreamers.

To be poor is to be powerless. The members of the Holbrook family have no control over their environment. When a particular place becomes unbearable, their only option is to leave and to hope that their suffering will be diminished in different surroundings. Similarly, each member of the family must continuously strive to keep spirit alive, to struggle against a lifelong dulling, to fight strictures on the imagination--strictures insidiously constructed and daily reinforced by unalleviated hardship and despair. In Yonnondio, Olsen charts this difficult battle to maintain dignity and expand awareness primarily through the characters of Mazie and Anna.

<sup>1</sup> Annie Gottlieb, rev. of Yonnondio, by Tillie Olsen, New York Times Book Review, 31 March 1974, p. 5.



In the beginning of the novel, Mazie's most evident trait is her curiosity. Though Anna muses that Mazie acts "like a woman sometimes," her childish inquisitiveness and impulse to learn still predominate:

Mazie pushed her mind hard against things half known, not known. "I am Mazie Holbrook," she said softly. "I am a-knowen things. I can diaper a baby. I can tell ghost stories. I know words and words. Tipple. Edjication. Bug dust. Superintendent. . . . The sun is makin a fire on me, but it is not black. Some color I am not knowen it is," she said wistfully, "but I'll have that learnin' someday."

Later, the relocation of the family to a farm opens a fresh and beautiful natural world to Mazie. It is also here that she meets Elias Caldwell. He teaches her and transforms her fantasies and speculations into knowledge. Her response to his information illustrates not only an openness and understanding, but also a dawning of the awareness that she is deprived, that she lacks access to the tools of learning:

As his words misted into the night and disappeared, she scarcely listened--only the aura over them, of timelessness, of vastness, of eternal things that had been before her and would be after her, remained and entered into her with a great hurt and wanting.

Mazie's experience in school is mentioned briefly. We are left with the impression that, while she has no difficulty with the lessons, her shame over her shabby clothes creates an insurmountable barrier, permanently alienating

her from formalized education: "For the first time, Mazie was acutely conscious of her scuffed shoes, rag-bag clothes, quilt coat."

The incident of Mazie's running through the corn field, her feet slashed by the stubble, while "a hunger and fear pushed her forward" to Caldwell's house, has symbolic implications. Olsen writes: "There was something to escape from," the life of humiliation and conditioned ignorance. As she runs, and "the corn stubble cut into her bare feet," the barrenness of an impoverished existence is evoked. The fruit of the field, the living purpose of it has been removed, cut down. Similarly, a center, a freedom has been taken from Mazie's life. The stubble in the field is the stubble of her existence, the meagre remains allotted to Mazie. The stubble slashes and pains like the denied opportunities for self-discovery and self-expression that torment Mazie's consciousness. She runs to Caldwell, seeking the vitalizing influence and comfort of his experience. But Caldwell is dying. Desperately, the young frightened girl tries to formulate a personal meaning from the essential wisdom which the old dying man urgently attempts to convey:

"You don't know how few . . . 'Better,' your mother says, 'to be a cripple and alive than dead, not able to feel anything.' But there is more--to rebel against what will not let life be. Your mother thought to move from the mine to the farm would be enough, but . . ."

Caldwell's deathbed thoughts, and his attempt to bequeath a kernel of truth as affirmation of the ideals that directed his living, are a preview of Eva's search for purpose in "Tell Me A Riddle," a preview that is startling in its similarity of core meaning:

An old man . . . tries to tell a child something of all he has learned, something of what he would have her live by--and hears only incoherent words come out. . . . To die, how bitter when nothing was done with my life. . . . Nothing of it is said.

In Yonondio, however, Caldwell's words are "a chaos of inarticulateness." Mazie senses their importance, but cannot harness their intention for her own benefit. To her, his words are "meaningless and strange, meaningless when one tries to understand, but meaningful for a fleeting second."

Leaving the farm precipitates a crisis which permanently alters Mazie's character. Life on the farm gave her a certain contemplative freedom. By comparison, the city is a claustrophobic hell. Mazie withdraws. She retreats into a world of memory: recollections of the farm are a salve. They form into a protective haze which intercedes between her mind and outer reality:

Only Mazie did not see. Still she lived on the farm in June, in early June, when a voluptuous fragrance lay over the earth. Wooden she moved about, lifting and washing and eating, and always a scarcely perceptible smile about her mouth. . . . Enveloped in the soft dream of the farm, she was secure. Hollow and unreal

the dirty buildings and swarming people revolved about her, flat like a picture that her hand could smash through and see the rolling fields and roads of home just beyond.

In shielding herself from her surroundings, Mazie is not merely hiding herself from "a voiceless dream to be endured," but is also attempting to liberate her spirit. She is clinging to Caldwell's advice that "Whatever happens, remember, everything, the nourishment, the roots you need, are where you are now." She battles valiantly against the brutalizing and atrophying effect of her present environment by filling her mind with the world of the farm, thereby trying to ensure the freedom and development of her consciousness.

For a time, the farm is uppermost in her mind, but eventually the memories recede and the immediate reasserts itself. Mazie becomes absorbed into an everyday world. Where there was once resistance, there is now identification. Mazie's creative energies become devoted to the activities of her peers. The impulse to transcend is replaced by the compulsion to escape:

Children--already stratified as dummies in school, condemned as unfit for the worlds of learning, art, imagination, invention--plan, measure, figure, design, invent, construct, costume themselves, stage dramas; endlessly--between tasks, errands, smaller children to be looked after, jobs, dailinesses--live in passionate absorbed activity, in rapt make-believe.

While Mazie's intelligence and imagination are still stimulated and utilized, her earlier "great hurt and wanting" is submerged in fantasy. Along with other children educated by poverty, she has turned from books, from the world of structured learning, "in outraged self-respect." The boundaries of her universe shrink. "Ginella's palace" is now her greatest source of wonder and excitement.

Because the novel is unfinished, it is impossible to gauge whether Mazie will completely succumb to her numbing environment, or whether she will reject the powerlessness it engenders, and instead attempt to achieve control over her life and the forces that govern it. But while it is difficult to be certain about Mazie's future, Olsen has made it clear that the impediments to self-determination are so numerous and insidious that transcendence is improbable.

When the focus shifts from Mazie to Anna, the limitations of youth and innocence are transcended and a world of adult experience and complexity is revealed. Through the character of Anna, Olsen is able to develop situations and pose questions which are of a more basic nature. Not only does Anna's world provide a more complete portrait of the effects of poverty on a human being, but it also provides a context in which to explore possibilities of successful defiance and struggle against paralyzing and brutalizing forces.

It is primarily through an exploration of Anna as

mother that this portrait is drawn. The suppression of her individuality because of the grueling demands of her role--mother, poor mother--and her agony over the thwarting and perversion of her children's vitality, together form a composite picture of how poverty destroys life, and how life battles fiercely against the exigencies of poverty.

One of the earliest informative references to Anna is made by Caldwell. In offering advice to Mazie, he gives this description of her mother:

"Mazie. Live, don't exist. Learn from your mother, who has had everything to grind out life and yet has kept life. Alive, felt what's real, known what's real. People can live their whole life not knowing."

While Anna's strength of character is affirmed consistently throughout the novel, it is a strength which seems to emanate exclusively from a vast mothering love, rather than also from a determined sense of self. In fact, we are given only rare glimpses of Anna the individual. While traveling to the farm, the beauty of the countryside inspires a hushed singing, singing which "unfolded memories of past years," momentarily revealing Anna's heritage:

A memory, unasked, plunged into her mind--her grandmother bending in such a twilight over lit candles chanting in an unknown tongue, white bread on the table over a shining white tablecloth and red wine--she broke into the song to tell Jim of it . . .

There is no subsequent mention of this or any other important concrete connection to the past. Whatever meaning Anna's Jewish heritage could possibly have (Anna herself cannot provide the memory with a context, as evidenced by the ellipsis), is lost along with other innumerable details of personal history, lost because the meaning of the history is lost:

A muffled sonorous sound, a wailing word is borne  
through the air for a moment,  
Then blank and gone and still, and utterly lost.<sup>2</sup>

For Anna, this loss has a dual implication: her individuality is submerged in mothering, and her historical identity has been rendered irrelevant by the leveling effect of poverty.

Only when her miscarriage confines her to bed and the daily routine of her life is interrupted does Anna experience a quiet and detachment which, while short-lived, precipitate a fleeting encounter with her self:

And a separation, a distance--something broken  
and new and tremulous--had been born in her,  
lying by herself those long unaccustomed hours  
free of task.

This feeling of separation never achieves a fuller expression than vague smiles, bits of old songs, far-away looks, indicating an otherness, but not describing, identifying or retrieving that buried self:

<sup>2</sup> Walt Whitman, "Yonnondio."

Mazie felt that strange happiness in her mother's body, happiness that had nought to do with them, with her; happiness, and farness and selfness.

However, "Never again, but once, did Mazie see that look-- the other look-- on her mother's face." It is ironic that the only recurrence of "that look" is not recorded in the novel, perhaps lost in one of the "fragments . . . telling what might have been."

Whatever happiness or comfort Anna may derive from the memory of an earlier time, the effect of this remembering on her behavior is in conflict with her image and responsibilities as mother. When her attention to her children is divided, they do not understand, and they are frightened by this strange alien self:

A remote, shining look was on her face, as if she had forgotten them, as if she had become someone else, was not their mother anymore. "Ma, come back," Mazie felt like yelling, in rancor, in fear; jumping up, snapping her fingers into that dreaming face to bring attention, consciousness of them back, make it the old known face again.

But what blocks Anna from "selfness" is the sheer crushing weight of being poor. Because she must bring to bear the full force of her mind on the never-ending problems of raising a family on too little of everything, there is no time or place for contemplation, and seemingly no need for memory or history. There is never enough money, time, love, peace, health, patience, knowledge, so that living is a cycle of searching and straining, which



requires total devotion. The order which Anna creates through unceasing labor gives their lives a veneer of accomplishment, a sense of daily victory over hopelessness. When Anna abandons her vigilance, the ensuing disorder brings to the surface the underlying futility of their lives. The incident when Anna--pregnant with Bess, her mind adrift, the chores neglected--apathetically allows the chicks to burn in the stove, illustrates how easily the family plunges into chaos when she relaxes her control:

The afternoon was a short gray blur . . . Nobody noticed when the sheep became hysterical and finally ceased. Mazie and Ben peopled a city with things cut out of a catalogue, while Will watched them, his head a tangle of fever . . . Anna sat unmoving by the stove, her hands over her belly, a half smile of wisdom on her mouth, coming out of her dream to say, "Wipe Jim's nose, Mazie. I see the grease didn't no good to drive that cough out, Will." And then sinking back into the dream again.

Aware of this process, Anna represses "selfness." For the large part of the novel, Anna is completely devoted to the maintenance of her family, so that their needs are forged with her being, becoming raison d'être, becoming a surrogate self.

The deterioration of Anna's health, a consequence of malnutrition, overwork, exhaustion, six pregnancies in eight years--the poor health of poor living--illustrates the futility of her attempt to provide better lives for her children. It is a vicious circle: her trying makes her ill,

and her illness makes her unable to try:

The cumulating vision of overwhelming, hostile forces surrounding which had come to Anna that week of the clinic, never left her. But she was not strong enough to contend with it now. Only sporadically could she try to order, do something about their lives.

The break in routine while she is convalescing, coupled with her visit to the clinic where the terrifying message of the posters is branded in her mind ("Dirt, the poster said. Dirt Breeds Disease."), force Anna to confront a reality from which she was hidden by all-encompassing pain and obsessive labor:

Her fists are clenched, and behind her eyes the unshed tears stand in knots of pain. Money, she is thinking, sicknesses. Streets. Dirt. The children, my children. What is happening to them, what will be? My babies, my children. Outside no answer. . . . My children, the children.

Heavy to take up again, being poor and a mother.

Anna realized that it is "beyond any effort or doing of hers: that task of making a better life for her children," and her response is frantic activity. Cleaning and scheming, she again attempts to lose herself in "that task . . . to which her being was bound." But her body cannot sustain the frenzy of compulsive work, and her consciousness returns, defeated, to the awareness that she alone cannot transform her children's destinies: "Seems like we cant do nothing for them."

Mazie and Anna are victims, their characters incomplete and essentially devastated. But the cast of their lives is moulded by omission as much as by recorded circumstance. Yonnondio is not only a chronicle of the hardships of a poor family, in which humiliation and deprivation are catalogued. Weaving through the novel and through the characters of Mazie and Anna, is "a longing, a want undefined, for something lost, for something never known."

