

# Traditions of the Grotesque in Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio*

Melanie Secco

Written amidst the Great Depression, *Yonnondio* is an unflinching portrayal of the unpleasant realities of poverty. Doubtlessly shaped by Olsen's communist ideals and her own childhood in poverty (Pratt vii-ix), *Yonnondio* is a novel that fits into the tradition of the naturalist Proletarian novel that proliferated during the 1930s and focused on reproducing the gritty and unpleasant life of the lower class (Campbell 500, 503). Olsen's portrayal of that world is inarguably grim; the cities are menacing and oppressive while the bodies of the poor are twisted with disease and deformity (Olsen 65, 171). In using this imagery of the grotesque Olsen is accessing a long tradition of talking and writing about the poor through the use of the physical. This is a tradition, however, divided in two. One strand of thinking saw its heyday with the Victorian social problem novel. There, images of the grotesque poor were reproduced as a means of prompting reform, while simultaneously operating as spectacle for upper class readers (Flint 1, 2; Stallybrass and White 126). The other strand of thinking reaches back to the medieval world with works like Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (Stallybrass and White 6). In 1965 Mikhail Bakhtin examined Rabelais's work and demonstrated how this tradition of writing used the grotesque in relation to the lower classes as a means of transgression and renewal through the carnival and carnivalesque laughter (Stallybrass and White 6, 8, 9). Though Olsen works inside both of these traditions, by utilizing the imagery of the grotesque, she ultimately complicates the intention behind its usage, refusing to make her subjects a spectacle while presenting an accurate and sympathetic portrayal of the poor that fully illustrates their subjugation.

The Victorian social problem novel embodied many of the conventions in employing the grotesque that Olsen both accessed and nuanced. Here the grotesque was employed by the upper classes in their description of the poor and used to shock readers, while also evoking a sense of pity, as a means of making them aware of the need for societal reforms (Flint 1, 2). The result of this, however, was that the poor were often made into spectacles and "the slum, the labouring poor, the prostitute, the sewer, were recreated for the bourgeois study and drawing room as much as for the urban council chamber" (Stallybrass and White 125-126). Accord-

ing to Stallybrass and White in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, a tension existed in the upper classes between the desire to survey and examine the poor (and their bodies) from a position of superiority, and the revulsion and disgust at what they found (126). The conflict of these two desires often lead to the objectification of the poor, despite reformers' supposedly altruistic intentions. It is also notable that as Victorians imposed increasingly strict regimes of cleanliness and health upon themselves, they continually returned to the depictions of the poor who lay outside those very realms of control and betterment (ibid). Critics like Stallybrass and White have argued that this was because the characterization of the lower classes as morally and physically deformed, as well as intellectually deviant, enabled the upper classes to reinforce their own class position (19-20, 26). By consolidating all they saw as unpleasant and unwanted in the figure of the Other (the lower classes) and then excluding that figure from society, the grotesque operated as the means by which the identity of the upper classes was strengthened by an articulation of what it was not (19, 26).

Although Olsen was writing much later, she employs many of the same images the Victorian reformers did in order to instill a similar sense of revulsion in her readers, though she makes sure to remove the sense of culpability the poor have for their own situation. Victorian discourses often focused intensely on physical descriptions of the poor and the places they lived (Flint 1, 2). The upper class was constructed around terms of beauty, centered on the classical body, while placed in opposition to the lower classes with their grotesque bodies (and spaces) (Stallybrass and White 22, 23). Smell, for instance, was used to great effect, where disgusting smells were not only representative of a lack of sanitation, but also a means of encoding the difference between the upper and lower classes (139); the *lack* of disgusting smells (and presence of nicer ones) was a sign of belonging to a class with the wealth, and therefore the ability, to avoid repugnant smells that cling to the body. In Omaha, the smells of the city are oppressive and stifling, be they the smell of the river and dump, or the packinghouse (Olsen 69). Will declares that it smells "worse'n vomit, worse'n dead dogs and garbage, worse'n the crap can" (80), and Ben cries that the stench steals his breath, making it hard for him to breathe (79). Smell is an oppressive force that both suffocates them and marks them as different, as members of the lower classes living near the packinghouse and dump. In comparison, Anna's wealthier friend Else is described as smelling "too sweet" and living in a home that only smelt when "the wind blew strong from the south" (73). In spite of Olsen's use of smell to differentiate the high and low classes, however, she does not completely follow the tradition of the Victorians. Her use of smell is complicated because it does

not actually emanate from the poor themselves. The source of the stench is from large corporate forces like the packinghouse and factories, or from places of human refuse like the dump. So while the Holbrooks may live surrounded by stink, Olsen makes it clear that it is not actually a part of them. It then becomes an embodiment of the oppressive forces that shape their world without their consent.

Olsen throughout also subverts any attempts to morally judge or condemn the characters. A key component to the Victorian tradition of the grotesque was how the physical body was an outer reflection of character. The presence of physical filth and grime indicated inner moral failings or character weaknesses (Stallybrass and White 131). A nineteenth-century advocate of the sanitary idea in Britain once announced that “fever nests and seats of physical depravity are also the seats of moral depravity, disorder and crime” (qtd. in Stallybrass and White 131). The same sliding between the physical and moral occurs in American thought too, and Olsen injects such upper class prejudices into the narrative by embodying them in the form of the doctor who comes to examine Anna after her miscarriage (Olsen 110-111). When examining Anna he notes with distaste the undeniably dirty room, thinking of it as a “pigsty” and associating it with the dirt of animals (110). He then goes a step farther, however, and explicitly calls the Holbrooks “animals” and compares them to senseless beasts that only seek the physical pleasure of food, drink, or sex (ibid). In his eyes they both live *and* act like animals, simultaneously immoral and physically disgusting, and doctors should “sterilize the whole lot of them after the second kid” (ibid). This comment on sterilization hints at the eugenics movement and is loaded with assumptions about the reproduction of poverty and the undeserving poor. Overall, the doctor essentially blames the victims and sees the Holbrooks as entirely responsible for their own situation. Just like the Victorian social justice reformer, he collapses the distinction between social class, the physical body, and morality, and views them all as extensions of one another. Olsen, however, makes sure to remove the reader from the doctor’s judgment and moral condemnation just as she did with her treatment of repulsive dirt and smells. One way she does this is through Jim’s comment that the doctor told him “everything she needs, but not how to get it” (112) in reference to medicine for Anna. This statement reinforces the reader’s awareness of the gap in knowledge and understanding between the two classes. It is not an ignorant disregard of their own health that brings about the dreadful medical condition of Anna and the baby then, but instead a lack of material resources that limits their capability to care for themselves. Anna’s constant struggle to keep the tenement itself clean is also a testament to their dissatisfaction with their sur-

roundings (123, 124, 127). This makes it clear that it is not due to laziness or a conscious choice that they live in such an unhealthy and unpleasant environment, despite the doctor's assumptions. So while Olsen uses many of the same grotesque depictions to incite disgust at the conditions of the poor, she removes any sense of responsibility for those conditions from the Hollbrooks themselves, refusing moral condemnation of them. This even extends to her portrayal of rough characters that an upper class audience would have been primed to judge and dislike: like Jim who drinks and beats his wife and children, or Anna who in turn hits the kids (9). Olsen takes great care to ensure that their characterization is nuanced and three dimensional. Jim has his moments as a loving father with Mazie, capable too of gentleness and care when Anna is sick (112, 128-130). Meanwhile Anna is constantly trying the best for her children, be it getting them an education or keeping the tenement clean (2, 126-127, 136). Any slide into moral condemnation of these characters and their actions by the upper class reader