This undercurrent is a lifeline to the future. In their silences, lapses, losses, Mazie and Anna are the embryonic manifestation of many of Olsen's later characters. Jeannie and Helen in "Hey Sailor, What Ship?," Carol and Helen in "O Yes," Emily and her mother in "I Stand Here Ironing," and Eva in "Tell Me A Riddle"--all these characters originate in Yonnondio. Their individual struggles for meaning, for coherence, and for transcendence, can be traced to the failing attempts of Mazie and Anna.

Olsen's ending to Yonnondio, while not a conclusion ("it was not to have ended here"), emphasizes this foreshadowing, this link to the future:

Bang!

Bess has been fingering a fruit-jar lid--absently, heedlessly dropped it--aimlessly groping across the table, reclaimed it again. Lightning in her brain. She releases, grabs, releases, grabs. I can do. Bang! I can do. I! A Neanderthal look of concentration is on her face. . . . Centuries of human drive work in her; human ecstasy of achievement, satisfaction deep and fundamental as sex: I achieve, I use my powers; I! I! Wilder, madder, happier the bangs. The fetid fevered air rings with Anna's, Mazie's, Ben's laughter; Bess's toothless, triumphant crow. Heat

misery, rash misery transcended.

This ending, affirming life, rebirth, progress, is, in fact, a beginning. In Yonnondio, the unfolding of Olsen's art and visions begins. Mazie and Anna, lost in their own time, and lost in the "scraps . . . telling what might have been," are resurrected and flourish in the lives Olsen will form from their ashes.

### III. "Hey Sailor, What Ship?"

In Yonnondio, Anna remembers her brother, Ralph, "the one that ships." She tells her children--"Ralph's been everywhere. Wonders of the world." In "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" Whitey is the one who has roamed the world, and visited all the places that Anna recalls only from picture books. But Whitey has not obtained health, security or happiness in his travels, and his abundant experience and knowledge have been accumulated at the expense of loving, sustaining relationships.

This story is ultimately concerned with the limitations of love and friendship. Caring enough is not the issue. The limitations are in the matters that love cannot affect or change. It is a dilemma of humanity rather than morality.

Like all long-term and familiar things, a friendship, such as the one among Whitey and Lennie and Helen, becomes patterned, taking on a life of its own based on habit and expectation. Thus, no matter how deep affection may flow, there is an inherent tendency towards inflexibility. If changes in the life of one of the friends do not coincide with what is familiar, they may be distorted or edited, instead of incorporated into the body of the friendship. Subtly and slowly, each friend's vision of another can become selective, ignoring developments and omitting inconsistencies.

Objective appraisal is blurred and replaced by an attempt to control reality.

Time, the element which constructs and cements deep friendship, also has the power to destroy what it has created. In this story, time is the controlling force. It provides the story with both structure and meaning: the author's stylistic manipulation of time is the method for expressing the effects of time passing on individuals and among friends.

Time is therefore presented with all the confusion and complexity of the multiple points of view that have attempted to harness it. It is transformed into a subjective and passive entity, responding to personal needs, rather than dynamically molding a collective experience. Defined differently by the scope and interests of each person, the components of time--past, present and future--are accorded a relative and varied importance.

Jeannie, for instance, with all the self-righteousness of her youth, arrogantly refuses to admit all formulations other than the evidence of the present. Having no recollection of Whitey's earlier days, and being too young to be humbled by the convolutions of a personal history, she finds the past implausible and irritating:

Now you're going to tell me the one about how he saved Daddy's life in the strike in 1934.

He knows more about people and places than almost anyone I've ever known. You can learn from him.

When's he like that any more? He's just a Howard Street wino, that's all.

Her vision beyond the present extends forward into the future, rather than back into the past. She is impatient to grow up. Reminders of the past do not propel her where she wants to go. Whitey's hazy grip on the present, and tenuous claim on the future, enable Jeannie to discredit his past, and reinforce her desire to obliterate his presence from her life.

Lennie and Helen, however, want desperately to cling to the past. Their love for Whitey, their understanding and appreciation of his way of life, their respect for his experience, their admiration of his vitality: all is rooted in the past, in who and what Whitey used to be:

To Lennie he remained a tie to adventure and a world in which men had not eaten each other; and the pleasure, when the mind was clear, of chewing over with that tough mind the happenings of the times or the queerness of people, or laughing over the mimicry.

To Helen he was the compound of much help given, much support; the ear to hear, the hand that understands how much a scrubbed floor, or a washed dish, or a child taken care of for a while, can mean.

They cannot cope emotionally with the disintegration of Whitey's personality, because to admit the tragedy would be to accept the defeat of a personal ideal: the

ideal of an exciting and courageous life, a life which Whitey lived. In the past, their manner of living was a complement to Whitey's, each providing what was essentially lacking in the other, exchanging comfort for adventure, and family warmth for exhilarating independence. Now the two lifestyles conflict. The rhythm has been lost, and rather than blend, they grate. Lennie and Helen also do not want to yield to the present because, aside from reflecting the outcome of old dreams, the present offers only sadness and frustration. Their impulse is to help where help is impossible:

How can we help caring, Whitey? Jesus, man, you're a chunk of our lives.

Shove it, Lennie. So you're a chunk of my life. So?

They cannot witness or be accomplices to Whitey's doom. Therefore it is preferable to release him from their lives rather than watch his inevitable destruction.

Whitey wants only to forget. The dimension in which he chooses to dwell is neither past nor present, but in the realm of not remembering. He moves neither forward nor backward, only downward. His broken spirit, his sick body, his alcoholic consciousness, are parts of a man tormented by the effects of time. He has abandoned history and identity in favor of suspension in timelessness. This timelessness is one prolonged moment, the moment when he stopped the progress of his life and



stepped outside of it, refusing to create a future and accepting the consequences of an eternal present of self-destruction:

Remember too much, too goddam much. For twenty-three years, the watery shifting: many faces, many places.

But more and more, certain things the same. The gin mills and the cathouses. The calabozas and jails and stockades. More and more New York and Norfolk and New Orleans and Pedro and Frisco and Seattle like the foreign ports: docks, clip joints, hockshops, cathouses, skid rows . . .

These various attitudes towards and manipulation of time are expressed and developed through Olsen's method of presentation. Primarily, the manner of telling mirrors Whitey's semi-awareness and confusion. The effect is hallucinatory. Shimmering, distorted as through a fish-eye lens, contradictory, abrupt and disjointed, Olsen's prose portrays a man for whom the memories of time are an agony necessitating the oblivion of alcohol. Time is life lost, repressed, remembered, forgotten, lost again, retrieved, destroyed.

Whitey's relationship to the passage of time and events is the classic alcoholic's amnesia and subsequent attempt to reconstruct petty detail. His alcoholism is thus a prevailing symbol of his profound disorientation and alienation. Following the pattern of his addiction, Olsen explores the disorder of Whitey's mind. This disorder is stylistically conveyed through short or incomplete sentences, the repetition of certain words,

and the interpolation of particular phrases.

Whitey is in a stupor in which concentration and continuity are minimal. Caught between desires and plans on the one hand, and indecision and loss of memory on the other, his thoughts are chaotic and muddled:

But Bell sold. Forgot, forgot. Took his cushion and moved to Petaluma to raise chickens. Well hell with you. Got any friends? then hell with your friends. Go to Pearl's. (Not Lennie and Helen and the kids?) See what's new or old. Got 'ruf lettuce for them babies. . . . Get a bottle first.

He verifies experience by cataloguing forgotten and purposeless details, rather than pursuing intentions and destinations:

Where'd it all go? and he lurches through the past. One hundred and fifty draw yesterday. No, day before, maybe even day 'fore that. Seven for a bottle when cashed the check, twenty to Blackie, thirty-three back to Goldballs, cab to Frisco, thirty-eight, thirty-nine for the jacket and the kicks (new jacket, new kicks, look good to see Lennie and Helen and the kids), twenty-four smackers dues and ten-dollar fine. That fine. . . .

This atmosphere of dislocation is further amplified by the usage of short and incomplete sentences:

Gotta . . .

Gotta something. Stand watch? No, din't show last night, ain't gonna show tonight, gonna sign off. Out loud: Hell with ship. You got any friends, ship? then hell with your friends. That right, Deeck?

These abrupt and dangling phrases reflect the fact that Whitey cannot maintain memory long enough to achieve coherence. He persistently loses his train of thought. He is unable to recall an incident from either the recent or distant past without trailing off or being consumed by a paralyzing anguish which halts the memory.

The story is peppered with words and phrases which describe and reinforce the relation which Olsen's characters have to time. They are variations on the theme of time lost, time remembered, and time confused. Examples of these words and phrases are: "long ago" (repeated frequently), "Wha time's it anyway?," "Forgot, forgot," "what's new, or old," "a worn likeness of Lennie," "four days and everything else too late," "Who is real and who is not?," "And is he really here?," "Don't you remember?," "lost country to him and unattainable," "it is Jeannie, so much like Helen of years ago," "It's late, it's early," "Oh feeling good, come back, come back."

The recurrence of the refrain "Hey Sailor, what ship?," emphasizes Whitey's rootlessness. Jeannie calls it "his long ago greeting," implying that the question is from another, earlier era. Along with the thread of sea imagery in the story, Whitey's greeting substantiates the impression that he is adrift, floating, homeless. The phrase is haunting, creating an image of Whitey as ghostlike, wandering lost through time.

Whitey's interaction with the family illustrates the differences between their worlds. His drunken and suspended

These abrupt and dangling phrases reflect the fact that Whitey cannot maintain memory long enough to achieve coherence. He persistently loses his train of thought. He is unable to recall an incident from either the recent or distant past without trailing off or being consumed by a paralyzing anguish which halts the memory.

The story is peppered with words and phrases which describe and reinforce the relation which Olsen's characters have to time. They are variations on the theme of time lost, time remembered, and time confused. Examples of these words and phrases are: "long ago" (repeated frequently), "Wha time's it anyway?," "Forgot, forgot," "what's new, or old," "a worn likeness of Lennie," "four days and everything else too late," "Who is real and who is not?," "And is he really here?," "Don't you remember?," "lost country to him and unattainable," "it is Jeannie, so much like Helen of years ago," "It's late, it's early," "Oh feeling good; come back, come back."

The recurrence of the refrain "Hey Sailor, what ship?," emphasizes Whitey's rootlessness. Jeannie calls it "his long ago greeting," implying that the question is from another, earlier era. Along with the thread of sea imagery in the story, Whitey's greeting substantiates the impression that he is adrift, floating, homeless. The phrase is haunting, creating an image of Whitey as ghostlike, wandering lost through time.

Whitey's interaction with the family illustrates the differences between their worlds. His drunken and suspended

perception separates him from the exuberant yet ordered cohesiveness of the family. Their lives surge with the flow of time and progress, while he stands immobile, stranded outside the clamor of meaning and events. What was in the past a counterpoint between two complementary experiences, a harmony between differing expressions of vitality, is now the clash of distinct and opposing tempos. Where there was once consideration, mutual love and benefit, there is now misunderstanding and short tempers. Where Whitey once enriched, he now disrupts. Olsen's clipped combative dialogue dramatizes this estrangement:

Who gives a shit about the dishes?

Watch it, says Helen.

Whenja start doin' dishes in this house after dinner anyway?

Since we got organized, says Lennie, always get things done when they're supposed to be.

Whitey and the family not only live out two different lifestyles, but also seem to live within different dimensions of time, space and sound. The clarity of the family's life--consecutive, structured, and quiet with the calm of purpose--causes Whitey torment by focusing on and refracting the isolation and hopelessness of his existence:

He wakes into an unshared silence he does not recognize, accustomed so to the various voices of the sea . . . or hazed through drink, the noises of the street, or the thin walls like ears--magnifying into lives as senseless as one's own.

Here there is only the whisper of the clock (motor by which this house runs now) and the sounds of oneself.

The trembling will not cease.

\* \* \*

Thus, the actual manner of Olsen's presentation delineates the various relationships which the characters have to time and memory. The predominant stylistic temperament reflects Whitey's consciousness, much like looking through the wrong and foggy end of a telescope. It is pierced periodically by the liveliness of the children, and the caring, grasping, clinging pity of Helen and Lennie.

The device of omitting quotation marks from the text blurs the distinction between individual and narration, and blends different voices and thoughts. Just as barriers are removed which distinguish person from person and characters from narration, similarly divisions between past and present waver, and allow past to become present, or present to submerge past. Reality ceases to be an experience of immediacy. It is transformed and conveyed as an alchemical residue: a bit of what is chosen, a bit of what is cherished, a bit of what impinges.

The italicized portions of the story are paragraphs of pure memory. Unlike the rest of the story, these paragraphs do not harbor conflicting perspectives, but present a unified view of the love and meaning underlying the friendship. Through this account, the reader learns the background of Lennie's and Helen's tie to Whitey. More important, the reader learns about Whitey's past. He has not led a life of mere adventure and recklessness, of immorality and purposelessness. Certainly there was adventure, and he was reckless indeed, but he did have purpose.

His sailing life was an expression of a struggle for freedom and dignity which was principled and ideological. And he had not been alone:

Understand. The death of the brotherhood.  
Once, once an injury to one is an injury to all.  
Once, once they had to live for each other. . . .  
Now it was a dwindling few, and more and more  
of them winos, who shipped sometimes or had  
long ago irrevocably lost their book for  
nonpayment of dues.

It is not his own weakness, but rather the failure of a dream and the hypocrisy of society which are the fundamental causes of his disintegration; the "Law and the Wall: only so far shall you go and no further, uptown forbidden, not your language, not your people, not your country." And now all that is left him is "the memories to forget, the dreams to be stifled, the hopeless hopes to be murdered."

One of the most remarkable aspects of "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" is Olsen's ability to strike a perfect balance between perspectives. Yet her approach is not objective. It is clear that she is not detached from the lives she is describing, but is deeply, personally involved. In spite of her emotional attachment, however, it is impossible to ascertain whether her sympathy lies more with Whitey or with Helen and Lennie. Olsen has described both realities with equal insight and feeling. She has not identified herself with any particular character, making it difficult, therefore, for the reader to do so.

By steeping her characters in the complexities of time, rather than portraying them against a moral backdrop, Olsen does not permit the reader the exit of easy conclusions and standard formulas. Without the traditional escape routes of identification and moralizing, the reader is required to confront the human and social implications of the story, rather than enabled to relate to the purely personal or psychological implications. The reader is expected to understand that "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" poses more questions than it answers; that if Olsen intends any criticism, it is directed against the world Whitey surveys from the top of the hill, not against Whitey himself or his friends.



IV. "O Yes"

Like "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" "O Yes" also focuses on the breakdown of relationships. Through the exploration of the dissolution of a friendship between a black and a white girl, the components of a racist society are exposed. The occasion of Parry's baptismal ceremony is transformed into a metaphor for Carol's loss of innocence. The difference between Parry's and Carol's response to the church ritual is further developed in the subsequent widening gap between them, a gap created by the opposing realities of black and white experience.

For Parry, the baptism is symbolic of an initiation into life which in fact has occurred long before the performance of the rite. Like her sister and brother, Parry is unperturbed by the proceedings, being familiar both with anguish and the need to express the effects of torment. While Carol trembles, "Parry still ponders the platform; little Lucy loops her bracelet round and round; and Bubbie sits placidly, dreamily." Parry is awed by the ritual, but it is Carol who is frightened when she asks, "Parry, are you scared . . . the baptizing?"

For Carol, Parry's baptism is an actual initiation into a new era. She is unprepared, unable to confront and understand the emotional tumult which is a consequence of brutalized lives. Carol has been spared the indignities that Parry and her family experience in their day to day

lives. Her initiation is twofold. First she encounters a violence and depth of suffering that were previously unimagined. Also, she is initiated into a world where she must make a moral choice. She is entering an adult society in which she must choose between the suffering that identification with and loyalty to Parry's experience will bring, or the sadness, frustration and security of accepting the cloak of her white privilege.

Carol's initial response to the exuberance and spontaneity of the events in the church is one of pleasure and mild confusion. As the intensity of the service grows, she becomes more confused. Olsen describes the service in extremely vivid language, evoking an atmosphere of a joyful collective experience, an experience from which Carol is increasingly alienated: "the bubbling, swelling, seething of before the services," the "Looping, scalloping" of the preacher's voice, the "thundering" of the choirs, the "Exultant spirals of sound," the "piano whipping, whipping air to a froth," how the music "leaps and prowls," and the "Ladders of screamings." Carol attempts to set herself apart from this activity, to create a distance in order to avoid being engulfed in a frenzy she does not understand:

If she studied the fan--became it--it might make a wall around her. If she could make what was happening (what was happening?) into a record small and round to listen to far, and far as if into a seashell--the stamp and rills and spirals all tiny (but never any screaming).

Carol's fan, on which "a little Jesus walked on wondrously blue waters," and the water imagery in the description of the service, reinforce the metaphor of baptism, culminating in the invitation to "wade wade in the water." But Carol would like to stay as far away as possible from the baptismal water, the water of life, preferring instead to hear its dry echo "far and far as if into a seashell."

Unwilling to wade in the water, Carol sinks. Her fainting is evidence of her inability to absorb the experience, and symbolic of the baptism which plunges her into the realities of experience regardless of consent or readiness. The link between Carol's fainting and the formal ritual of baptism is established through the water imagery. Just before her sinking, the singing is described "in slow waves" and "in great humming waves." Her actual loss of consciousness is related in terms of immersion in water:

. . . the blue-painted waters of Jordan swell and thunder; Christ spirals on his cross in the window, and she is drowned under the sluice of the slow singing and the sway.

The phrases "So high up . . . the waves," "all sunken under water," "She swims," and "Up through the waters," together give the impression of someone being plunged into water, momentarily floating, and quickly rising, emphasizing again the immersion of the act of baptism. Furthermore,

the fact that Carol experiences the fainting as the sensation of being submerged under water (rather than its only being described in those terms), implies that she is aware, to some extent, of the baptismal significance of what she has experienced. This awareness is further established by her comment, upon reviving, that "if I had all your petticoats I could float," and later, when Alva is talking, the recurring sensation of "waves lapping and fretting."

\* \* \*

As the setting shifts in the second section of the story, there is a corresponding change in the characters. Carol's struggling awareness is placated and repressed, and she is reconnected to a familiarity and normalcy which were not present in the church. The atmosphere of free expression during the service is replaced by the reassuring logic of the home. The spontaneous reactions of the congregation are replaced by analysis and discussion among the members of the family.

The conversation between Len and Helen and Jeannie is a restatement in very different terms of the realities and truths extrapolated from the first section. Analytic rather than lyric, factual rather than experiential, the discussion explains the estrangement between Parry and Carol by sketching the circumstantial background which has made their separation inevitable.

Olsen's style changes dramatically in the presentation of the discussion. She forsakes metaphor, descriptive detail, symbolic and vivid language in favor of straightforward narration, and replaces hypnotic chant with dialogue. This change accomplishes its desired effect. The language of the conversation is that of stark, angry, impatient reportage:

They're in junior high, Mother. Don't you know about junior high? How they sort? And it's all where you're going. Yes and Parry's colored and Carrie's white. And you have to watch everything, what you wear and how you wear it and who you eat lunch with and how much homework you do and how you act to the teacher and what you laugh at. . . . And run with your crowd.

There is no escape route through metaphor; no interpretative outlet, no aesthetic flight. The reader is forced to confront the relentless molding and forming, the "sorting," of society. The conversation exposes the harsh inexorable realities of racism. It presents these realities momentarily suspended, unaffected by the subtle motions of time and need, before they are transfigured by religious expression and superseded by a young girl's urge to conform.

The conversation fades into a last glimpse of Parry and Carol, playing happily together. The scene then changes into a dreary fulfillment of Jeannie's predictions--"the months go by and the sorting goes on." The incident when Parry brings Carol her books is a final confirmation of their alienation from each other, and precipitates the crisis which concludes the story.

Parry's monologue is proof of the growing distance of the past months. ". . . looking quickly once then not looking again and talking fast," talking from behind a wall of jargon and sarcasm, impersonal and uncomfortable, Parry omits the crucial anecdote from her account of teachers, friends and events. She covers this fundamental silence between them with her antics, and when she leaves, Carol retreats into the world of their past to further avoid facing the painful truth of the present.

Triggered by the music on the radio, the repressed confusion and sadness of the past months tumble out. Contrary to Helen's observation that "supposedly it is forgotten," it is obvious from Carol's outburst that the memory of her experience in the church is very much alive. The fact that not only is the experience remembered, but that the memory elicits such a profound and disturbed reaction, reestablishes the experience as a loss of childhood innocence. Helen's comment--"It is a long baptism into the seas of humankind, my daughter. Better immersion than to live untouched"--reaffirms the importance of the baptismal metaphor in the explanation of Carol's original reaction in the church.

The most interesting aspect of the last pages of the story is what can be inferred from Helen's response to Carol. Torn between sympathy and betrayal, between identification and scorn, Carol turns to her mother for an answer to her bewilderment. Helen is unable to

articulate an adequate reply. Each possibility is rejected with the words "thought of saying. And discarded." She is unable to verbalize a response because she is stunned by the sheer pain and mystery of life's knowledge. There are answers in her mind and heart, but no vehicle to convey their meaning to Carol.

The insight to be gained from Helen's silence is in contrasting it to Alva's voluntary and effusive explanation after the incident in the church. Both women are loving and sensitive mothers, concerned with imparting to their children an open-minded and intelligent approach to life. Both take seriously the responsibility of guidance, and both accept the burden of the prophecy in Alva's vision--  
"Mama, Mama you must help carry the world." Nevertheless, in spite of this equality, it is Alva rather than Helen, Carol's biological mother, who attempts to interpret and communicate the importance of Carol's experience. Helen is begged for an answer, while Alva responds without being asked:

"You was scared. Carol, it's something to study about. You'll feel better if you understand."  
 Trying not to listen.

. . . "Get Happy, we call it, and most it's a good feeling, Carol. When you got all that locked up inside you."

Helen is unable to give freely the information and confirmation that Carol needs so desperately. The reason for this curious shortcoming lies in her own isolation, her own lack of sustaining power:

While in her, her own need leapt and plunged for the place of strength that was not--where one could scream or sorrow while all knew and accepted, and gloved and loving hands waited to support and understand.

What is the element which empowers Alva to communicate while Helen is paralyzed? Olsen clearly demonstrates the link between suffering, religious expression, and forbearance. But it is not simply Alva's religious faith which accounts for her transcendent awareness and wisdom. Alva succeeds where Helen can only fail because she is not alone. She is part of a community, a collective, whose purpose it is to provide meaning while its members struggle to maintain their humanity and dignity in the face of hardship and humiliation. Though both Alva and Helen know that their daughters' needs are great, the impulse for self-preservation has forced Alva to approach life as a constant battle towards understanding what seems incomprehensible. As a corollary to her individual battle, she accepts the responsibility of being her sister's keeper.

Therefore "O Yes" is not only a story about a young white girl's initiation into the cruel realities of adult life. While showing some of the tragic effects of a racist society, Olsen also demonstrates the profound human will to overcome the barriers which alienate and divide, the will to create order and discover truth. Through Alva, Olsen has revealed one of the fundamental ironies of an oppressive system. The same people which a society seeks to dehumanize possess a potential integrity and under-



standing which not only sustain their own lives, but enable them to surpass the knowledge of the privileged, and to teach them a greater love.

V. "I Stand Here Ironing"

Motherhood, as our civilization has defined and institutionalized it, requires a relinquishing of individuality in favor of conformity to a highly demanding role. This role of mother is based on the assumption that the individual woman willingly subverts her needs and ambitions to sustain the lives of children and husband. All women are aware of this expectation. Some abandon themselves unconditionally, others attempt a balance between role and person.

In this story, Olsen is exploring the psyche of the mother as constructed by the experience of motherhood. We are not presented the account of a life, but rather plunged into the process of living. However, the technique of generalization is not used to produce generalities. It is not simply a literary device to simplify the author's conclusions. Anonymity facilitates identification in this story because of the nature of the subject. By conspicuously steeping a personal history in anonymity, Olsen mirrors the contradictions revealed in the story, pitting role against individual, self against circumstance, expectation against reality.

The woman in "I Stand Here Ironing" is nameless and silent. She is described by circumstance rather than by personal detail, and we witness her thoughts rather than her actions or speech. The monologue is, strictly speaking,

impersonal. Though it pertains to the woman's life, it does not develop her character (nor deny it), but, instead, probes her effect on her daughter's development. Therefore, it is clear that we are not to regard this story as the chronicle of an individual experience. "I Stand Here Ironing" pushes away from the plot and the particular, and points towards the reflective and the universal. What is the reason for this transposition?

Identity has been subjugated, but it has not been extinguished. Emily's mother may have no name, but she has a past of her own, even when it seems to exist only as an undercurrent to her daughter's development. As Olsen has portrayed it, to write about a mother mothering is not to write about either a model or an exclusively personal experience, but about a human being hidden inside a role. It is the dialectic between the unique woman and the typical mother that explains the structure and tenor of "I Stand Here Ironing."

The structure of the monologue is cyclical. The four opening paragraphs foreshadow the shape and direction of thoughts which are expanded in the text of the story, and then recapitulated in the final two paragraphs. Paralleling the progressive deepening of the woman's memories is a kind of structural implosion. Balanced at beginning and end is the image of the mother ironing. The outer layer is formed by the mother's consciousness of her distance from her daughter. Reluctant to plumb

the past, she states at the outset:

You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key? She has lived for nineteen years. There is all that life that has happened outside of me, beyond me.

She returns to this perspective on the closing page, concluding: "Let her be." This layer is like a crust or an armor. Erupting the objectivity of these observations is the mother's urge to question and remember. She asks herself: "When is there time . . . to total?" and finally realizes: "I will never total it all." This is a second stage in the development of her thoughts, a stage of tentative exploration and summation.

The third layer is the fulfillment of the prediction: "I will become engulfed with all I did or did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped." She proceeds to do exactly that, allowing the past to well up and fulminate, attempting, on the basis of self-recrimination, to reconstruct her daughter's personality. Having unlocked the past, the memories tumble out, grasping for a center, a meaning. The realization of this search is anticipated by the sentence: "I will start and there will be an interruption and I will have to gather it all together again." In fact, she is later interrupted by the cries of another child, and, in comforting him, the memory of Emily's invented word "shoogily" elicits the reaction:

In this and other ways she leaves her seal, I say aloud. And stare at my saying it. What do I mean? What did I start to gather together, to try and make coherent?

This break is the center; for a brief moment she attempts to articulate a pattern from the residue of memories. She then sinks again into the flow of remembering, a flow abruptly stopped by Emily's entrance which propels the mother back to the present.

The cyclical formation implies more than a convergence of beginning and end. The circularity is not simply indicative of repetition or continuity, but is used to portray time as double-exposed rather than elliptical. The mother's attempt to rationalize her daughter's life as a consequence of her own, gives rise to a pattern of cause and effect. But the mother's ultimate inability to measure Emily's failure by her own upsets the pattern, and, in place of a continuum, there is the sense of one life translucently super-imposed over another life.

This is analogous to the aforementioned dilemma of a human being hidden inside the role of mother. In both cases, the attempt at containment of the individual causes the duality. In this instance, however, it is not the struggle between role and individuality, but the struggle for recognition of the independence of child from parent. Both struggles are dialectical, and both take place within the psyche of the mother.

The tension created by the dialectic of identity

is developed by the use of contrast in the mother's reminiscing. The account of Emily's childhood expresses an essential contrast between illusion and reality. However, this contrast is not wholly psychological. It does not represent simply an internal struggle, but also a struggle between individual and society. This contrast is a vehicle for expressing the contradictions and ironies embedded in a society which expects its members to derive sustenance from the illusion of attainable happiness.

The memories are presented with an almost physical movement. Most events are introduced optimistically, reflecting expectations, hopes and trust. By the time the expectation is modified by what actually happens, the memory has sunk into a dismal reality. Olsen's presentation mirrors the emotion of the actual unfolding of a memory: a thought begins brightly, proceeds quickly, is confronted by circumstance, becomes slow and heavy, and plunges downward to a depressing full stop.

First the mother "did like the books then said," insisting on following the rules in spite of the baby's hunger and her own pain. The loss of her freedom to appreciate the baby is an excellent example of the contrast between, and transformation of, the ideal into the real. The paragraph begins with short, cheerful, straightforward sentences. Her joy is the fulfillment of happy motherhood. However, in one long disillusioning sentence, the natural course of emotion is rerouted and

forced to confront a different world:

She was a miracle to me, but when she was eight months old I had to leave her daytimes with the woman downstairs to whom she was no miracle at all, for I worked or looked for work and for Emily's father, who "could no longer endure" (he wrote in his good-bye note) "sharing want with us."

In one sentence miracle is transformed into disaster.

Not only must she leave her child and look for work, but she has been deserted by the father. Later, when Emily is two and "old enough for nursery school," possible relief is short-lived, and the experience becomes a nightmare, rather than an aid to the working mother. Even Emily's good nature is a blessing only superficially to a sensitive mother: "And what was the cost, the cost to her of such goodness?"

The most effective use of contrast is in the account of Emily's stay in the sanatorium. Initially the mother describes the place from the perspective of an outsider, recalling "pictures on the society page of sleek young women planning affairs to raise money for it," a picture of well-intentioned charity. This naiveté begins to be modified at the beginning of the next sentence--"They never have a picture of the children . . ."--and then shifts radically, ending with the cruel information that "parents can come to visit 'unless otherwise notified'--as we were notified the first six weeks."

Having set the scene, Olsen proceeds to give three

examples of the life of "that place." The first one is introduced with a descriptive objectivity, the tone evoking a picture of a delightful, exclusive summer camp: "Oh, it is a handsome place, green lawns and tall trees and fluted flower beds." The addition of the children in their red and white uniforms completes the image of a wonderland. In the next sentence, the atmosphere is destroyed abruptly. What is exposed ("the parents . . . shrieking," and "the invisible wall 'Not To Be Contaminated by Parental Germs or Physical Affection'") seems even more insidious because it has been hidden behind a façade of indulgence.

The next incident is short and incisive. An opportunity for much-needed friendship and affection is presented by the appearance of the girl who holds Emily's hand. When the girl is transferred, however, not even sleek young women and fluted flower beds can change Emily's observation that "They don't like you to love anybody here."

The incident concerning writing and receiving letters is a further example of how Olsen presents disappointment couched in expectation. Hope of approval and attention arises with the possibility that Emily will get a star as a reward for writing well. But "There never was a star." This callous and even punitive indifference is compounded by the administration's refusal of Emily's request to have something of her own in an anonymous and alien environment.

The immediate and most obvious motive for the use of contrast in the exploration of the memories is that it



emphasizes and dramatizes the anguish of each experience. A linear rendering of events could not have conveyed this anguish with an equal depth, because, to fully grasp despair, it is necessary to know the unrealized hope which preceded it. Therefore Olsen has us witness and follow disappointment to its most painful limits by providing the expectation from which it descended.

Apart from underscoring the poignancy of situations, a major purpose of the contrast in "I Stand Here Ironing" is to heighten the awareness of conflict between individual and society. The conflict that is explored is not the familiar clash between individual integrity and social conformity. The woman in this story does not challenge conventional behavior in the pursuit of identity. She is unceremoniously and courageously trying to be a good mother, an effort which theoretically receives the greatest social approbation. But in this story, approval never moves from the realm of the abstract, is nowhere manifested as concrete support. Therefore the kernel of conflict does not lie in the rebellion or flamboyant self-assertion of the individual against a disapproving society. The conflict is between a sensitive, overworked and conscientious mother, and a society which, while offering hopes and dreams, delivers hardship and despair.

Aspirations which are endorsed as the very fibre of a society, and which are advertised as universally accessible, very quickly are transformed into semi-conscious

and profound expectations. Every person is encouraged to harbor an idealized vision of his or her future, to naively mistake potential for opportunity, and to blame self rather than circumstance when the vision fails to materialize.

Motherhood is a prime receptacle of a variety of these social myths. Tempted by the promise of fulfillment, spirituality, and the abandon of total devotion, the mother is conditioned to underestimate the difficulty of creating a perfect world for her child, and to overestimate her ability to accomplish the impossible. Thus it is not surprising that there is an undercurrent of guilt and self-accusation throughout the mother's reminiscence.

Although the mother does not openly challenge social values, her reaction to circumstance is not exclusively one of self-reproach. There is also a dignity struggling to assert itself. Only someone who tries for more than what is forthcoming, someone who believes in her basic right to security, happiness and respect, would describe incidents as Emily's mother does. Disappointment, even despair, is not defeat. The mother, while accepting the design of circumstance, does not forsake striving for better. And she never forsakes the belief that what she is striving for is a life which she and her daughter deserve.

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In her essay, "Silences: When Writers Don't Write," Olsen reconstructs her struggle to become a functioning writer:

Time on the bus, even when I had to stand, was enough; the stolen moments at work, enough; the deep night hours for as long as I could stay awake, after the kids were in bed, after the household tasks were done, sometimes during. It is no accident that the first work I considered publishable began: "I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron."

What is no accident for the writer is likewise no accident for the character. It is not arbitrary that Olsen's creativity was forced to blossom in stolen moments and unlikely places. Similarly it is not arbitrary that, in the story, the mother's thoughts unfold while she is ironing, that she becomes identified with her labor, and that the simple act of ironing is transformed into a rich metaphor of female experience.

The back-and-forth motions of ironing have a lulling and hypnotic effect on the mind, similar to the incantatory rhythms of various religious ceremonies. As the mother irons, the movements create an aura of serenity, opening her mind to contemplation. Thus the act of ironing establishes the overall pace of the development of the mother's thoughts by transporting her to a plateau of introspection and recollection.

Emily's comment, "Whistler painted his mother in a rocker. I'd have to paint mine standing over an ironing

board," reinforces the close relation, established in the opening lines of the story, between the mother and her work.

The act of ironing is a metaphor for the act of remembering. As the iron moves back and forth, flattening wrinkles, so the mother's memories of a life accompany the motion of the iron, shifting continuously between hope and disappointment. There is a synchronization of outward and inward activity: her labor for her family and her thoughts about her family. The relentless movement of the iron, and the manner in which the past is reconstructed, are further paralleled by the Sisyphean quality inherent in each task. The motion of the iron is symbolic of the housewife's never-ending cycle of cleaning and ordering, and also symbolic of the mother's persistent recollecting in spite of the knowledge that she can never "total it all."

What gives the metaphor an unusual power is not merely this mother's particular relation to the act of ironing, but its universal applicability. Innumerable are the lives remembered and the books written while bent over the ironing board--innumerable and unrecorded. In the collective experience of all women whose lives have been consumed by household duties, this image is one of almost archetypal significance. It has the potential to evoke immediate recognition and profound empathy because it reflects a submerged intelligence and creativity hidden in the minds and hearts of a multitude of women.

Emily's entrance stops the flow of memories, and jolts her mother back to the present. Her question "Aren't you ever going to finish the ironing, Mother?" if it is examined in the light of the metaphor, is a symbolic demand for independence, and further encouragement for the mother to abandon her reverie. It is a request that her mother stop exploring the past, and end the maternal protectiveness of her attempt to contain her child's growth within the confines of her own experience.

Emily's return home affects the story in two other ways. First, her appearance enables the reader to shift perspective and to examine Emily more objectively. Also, in forcing her mother to perceive her with greater detachment, Emily precipitates not only a break in the reminiscence, but a resolution of the mother's thoughts as well.

Though we are given much information concerning the circumstances of Emily's upbringing, all of which would be useful to explain or interpret her childhood, we are given little with which to formulate an opinion of her nearly adult character. However, there are three contradictory aspects--her appetite, her humor, and her fatalism--which together reveal an essence, a certain attitude to life.

In her earlier years, Emily "stayed skeleton thin, not wanting to eat." Psychoanalytic interpretation aside, it is only natural to associate a loss of appetite with a disinterest in life, especially in a growing child. The mother herself makes this connection: "She ate little.

Food sickened her, and I think much of life too." Yet somewhere between her early childhood and her adolescence, the pattern is reversed. Her mother then says she is "always eating (it was in those years she developed her enormous appetite that is legendary in our family)."

As much as her previous disgust for food was a barometer, so her new voraciousness is indicative of a change in attitude. Her rejection of life has been superseded by acceptance and curiosity. Even though, as her mother seems to imply, desperation possibly underlines the change, it is nonetheless a sign of vitality.

Similarly, Emily's "rare gift for comedy" is proof of a determined liveliness, particularly if it has grown "out of her despair." Her humor is a means of self-expression, and, as such, reflects a positive attachment to life. It is also indicative of her desire to give pleasure to others. When the mother remarks that Emily's audience is "unwilling to let this rare and precious laughter out of their lives," she is bearing witness to Emily's impulse and ability both to give joy and give of herself.

Emily's fatalism contradicts the drift of the other two characteristics. Her statement "in a couple of years when we'll all be atom-dead . . ." confirms her mother's apprehension: "She is a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear." Emily's cynicism and sense of futility are as much a part of a fundamental attitude as is her

vitality.

A brief look at the origin of these divergent characteristics will perhaps explain their coexistence. Emily's fatalistic viewpoint is a direct and literal response to historical realities. The era in which she matured is one of terror and insecurity; her reaction reflects the extent to which she has been molded by, and has succumbed to, environmental pressures. On the other hand, her humor and appetite are both testaments to her ability to transcend experience. They are proof that she has conquered, to a certain degree, the determinism of background and circumstance. In combination, all three aspects provide insight into the adult human being that Emily is becoming.

Emily's presence also obliges her mother to recognize her separateness. At first it is an optimistic acceptance: "She is so lovely. Why do you want me to come in at all? Why were you concerned? She will find her way." This sentiment is immediately altered by Emily's "atom-dead" comment. It reflects such a depth of cynicism and resignation that the mother is prompted to realize that she cannot entirely account for or control the forces which form and direct her daughter's life.

The frightening passivity exposed in Emily's statement also leads the mother to conclude that not only is she unable to "total it all," but that it is not in Emily's interest for her to try. She recapitulates the markings of Emily's growth, a catalogue of her own insufficiency,

anxieties and failures, and understands that she is inhibiting rather than helping her daughter by attempting to chain her to the past. Emily's mother is confronting the crisis of parental protectiveness, the realization that only by relinquishing control will a child learn to control his or her own life.

The mother's eventual return to the knowledge that "There is all that life that has happened outside of me, beyond me," is no longer simply an admission of ignorance and impotence. It now stems from an understanding of the necessity of independence. The key she was searching for does not lie in an analysis of the past, but in breaking through to the present. Her insight also ends her personal dilemma because it frees her from the paralysis of all-consuming guilt.

The conclusion is expressed through the image of the iron. It is a brilliant choice of vehicle, because the image subsumes a complexity necessary for a full expression of the author's meaning. A previous analysis of the image has explored its association with the mother, and its Sisyphean qualities. It is a symbol of fate, of inexorable time, of a mother's control.

In the last lines of the story the mother is discouraging Emily's passivity, a passivity engendered by circumstance and design. By acknowledging Emily's independence from her, she is also acknowledging the possibility of transcendence, of self-determination.



The mother's conclusion is an exhortation to help Emily look forward and beyond, to grasp time and control destiny, to harness the past for change, and to approach the cast of circumstance as direction rather than inevitability.

\* \* \*

One critic has written the following appraisal of the mother:

Mrs. Olsen's woman is burdened with exhaustion, a victim of a world in which all the panaceas have been discredited. To say that she seems ordinary or without stature indicates only the costume she may be wearing, for her suffering is made vivid and historic.

Not only is her suffering vivid and historic, but her courage and intelligence as well. This anonymous woman, a mother struggling with motherhood, offers her daughter more than an unconditional or self-denying motherly love. She offers her a mother's incomparable strength and purest wisdom.

<sup>1</sup> Richard M. Elman, "The Many Forms Which Loss Can Take," rev. of Tell Me A Riddle, by Tillie Olsen, Commonweal, 8 December 1961, p. 295.

VI. "Tell Me A Riddle"

In "Tell Me A Riddle," Olsen expands the pattern of recollection and reconstruction developed in "I Stand Here Ironing." In this story, however, the scrutiny of the past is focused on the self. Eva is older than the mother in "I Stand Here Ironing," older and dying. Her children are grown: their identities are primarily their own concern. Therefore, in "Tell Me A Riddle," the thread of unravelling memory carries Eva on an odyssey of self-discovery.

In the first chapter, Olsen familiarizes the reader with the personalities of Eva and David. The sparring of their present relation is a dynamic which is interrupted periodically to reveal glimpses of the past. These flashbacks not only show the roots of the conflict between them, but also widen and deepen the reader's perception of Eva's and David's individual responsibility and attitudes:

Old scar tissue ruptured and the wounds festered anew. Chekhov indeed. She thought without softness of that young wife, who in the deep night hours while she nursed the current baby, and perhaps held another in her lap, would try to stay awake for the only time there was to read. She would feel again the weather of the outside on his cheek when, coming late from a meeting, he would find her so, and stimulated and ardent, sniffing her skin, coax: "I'll put the baby to bed, and you--put the book away, don't read, don't read."

The past and present are distinct realities because they portray separate and opposing reflections of character. The result is two portraits of each person: Eva stubborn in the present and compliant in the past, and David self-centered in the past and good-natured in the present. Thus the reader is given a panoramic view of a scarred and complex relation.

Olsen creates this panorama through the manipulation of certain techniques. Rather than encumber the exposition of personality with narrative details, and construct the story through a linear development, Olsen omits ponderous psychological and physical description, and allows the characters to control revelation. Not weighed down by placement and explanation, character unfolds through the juxtaposition of various voices, dialogue, and interior monologue. Freed from the chronology and pace of narrator-controlled development, timing is more spontaneous, voices are buoyed and intermingle, impressionistically combining to form a composite picture which offers the reader multiple discoveries:

Why now, why now? wailed Hannah.

As if when we grew up weren't enough, said Paul.  
Poor Ma. Poor Dad. It hurts so much for both  
of them, said Vivi. They never had very much; at  
least in old age they should be happy.

Knock their heads together, insisted Sammy;  
tell 'em: you're too old for this kind of thing;  
no reason not to get along now.

Lennie wrote to Clara. They've lived over  
so much together; what could possibly tear  
them apart?

Olsen employs this technique throughout "Tell Me A Riddle." As the story evolves, it is used as a sharp implement which burrows beneath mundane events and recollections, and uncovers a realm of primordial consciousness.

In the beginning, memory is suppressed and there is only bickering. The argument seems self-evident: David is reasonable in his desire for comfort and company, and Eva is unfair in her refusal to change. How could one not sympathize with David's wish "to be carefree where success was not measured by accumulation, and there was use for the vitality still in him"? In this view of the present, as yet unruffled and uncomplicated by the past, Eva's obstinacy seems gratuitous and cruel. It appears that one of David's foremost motives is to relieve her of chores and to provide her with leisure:

Over the dishes, coaxingly, "For once in your life, to be free, to have everything done for you, like a queen."

"I never liked queens."

"No dishes, no garbage, no towel to sop, no worry what to buy, what to eat."

"And what else would I do with my empty hands? Better to eat at my own table when I want, and to cook and eat how I want."

It is important to emphasize this perspective because, although the reader's awareness grows as the past is delved, and he or she becomes more understanding of Eva's response, Eva's family remains fixed in the present and judges the relation accordingly. The narrowness of the family's

reaction is crucial. It increases Eva's isolation, and forces her further into the recesses of memory. The insensitivity of family members also involves us more in Eva's history because we realize that we are sole witness to Eva's internal anguish and wandering, and that therefore we are her sole ally.

In his attempt to sway her, David unwittingly pierces the immediate and unlocks the past. Ironically, the memories that are conjured up serve to legitimize Eva's position, rather than encourage her to acquiesce. The contrariness and stubbornness of the present are overshadowed by the strength and tenacity exhibited in the past. These first flashbacks are evidence of the initial weakening of the stronghold of the memoryless present, the early signposts guiding Eva in her search for identity and meaning:

But from those years she had had to manage, old humiliations and terrors rose up, lived again, and forced her to relive them. The children's needings; that grocer's face or this merchant's wife she had had to beg credit from when credit was a disgrace; the scenery of the long blocks walked around when she could not pay; school coming, and the desperate going over the old to see what could yet be remade; the soups of meat bones begged "for-the-dog" one winter.

What emerges from Eva's memories as reason for her present bitterness is an immense, though still vague, sense of loss. Her battle with her husband, when examined in the light of the past, does not reflect a quarrelsomeness,

but an awakening effort to reclaim her self. The emphatic refrain, "Never again to be forced to move to the rhythms of others," is statement of Eva's intention at last to retrieve and follow her own instincts and longings.

No longer called upon to serve others, Eva's natural, primal independence is resurrected and is impatient to flourish. The dawning of this urge is reflected in Eva's attitude to household chores:

Tranquility from having the empty house no longer an enemy, for it stayed clean--not as in the days when it was her family, the life in it, that had seemed the enemy; tracking, smudging, littering, dirtying, engaging her in endless defeating battle--and on whom her endless defeat had been spewed.

The vocabulary of the description--"enemy," "endless defeating battle," "spewed"--constructs the image of a domestic Sisyphus, once enslaved and bitter, now grasping the opportunity to be liberated from household absurdity and alienation. Eva has finally been released from the compulsion of serving others. Rather than meekly retire into obsolescence, she would prefer to retrieve a buried identity and live her last years for herself. This desire is simply and eloquently expressed:

Being able at last to live within, and not to move to the rhythm of others, as life had helped her to: denying; removing; isolating; taking the children one by one; then deafening, half-blinding-- and at last, presenting her solitude.

And in it she had won to a reconciled peace.

Mother to them all, Eva is treated like a cantankerous child by her own children and husband. The family is clearly unaccustomed to perceiving Eva's needs as distinct from the family will. She has conformed to their wishes for so long that she has been robbed of individual choice. Her family functions much as a benevolent dictator does, operating within the false logic of the conviction that it provides the mother with all she needs. Therefore, problems are petty, solutions are either instantaneous or imminent, and the mother could never need more than the family is capable of providing. They begrudge her the freedom to go beyond the family structure to establish identity. The atmosphere is one of condescension, for only on the basis of projected infantilism could they expect Eva to be sustained exclusively by their love:

But when they asked: "And you, Ma, how do you feel about it?" could only whisper:

"For him it is good. It is not for me. I can no longer live between people."

"You have lived all your life for people," Vivi cried.

"Not with." Suffering doubly for the unhappiness on her children's faces.

The tragedy of the situation is increased by the fact that the family is not intentionally cruel. Even in David's attitude there is evidence of fundamental tenderness and concern. There is ample love, but love is not enough. The family's mistake is that they want Eva to remain faithful to her role as mother. They do not

want her to grow inwardly or outwardly distant, and, by inhibiting her self-expression, they are denying her humanity.

After Eva sees a doctor, Nancy's reply to Paul's question, "So there was nothing physical," reveals an irrationality born of resentment: "Of course there was. How can you live to yourself like she does without there being?". From Nancy's comment it would appear that a mother's desire for solitude is proof of physical deterioration rather than spiritual independence. She concludes her curious analysis with a bit of outrageous medical paternalism (with which she obviously is in full agreement):

. . . . But he was clear enough: Number One prescription--start living like a human being. . . . When I think of your dad, who could really play the invalid with that arthritis of his, as active as a teenager, and twice as much fun. . . .

The unfairness of the comparison between Eva's lassitude and David's vivaciousness is compounded by David's reiteration of the diagnosis, that "your sickness is in you, how you live." Ironically, Eva's energies have been depleted because she has given her life to others through her selfless fulfillment of the role of mother. Now, when finally she attempts to live "like a human being"--that is, to find and be herself--she is criticized for not doing what others would have her do. The exhortation



to "start living . . ." is really no encouragement at all, but rather an expression of disapproval. It would seem that it is both a sin and a social gaffe for an aging mother to choose self-expression over the rewards of juvenile recreation and doting lonely grandmotherhood. The ultimate irony is that her illness is not caused by how she lives, but is the inevitable conclusion of life itself.

\* \* \*

In the second chapter of "Tell Me A Riddle," Eva's personality and past are expanded. Eva's thoughts and insights broaden our awareness of her character and are transformed by Olsen into a complex metaphor. Her experiences and reflections are clarified and intensified until they transcend the individual and become a kernel or center from which emanate a multitude of elemental observations and truths.

Olsen tentatively and simply introduces the theme of a life/death cycle. Coinciding with the knowledge that death is consuming Eva's body, the reader witnesses a change in her manner. Where she was once morose and withdrawn, she is now curious and lively:

The look of excitement. The straining to hear everything' (the new hearing aid turned full).  
Why are you so happy, dying woman?

This rejuvenation following the diagnosis of pending death, establishes a bond between life and death, a bond which is further strengthened and developed as the story continues. The nearer Eva comes to dying, the more she is concerned with the mysteries of life. While dying, she affirms living.

The incidents "of the rabbi in the hospital, and of the candles of benediction" provide a great insight into Eva's identity, and demonstrate a sophisticated intelligence and idealism beneath the mask of pettiness and provincialism. Suddenly, a different person is revealed or, more accurately, is reborn. From the dark and distant past, there is an upsurge of passionate conviction:

Heritage. How have we come from the savages, how no longer to be savages--this to teach. To look back and learn what humanizes man--this to teach. To smash all ghettos that divide us--not to go back, not to go back--this to teach. Learned books in the house, will humankind live or die, and she gives her boys--superstition.

The historical analysis and awareness demonstrated by Eva's outrage and comments, are in striking contrast to David's earlier appraisal of her perception:

The television is shadows. Mrs. Enlightened! Mrs. Cultured! A world comes into your house-- and it is shadows. People you would never meet in a thousand lifetimes! Wonders. When you were four years old, yes, like Paulie, like Jenny, did you know of Indian dances, alligators, how they use bamboo in Malaya? No, you scratched in your dirt with the chickens and thought Olshana was the world.

Eva's wisdom lies buried beneath her apparent ignorance. Her knowledge is a sensitivity, a humanism, which pre-empts any formal education, and without which learning is merely the accumulation of pointless details. Therefore, the account of the two incidents banishes any possible fragment of lingering condescension in the reader's approach to Eva. Instead, Eva is placed firmly in a context, and clearly identified as one among many in the tradition of progressive, humanist, eastern European Jews who suffered, learned, fought and escaped.

The discovery of her illness severs Eva from her accustomed routine, and marks the beginning of travel. The actual traveling parallels her internal voyage, and provides the concrete signposts to her mental wanderings. Eva's repeated pleadings throughout the story--"Let us go home. Let us go home," "Not to travel. To go home," "We have to go home," "Not home yet?," "Where is my home?"--chart her attitude to movement. Before she is physically uprooted, her house gives her solitude and peace. It is a buffer between her and others, and it offers her the oblivion of routine and familiarity. At this point, what threatens her security is not travel, but the spectre of the "Haven." The "Haven" would rob her of the control, identity, and peace which her house has come to represent, and would set her adrift from the world which she has created.

As the threat of the "Haven" recedes, it is replaced

by the plan of prolonged travel. For David, travel is a reprieve from death--"Not home to death, not yet." But for Eva, traveling is a wrench from the solitude which allowed her to control memory and events. It thrusts her into a world where people and places impinge on her, and it evokes unwelcome associations. Because she cannot seal her memory, she is obliged to follow the painful path to and through the past. Now her periodic requests to go home are an appeal to limit reminiscence, to restrict the provocation of her memories.

Two aspects of the trip to Vivi's precipitate Eva's passage to reminiscence and self-discovery. Her unexpected reaction to the baby points towards the past: "(A long travel from, to, what the feel of a baby evokes.)" When the feeling of that "long travel" is reinforced by her first experience on an airplane, the physical sensations of travel overwhelm the reality of the present, and carry her into the realm of metaphor. Eva plunges into "a steerage ship of memory," a phrase which balances, and blends metaphor with recollection. Her present journey in an airplane reminds her of a distant odyssey "across a great circular sea." Circularity is the unifying element in the subsequent chain of memories:

. . . and through the thick-stained air, tiny fretting waters in a window round like the airplane's--sun round, moon round. (The round thatched roofs of Olshana.) Eye round--like the smaller window that framed distance the solitary year of exile when only her eyes could travel, and no voice spoke.

The circular aspect of her remembering returns her to the problem of the present, her inability "to make herself embrace a baby." The sounds of life in the house lull her back into memory--"Still she rode on." In attempting to make sense of her response to the baby, Eva expresses feelings dredged from the past which emphasize her search for identity. Olsen's description of Eva's feelings is so encompassing and eloquent that what is actually articulated is a universal experience. In two short paragraphs, Olsen captures the evolution of the mother: the original submission of the individual to the yoke of motherhood, the selfless devotion, the shock when mothering is no longer needed, the pain when love becomes embarrassing, redundant, and must be curbed, and the rare and fragile determination to resurrect the individual from the pit of lost time:

It was not that she had not loved her babies, her children. The love--the passion of tending--had risen with the need like a torrent; and like a torrent drowned and immolated all else. But when the need was done--oh the power that was lost in the painful damming back and drying up of what still surged, but had nowhere to go. Only the thin pulsing left that could not quiet, suffering over lives one felt, but could no longer hold nor help.

On that torrent she had borne them to their own lives, and the riverbed was desert long years now. Not there would she dwell, a memoried wraith. Surely that was not all, surely there was more. Still the springs, the springs were in her seeking. Somewhere an older power that beat for life. Somewhere coherence, transport, meaning. If they would but leave her in the air now stilled of clamor, in the reconciled solitude, to journey to her self.

Thus her inability to touch the baby is a consequence of her attempt to reclaim her self, a result of the necessity to combat the sorrowful awareness that "warm flesh like this . . . nuzzled away all else and with lovely mouths devoured."

Eva's response to the baby establishes the tenor of her relationship to Vivi's family. It is a quiet battle, the dynamic of which is known to Eva alone. In order not to succumb to "drowning into needing and being needed," Eva first defines a physical distance. She automatically and willingly attends to housekeeping, but maintains a distance from the duties performed exclusively by a mother, refusing to nourish others at her own expense--"to none tended or gave food."

But Eva must defend herself more against the attitudes of others than against her own tendencies. The grandchildren's approach to her is a relentless demand for unconditional love and attention. The demands of the children--or, as Olsen puts it, their "trust"--leave no room for Eva to be alone, distant and unresponding:

. . . And everything knocked: quick constant raps: let me in, let me in.

How was it that soft reaching tendrils also became blows that knocked?

Unconscious of their effect on her, both Vivi and her children define Eva by their own needs and recollections. Though Vivi's family is awed by, and respectful of, Eva's

life, it is a respect which spawns curiosity rather than allowing for privacy. The children: "(command performance; we command you to be the audience)." And Vivi: "She had started remembering out loud deliberately, so her mother would know the past was cherished, still lived in her."

Both treat Eva as an extension of themselves, as an appendage to present needs or past events.

In spite of laudable intentions, Vivi's and the children's behavior causes Eva much anguish. They force her, unprepared, to remember and relive times that she has carefully hidden in the layers of the past. Vivi's recollections are romanticized and selective, so that her admiration of her mother's wisdom is an ironic reminder to Eva of all that was lacking:

(What I intended and did not? Stop it, daughter, stop it, leave that time. And he, the hypocrite, sitting there with tears in his eyes--it was nothing to you then, nothing.)

The pain Vivi's memories elicit is compounded by the curiosity of the children. Eva is robbed of her "reconciled peace," and forced by the simple, cutting questions of child and grandchildren into the retracing of her life:

Day after day the spilling memories, Worse now, questions too. Even the grandchildren: Grandma, in the olden days, when you were little. . . .

In the midst of this slow torture, it is no wonder that Eva constantly returns to the request "Let us go home," home to the solitude of controlling her own life's memories. But they do not go home, and, instead, her emotions pressure her inward. Unable to resist the correspondence of present to past, barriers dissolve, and Eva plunges backward in time and association. What begins innocently as a recollection of "how they played jacks in her village," is transformed into an exploration of Eva's consciousness of life's meaning and purpose.

The bridge between present and past, between simple observation and profound awareness, is constructed by the symbolism of Richard's rock collection. The "Six stones, round and flat" of her childhood remind Eva of the names of rocks ("her lips mutely formed the words to remember") when Richard first showed her his collection. The function of the rock collection in the story is foreshadowed by Richard's gift to Eva: "It's to start off your own rock collection, Grandma. That's a trilobite fossil, 200 million years old (millions of years on a boy's mouth)." This sentence brings into relief the issue of Eva's problematic relationship to the past, and, from the perspective of the subsequent evolving symbolism, can be viewed as metaphoric encouragement for Eva to forsake her fear of memory, and rather to find and articulate her place in the flow of time.

The paragraph which traces Eva's probing consciousness through the pivotal image of rock or stone, is of climactic



importance, and verges on epiphany:

Of stones (repeating Richard) there are three kinds: earth fire jetting; rock of layered centuries; crucibled new out of the old (igneous, sedimentary, metamorphic). But there was that other--frozen to black glass, never to transform or hold the fossil memory . . . (let not my seed fall on stone). There was an ancient man who fought to heights a great rock that crashed back down eternally --eternal labor, freedom, labor: . . . (stone will perish but the word remain). And you, David, who with a stone slew, screaming: Lord, take my heart of stone and give me flesh

Vast meaning is made extraordinarily compact, mirroring the process of the formation of rock. From an overall perspective, the formation of rock is symbolic of history: compressed, recorded, and passed down. Because it is a buried and universal history, the symbol is Jungian in its evocation of a layered consciousness, a collective memory.

The three kinds of stone constitute a further examination of the symbol. Each kind is a metaphor for a stage in life. The first ("earth's fire jetting" or "igneous") is comparable to birth and early life, malleable and polymorphic. The second ("rock of layered centuries" or "sedimentary") is akin to the process of aging, the accumulation of the events and accomplishments of a life. The last ("crucibled new out of the old" or "metamorphic") represents the crucial stage in the life/death cycle, the transformation from completion to renewal, the process of rebirth from death.

At this point, the flow of the association is disrupted: "But there was that other . . ." Eva's "journey to her self" is a voyage beyond the mythic. The "older power that beat for life" in her is not a biological urge, and she is accordingly not satisfied with her inferred place in the cycle she has been exploring. Implicit in the cycle is the glorification of nurturing. The accolade of "Earth-Mother" is proffered, a title which gives woman a secular divinity, while cheating her of humanity. Having rejected the concept that a mother's worth is measured by her sacrifice, Eva is not content with a mere functional place in the cycle of life and death. Rather than being flattered by her exalted status in the eternal scheme, she balks at the mindlessness of biological determinism, and seeks beyond to a more meaningful affirmation.

Searching for a purpose beyond biological determinism or mythic acceptance and passivity, Eva recalls the obsidian rock "never to transform or hold the fossil memory." This rock is a representation of Eva's fear that her life has been bereft of worth, and that there will be nothing to remember her by after her death: "let not my seed fall on stone." Her fear of this void forces deeper reflection, and forms a link between a purely organic and ritualistic evaluation of life--which Eva personally regards as insufficient--and an evaluation which is based on social history and progress. Civilizations are summoned up; the deeds of the Greek Sisyphus and the

Hebrew David, both intimately connected to the prevailing symbol of stone. It is their painstaking labor against seemingly insurmountable odds which forges the philosophy and history of humanity through persistence and faith.

Thus Eva is subliminally transported to a recognition of the importance of living a life. The two phrases--"stone will perish, but the word remain," and "Lord, take my heart of stone and give me flesh"--construct the emerging realization that existence alone does not provide meaning for a life, but is only a vessel. Through this vessel flow the ideas, labors and endeavors which are the key to the purpose of an individual life.

Eva confronts the contradiction between her attempt to find her self, and her unwillingness to explore the past where the roots of her identity lie buried. Pursuing the implication of the quote "stone will perish, but the word remain," what is durable in Eva's life are the history and ideas that have directed it. However, her individual achievement and struggle are made everlasting only to the extent that she tries to articulate and communicate the truths on which they are founded. By further implication, she should respect the labor that has consumed her days (are there tasks more apparently absurd or futile than those of Sisyphus and David?) and she must tear down the dam she has built to confine memory, and instead allow the past to flow abundantly so that future generations may inherit the knowledge of her experience.

The conclusion of this paragraph transcends a particular life, and becomes an affirmative statement on the passage and purpose of life in general. The paragraph conveys a basic belief in the progress of humanity. The life/death cycle is a cycle of constant motion in which ideals move ever closer to manifestation. Lives passed in suffering and obscurity are not without meaning, because history is formed by what is dreamt and overcome, rather than by what is despaired of and forsaken. Humanizing values ultimately triumph because history teaches, and people are always learning,

Eva begins moving in time towards the present. The "screaming in the background propels her forward into her own life. The last image--that of David who "slew, screaming"-- connects to Eva's memory of Lisa "the gentle and tender, biting at the betrayer's jugular." The correspondence is dual: first, there is a similar visual composition of the two images, and also both David and Lisa are possessed of a conviction so profound that it surpasses concern for personal preservation.

Again the screaming moves Eva forward, past the memory of her own children's "terrible fights," and back to "Vivi's house." Her excursion in time has disoriented her, and she is defenseless against the closeness and loving of the grandchild who ferrets her out of her hiding place--"And the sweat beads, and the long shudder seizes."

Unable to escape from the pressures of Vivi's family--

"It seemed the great ear pressed inside now, and the knocking"--Eva yearns to return to her "reconciled solitude" at home. "Not home to death" is David's reaction, and so once again he substitutes the flux of travel for the finality of home.

The account of their departure is a restatement of the theme of memory and inheritance. Each person bears the imprint of an elder. The past is fossilized in present and future generations:

They look back at her with the eyes of others before them: Richard, with her own blue blaze; Ann with the Nordic eyes of Tim; Morty's dreaming brown of a great-grandmother he will never know; Dody, with the laughing eyes of him who had been her springtime love (who stands beside her now); Vivi's, all tears.

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Richard, who taught Eva about the history of rocks, has inherited her eyes; his sister, Dody, has the same eyes as David. The fact that continuation is represented through eyes, emphasizes a deeper meaning than physical resemblance or simple fossilization, and implies that there is also the possibility of inheriting vision, the memory formed by the ideas and wisdom of those earlier lives.

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On the surface, the third chapter is a portrait of the subculture of the old. It surveys the world of those who have fulfilled their social function, outlived their

purpose, and been exiled by a society which ignores their contribution and is contemptuous of their aggregate wisdom. Having been stripped of status and robbed of dignity, the aged are reduced to an elementary existence. An irrelevant past and a nonexistent future place them in a twilight zone where time is measured only by the inevitability of death.

It is to one of the settlements of the exiled elderly that Eva is taken. An abandoned winter beach, it harbors numerous "dwelling places of the cast-off old." The scene is bleak:

The rest of the year it is abandoned to the old, all else boarded up and still; seemingly empty, except the occasional days and hours when the sun, like a tide, sucks them out of the low rooming houses, casts them onto the benches and sandy rim of the walk--and sweeps them into decaying enclosures once again.

In spite of the depressing atmosphere, Olsen hints at a different interpretation through her disparaging description of the younger people's use of the site:

A little tasselled tram shuttles between the piers, and the lights of roller coasters prink and tweak over those who come to have sensation made in them.

Comparing the experiences of old and young on the beach, it is difficult to ascertain the less fortunate group. While the old are barred from the enjoyment of contrived distraction, they are permitted the undisrupted pleasure of natural beauty and calm. The young, however, are

oblivious to the wonders of the ocean, and need "to have sensation made in them" by mechanical manipulation.

Ironically, the old and dying emerge from the comparison with a greater vitality than the young. When this conclusion is examined in the context of the theme of the life/death cycle, it takes on a deeper meaning. While the society of the young and healthy regard the deterioration of age with scorn and pity, Olsen emphasizes a different approach. She explores the concept that the proximity of death brings an individual into close contact with the source of life. Olsen now extends the previously established and developed theme of the metamorphosis of life into death, by following the interaction between Eva and her surroundings.

Excluded from functioning society, the old in this story are governed and sustained by the laws and motions of nature: "the sun, like a tide, sucks them out . . . casts them onto the benches . . . and sweeps them into decaying enclosures once again." Eva's relation to her environment is symbolic of the interplay between life and death forces. Dying, she has been transported to the scene of original life--the sea. Her response to the sea, particularly when compared to David's reaction, reflects her closeness to both actual death and symbolic rebirth. Her initial response upon sighting the sea is "there take me," and though she leaned against him it was she who led." Her impatience to reach the shore

reveals that she is drawn to the sea by a force which transcends her physical weakness. David, however, is more repelled than attracted:

And as they came almost to the brink and she could see the glistening wet, she sat down, pulled off her shoes, left him and began to run. "You'll catch cold," he screamed, but the sand in his shoes weighed him down--he who had always been the agile one--and already the white spray creamed her feet.

In the context of the established symbolism of stone, the sand that weighs David down is granulated rock: the details of time and history. He is still attached to a memoryless present, while Eva divests herself of weights, and runs to the ocean, to the flow of life.

When David "pulled her back, took a handkerchief to wipe off the wet and sand," it is an action symbolic of his attempt to keep her from the clutch of death, the death of which he is so afraid. However, she stops him, saying, "the sun will dry," which can be interpreted as her acceptance of the natural course of life to death. The sand she gathers "to look at with the strong glass" represents a profound change in attitude, precipitated by her earlier stone-associated reverie. She no longer blocks out the past, but is now interested in investigating and understanding the process of time. Olsen portrays Eva taking her place in the chain of life, as she



. . . lay down with the little bag against her cheek, looking toward the shore that nurtured life as it first crawled toward consciousness the millions of years ago.

There is a parallel between Eva and the ocean, based on the state of nurturing. The sea gives birth to life as Eva has given birth to her children. There is a sense of harmonious completion in the act of Eva, an individual mother, returning to the origin of all life.

The visit to relatives--Eva's last venture into the outside world--emphasizes her alienation from typical society. The world she enters is hellish and deadening in comparison to the sun and water of the beach. The smog is like a cloak, wrapping the inhabitants in a gauze which shuts out all realities other than the immediately visible. Eva responds with instinctive revulsion, in contrast to the society of people who passively accept this condition. She expresses her horror as she "walked with hands pushing the heavy air as if to open it" and "whispered: who has done this?". In the home of the relatives, Eva does not participate in the ritual reminiscence. While events are reduced to absurdity, perhaps Eva alone is aware of the incongruity Olsen describes:

Strange words across the Duncan Phyfe table:  
hunger; secret meetings; human rights; spies;  
betrayals; prison; escape--interrupted by one of  
 the grandchildren: "Commercial's on; any Coke left?  
 Gee, you're missing a real hair-raiser."

The smog, the moral and social values, the substance of the conversations--everything in this visited world reinforces the difference between the cultures of the living and dying illustrated in the beginning of the chapter. The sea gives life, while the smog kills. The thoughtless snobbery of the phrase "a nicer section of the beach, nicer people, a pool," is placed alongside Eva's pleasure in "sand to look at through a magnifying glass." Most striking is the comparison that can be made between the tinselled, trivialized anecdotes of after-dinner chatter, and Eva's earnest search for meaning and true identity through tedious and painful recollection. Therefore, though David "itched to tell them . . . 'A very sick woman,'" Eva's consciousness once again reflects a unique vitality in the midst of a society of the living-dead.

Returning to the beach, Eva "lay in the sun and looked towards the waters" while David "would sit only on the benches," demonstrating again his timorousness in opposition to her compliance with the motions of natural life. The essence of their surroundings is expressed symbolically through the almost comical title of the "New and Perpetual Rummage Sale stores." As the title implies, the enclave on the beach, is a sort of clearing house, to which the used and discarded old are sent. Situated between the society that has rejected its obsolete members, and an ocean of eternity waiting to reclaim them, this clearing house traffics in the decaying and dying.

Its existence is as "perpetual" as the cycle of life and death which ensures a continuous bustling trade.

The initial encounter with Mrs. Mays is introduced through the imagery of stone:

Thirty years are compressed into a dozen sentences; and the present, not even in three. All is told: the children scattered; the husband dead; she lives in a room two blocks up from the sing hall . . .

The compact communication of the facts of her life convey the impression of fossilized rocks: events sifted, layered and pressurized. What remains is only the imprint of essential memories, the details that tell the story of a lifetime.

"The description of the "community sing" subtly combines the imagery of "rock of layered centuries" with the metamorphic aspect of the life/death cycle. While Eva "sits in the wind of the singing, among the thousand various faces of age," the vast histories which the faces evoke are fossilized in her consciousness: "One by one they streamed by and imprinted on her." Eva witnesses the passage of life in the singing faces. Feeling the totality of life as expressed through song and music, from "children-chants" to "keens for the dead," Eva is transported to a certain beginning in her own life, to the first time she heard music:

while from floor to balcony to dome a bare-footed  
sore-covered little girl threaded the sound-  
thronged tumult, danced her ecstasy of grimace  
to flutes that scratched at a cross-roads  
village wedding

Since Eva also returns to this memory on the day she dies, it is a recollection of singular significance. Just as it represented a birth or entry into an elevated awareness when she was a child, it also represents the passage from life to death: it is her personal icon of metamorphosis. The overwhelming effect of the faces and the singing is suggestive of an imprint on stone: "Yes, faces became sound, and the sound became faces; and faces and sound became weight--pushed, pressed."

The remaining portion of this chapter focuses on Eva's concern with the immense waste of human capability. Her fantasies and memories which affirmed the wealth of living history and potential, are nowhere manifest in the broken, aimless lives she observes. When life is devoid of meaning, death signifies rot rather than rebirth. This deathliness now pervades her surroundings: "The stench in the hall: mildew? decay?"; "The stench along the slab of room"; "And now one room like a coffin."

But Eva is confused and frustrated rather than defeated. While she is aware of the loss and failure of individual lives--"Shrinking the life of her into one room like a coffin. Rooms and rooms like this I lie on the quilt and hear them talk"--she still senses the

indestructible power and greatness of human possibility:

Singing. Unused the life in them. She in  
 this poor room with her pictures. Max You  
 The children Everywhere unused the life  
 and who has meaning? Century after century  
 still all in us not to grow?

It is the failure of transformation that she mourns, not the failure of human beings. She affirms her deep faith in human potential--"Humankind one has to believe"-- but she questions the worth of that potential when she does not see its actualization in change, in the alleviation of suffering and the filling of emptiness: "So strong for what? To rot. not grow?"

Eva is now consciously expressing what she semi-consciously experienced during her daydream in the closet at Vivi's. She has separated meaning from existence, and wonders at the purpose of the latter without the former. Life without goal, accomplishment, progress, is life.. without validity.. In this context, death is not beatific metamorphosis but absurd horror, because memory is then bereft of significance, and futility is the only inheritance:

"And when will it end. Oh, the end." That nightmare thought, and this time she writhed, crumpled against him, seized his hand (for a moment again the weight, the soft distant roaring ) of humanity) and on the strangled-for breath, begged: "Man . . . we'll destroy ourselves?"

The answer she perceives on David's face will prove to be the ultimate test of her recent probing, remembering, questioning; as "she understood the last months, and knew that she was dying."

\* \* \*

The last chapter begins with the recurrence of Eva's request: "Let us go home." In the context of her awareness of her impending death, there is a new dimension to her desire. She does not want to end her life in a "slab of room," alien and anonymous, a room which reflects neither memories nor history. Jeannie alone understands her need, responding, "Of course, poor Granny. You want your own things around you, don't you?"

Eva's relation to the water and sand also has altered:

They watched the spent waves feeding the new, the gulls in the clouded sky; even up where they sat, the wind-blown sand stung.

She did not ask to go down the crooked steps to the sea.

She no longer runs towards the sea or sifts through the sand, but holds back, apprehensively watching the workings of the cycle which is reclaiming her body. In place of a sunny sky, there are "gulls in the clouded sky," scavengers waiting to snatch the life offered up to them by the sea. The scene is mocking, taunting. She is stung by the sand of infinite life histories, endless time: the cycle

asserting its prerogative.

The "Pan del Muerto" is a metaphor for the themes of memory and metamorphosis. The formation of the cookie in the likeness of the dead Rosita keeps her memory alive, and continues the cycle of creation through re-creation. The "Pan del Muerto" is moulded from organic material, replacing the life that has been taken. Paralleling the ritual of communion, this bread is like the host. The spirit of Rosita is made edible, nutritive, and is incorporated by those who love and remember her. She lives on in them. The information that "if it is a child only the mother can make them," and Eva's comment--"I think for the mother it is a good thing to be busy with such bread"--emphasize the theme of the continuous renewal of life. The mother, who initially gave life to the child, who gave nourishment and sustenance, is herself sustained by the act of re-creating the image of her child. By presenting Eva with the gift of the "Pan del Muerto" Jeannie provides her with "something of my own around me," giving her the understanding and comfort Eva so desperately needs.

As Eva's sickness ravages, time becomes polarized. While "Outwardly the days repeated themselves," moving towards the ineluctable future, inwardly Eva withdraws further into the past. This contrary motion is not simply evidence of a fear of death, but also supports the dynamic of a life/death continuum: Eva's proximity to physical death stimulates a converse mental voyage

back to beginnings and roots. The two paths ultimately describe a circle, joining at the points of birth and death. ♦

The last days of coherent contact with the outside world begin the unfolding of Eva's fundamental character: her intelligence, vital curiosity, fighting spirit and integrity. During these days she attempts to impart the knowledge and particles of experience which formed the foundation of her life, and which she offers as a precious inheritance to her descendants.

Two incidents demonstrate a renaissance of Eva's youthful nature. Not content only to observe the Samoan dance, she tries to imitate, to remember and to learn:

Long after they left, a tiny thrumming sound could be heard where, in her bed, she strove to repeat the beckon, flight, surrender of his hands, the fluttering footbeats, and his low plaintive calls.

When David places a flower in her hair "Like a girl," the contrasting image in the mirror elicits "a desolate, excited laugh." Though "she pushed the mirror away" still she "let the flower burn." She rejects the dying "yellow skull face" she sees reflected in the mirror, but accepts the adornment of the flower, accepts the mantle of blossoming life and beauty. In contrast to the supposed classic brittleness of the elderly, Eva does not regard herself as too old to learn a dance or wear a flower in her hair. She is not beyond new experience or lighthearted pleasure.



Eva instructs, compares, recounts, remembers. Her rambling reveals a deeply rooted impulse: the impulse to grow, to understand, to find order and meaning in individual action and in the flow of history. Her affirmation of the basic principle--"All that happens one must try to understand"--illuminates her own life as she searches for the truth and underlying reality that connects past to present:

"Like Lisa she is, your Jeannie. Have I told you of Lisa who taught me to read? Of the highborn she was, but noble in herself. . . . To her life was holy, knowledge was holy, and she taught me to read. They hung her. Everything that happens one must try to understand why. She killed one who betrayed many. Because of betrayal, betrayed all she lived and believed."

Eva is struggling to find meaning in her life both for her own sake, and for the sake of those who follow. The uttering of "half-memorized phrases from her few books," aside from teaching others, remind Eva herself of what she believes, renewing in herself, and hopefully kindling in those around her, sufficient strength to repeat: "'life may be hated or wearied of, but never despised.'"

Her courage and tenacity are further illustrated by her attitude to her illness. Refusing a relatively painless and prolonged passage to death, she does not want to be denied the human reality of the experience of dying, and therefore says to David: "'no pills, let me feel what I feel'." When David attempts to have her transferred to a hospital, she attacks him with an amazing

ferocity: "'Weakling,' she taunted, 'to leave me there and run. Betrayer. All your life you have run.'" She rallies extraordinary strength to defend and maintain the little familiarity of surroundings she possesses.

These incidents mark Eva's final conscious contact with others. What the reader subsequently learns about Eva is gathered from her disjointed, delirious monologue, and from the feelings and reactions of others.

Jeannie's response to her grandmother is proof that Eva's memories are not spilling unheeded, that her life is valued, and her thoughts and ideals are cherished and will be remembered:

Jeannie moved down the hall to take over the sickroom, her face so radiant, her grandfather asked her once: "you are in love?" (Shameful the joy, the pure overwhelming joy from being with her grandmother; the peace, the serenity that breathed.) "My darling escape," she answered incoherently, "my darling Granny" --as if that explained.

Eva's children react differently to their dying mother. The approach of some confirms the fear she has expressed throughout the story, the fear that her living was wasted, that she did not teach, that there is no kernel of truth or wisdom which she has transmitted and by which she will be remembered. Clara's reaction poignantly expresses this tragedy:

Pay me back, Mother, pay me back for all you took from me. Those others you crowded into your heart. The hands I needed to be for you, the heaviness, the responsibility.

. . . Where did we lose each other, first mother, singing mother?

I do not know you, Mother. Mother, I never knew you.

Lennie's response, though less alienated, demonstrates a sympathy based on lack: "suffering . . . for that in her which never lived (for that which in him might never live)." His remorse reveals a great love and respect, but not an equivalent depth of understanding. However, the inheritance he does acknowledge is a testament to Eva's mothering (in contrast to Clara's bitterness): "good-bye Mother, who taught me to mother myself."

Jeannie's more comprehensive and profound appreciation of Eva's greatness cannot be explained simply in terms of differences in personality. The children who experience the dilemma--"Too late to ask: and what did you learn with your living, Mother, and what do we need to know?"-- are not necessarily less sensitive or less caring than Jeannie. Rather, Jeannie has the advantage of distance and objectivity, while the children's relation to Eva was defined primarily by need. The vicissitudes of a large and poor family placed upon Eva a burden of such heavy responsibility that her role of caretaker obscured her history and her individuality. There was always need and greater need--no time to teach and no opportunity to learn.

As Eva slips deeper into unconsciousness, deeper

into the ramblings of the past, she is delving deeper into her self, uncovering more and more of the essence of her being. It is a process of liberation. This process is emphasized through the portrayal of Eva metamorphosing into the image of a bird:

Light she grew, like a bird, and, like a bird,  
sound bubbled in her throat while the body  
fluttered in agony.

and:

Light like a bird, the fluttering body, the  
little claw hands, the beaked shadow on her face;  
and the throat, bubbling, straining.

The freedom of flight implicit in this image also connects to the idea of Eva unmoored from the present, drifting backwards towards rebirth as she approaches closer to death. She is becoming light, spirit, returning to the instant where life and death meet and merge.

After the children leave, having said their good-byes, the focus shifts onto David. His agony is the chronicle of her last days. As he follows her streaming words, they launch him on a journey of his own:

He tried not to listen, as he tried not to look  
on the face in which only the forehead remained  
familiar, but trapped with her the long nights in  
that little room, the sounds worked themselves into  
his consciousness, with their punctuation of  
death swallows, whimpers, gurglings.

Because she cannot hear him, he cannot stop her. Her words flow ceaselessly, unmindful of rebuke and entreaty. Listening to her repeat an old melody, David is reminded of her "bent in listening to it, silencing the record instantly he was near." He tries to recall when she had "first begun to silence her few records when he came near--but could reconstruct nothing." His realization that he is unable to remember is crucial. He is confronted by the past--he has the desire to recall something, but he cannot. This inability increases his resentment towards Eva's selection of memories: "A lifetime you tended and loved, and now not a word of us, for us." He is not merely offended by the omission. He needs her to relive their past because he is unable to do it himself.

Her words, slogans, songs, poems, continue to pour. David argues and ridicules, but his arguments are those of the present and therefore insufficient to contradict the experience of the past. Again, like an amnesiac, he is startled by the faint shadows of memory floating unclear:

Though even as he spoke, he remembered she had not always been isolated, had not always wanted to be alone (as he knew there had been a voice before this gossamer one; before the hoarse voice that broke from silence to lash, make incidents, shame him--a girl's voice of eloquence that spoke their holiest dreams). But again he could reconstruct, image, nothing of what had been before, or when, or how, it had changed.

On the surface he continues his taunting, answering each phrase of belief with a cynical retort. But he is in dangerous waters. Eva's utterings have made him aware that he has forgotten or blotted out the world of his youth. He has set himself adrift from history, he has ignored the markings of time. His life, therefore, is existence void of memory and meaning. Having been obliged to face the emptiness in his life, Eva's choking fragment--"And every life (long strangling cough) shall be a song"--breaks the grip of repression and forgetfulness, and plummets David back in time, back through the years of hardship, idealism, disillusionment, resignation, sorrow:

The cards fell from his fingers. Without warning, the bereavement and betrayal he had sheltered--compounded through the years--hidden even from himself--revealed itself,  
 uncoiled,  
 released,  
sprung

Devastated by the moment of profound revelation--  
 "Lost, how much I lost."--David "escaped to the grandchildren," seeking to reassure himself that the affluence of their lives is "the dream then, come true in ways undreamed." But he is unable to content himself with the material accomplishments of his family. He cannot hide from the ideals and beliefs which transcend individual security and expose a larger reality and struggle. This time the comparison, so typical of his generation and background--"Better old here than in the old country!"--

does not appease and comfort. Because the "Better" . . . here than . . ." attitude, which has buoyed his life and lulled his conscience, is now hollow, he attempts to lose himself once again in the routine of the immediate. But it is impossible. He has been made aware of his lifeline to the past and, like Eva, his desire to understand overcomes fear and defense: "Still was there thirst or hunger ravaging in him." Like Eva, he rediscovers a world of contradiction--painful but glorious--a world antithetical to his present existence of undisturbed oblivion:

That world of their youth--dark, ignorant, terrible with hate and disease--how was it that living in it, in the midst of corruption, filth, treachery, degradation, they had not mistrusted man nor themselves; had believed so beautifully, so . . . falsely?

"Aaah, children," he said out loud, "how we believed, how we belonged." And he yearned to package for each of the children, the grandchildren, for everyone, that joyous certainty, that sense of mattering, of moving and being moved, of being one and indivisible with the great of the past, with all that freed, ennobled man.

Drawn into confrontation with the past through Eva's recollections, David is compelled to continue his journey through time. Eva has been his guide during the voyage, charting, signalling, and directing a course through memory. Realizing this, David also perceives that she is not randomly unravelling her life, but is speaking from a crucial center of her being: "Still she believed? 'Eva!' he whispered. 'Still you believed? You lived by it? These Things Shall Be?'" He tries to confirm his realization,

but she ignores his question and instead responds with recollections of domesticity, the recollections which he previously requested. David despairs: "I ask for stone; she gives me bread--day old." It is a statement of humor, pathos and great irony. When Eva offered "stone" (memory, meaning), he wanted "bread" (domestic comfort, sustenance). Now that he finally wants to know, to renew, it is too late, and he must search and remember alone.

As David flounders, another of Eva's phrases--"Not look my hair where they cut. . . ."--plunges him to a deeper layer of memory. Time and circumstance stream by and fall away, and his mind is filled with a consciousness of Eva, of his love for her:

And instantly he left the mute old woman poring over the Book of the Martyrs; went past the mother treading at the sewing machine, singing with the children; past the girl in her wrinkled prison dress, hiding her hair with scarred hands, lifting to him her awkward, shamed, imploring eyes of love; and took her in his arms, dear, personal, fleshed, in all the heavy passion he had loved to rouse from her.  
"Eva!"

Eva has carried David back to his self, following the same route she traveled in her journey to her self.

The circle of their lives is complete. In dying, Eva brings herself to an affirmation of her living. While Eva and David are not reconciled, her dying has united them, rekindling the love and experience which bind them. Aware of his need and love, conscious of her importance and impression, David conforms to Jeannie's sketch, and takes



his place beside her, "their hands, him and hers, clasped, feeding each other."

Eva's death marks the rebirth she has struggled to achieve. Music, which has been a thread throughout the story, is a metaphor for human spirit or essence. The closer Eva moves to revealing and liberating her spirit, the more music and song are used as symbolic expressions of that spirit; the "Russian love song of fifty years ago"; the "ear turned to music" after her operation; her response to the "community sing"; "intense in listening" to Jeannie's radio while she lies in her sickbed; Clara's memory of her singing; David's memory of her hiding her records from him; her phrase "And every life . . . shall be a song"; and her final return to the day in her life when she was introduced to music:

On the last day, she said she would go back to when she first heard music, a little girl on the road of the village where she was born. She promised me. It is a wedding and they dance, while the flutes so joyous and vibrant tremble in the air.

The occasion when she first heard music has been earlier described as an icon of metamorphosis. It is symbolic of an emergence, a rebirth, the opening of a world. Eva's return to that time at the moment of death, symbolizes another beginning, an emergence into the acceptance of death, an acceptance made possible by the triumph of life.

In "Tell Me A Riddle" Olsen has explored some of life's most ineffable mysteries and truths. In the account of the living and dying of one woman, she penetrates the opaque social and moral fabric which cloaks a seemingly unimpressive life, and which gives substance to that life. An examination of that substance illuminates the motivations which transform ordinariness into greatness. The wonder of the character of Eva is that, while she functions as a complex symbol, she is not separated from the typical or presented as an exceptional being in a world of mediocrity. Eva remains firmly rooted in an everyday world, thus enabling Olsen to imply the strength and purpose underlying even the most limited and simplest of lives. "Tell Me A Riddle" is a testament to the struggling humanity in us all.

Conclusion

After a reading of Tillie Olsen's work one evening, one admirer wrote about some of the ideas Olsen expressed:

. . . Tillie speaks of our responsibility to "voice the unvoiced," to speak for all those millions like us whose lives are such that they can never come to writing, to give form to that experience which has never, or rarely, been part of literature. In our society we injure each other, she reminds us, and any person who is lucky enough to achieve recognition does so at the expense of those who do not get the chance; this fact we must always remember, not with guilt but with a sense of responsibility to articulate the realities we come from. She speaks of change, of all that passes away, in human history because it is never recorded . . .

This account of Olsen's sentiments expresses more than noble rhetoric. Her work is intrinsically faithful to the "responsibility to articulate the realities we come from." The vividness and intensity of her language mirror the vitality of her characters, simultaneously revealing them not only as they are, but also "as they might be." The emphasis which she places on memory in her fiction reinforces an awareness of the fragmentation of the self, and functions as a reminder of all that is forgotten, thwarted or lost in the formation of a life.

The "ordinary" lives of Olsen's characters are rendered with an accuracy which seeks neither to idealize

<sup>1</sup> Boucher, pp. 28-29.

nor to pardon. Her female characters are not heroines: they transcend the heroic and achieve the human. They "give form to that experience which has never, or rarely, been part of literature." The reader, particularly the female reader, identifies with Olsen's women, but not at the expense of the diminishment of self.

It is to the importance of this identification that Florence Howe is referring in her appraisal of Olsen: "Her fiction, her life and her learning sustain us and inspire us to continue the work she has begun."<sup>2</sup> There is a wealth of encouragement and inspiration to be derived from Olsen's work. In her non-fiction, she recreates and legitimizes a history, a buried past, enabling us to understand the present, and giving us a tool to shape the future. The history of Olsen's individual life reinforces the hope and struggle she uncovers in the lives of others. And the lives she has created in fiction reflect her own statement concerning the importance of "Life in the Iron Mills": "Details, questions, Vision, found nowhere else-- dignified into living art."

<sup>2</sup> Howe, p. 441.

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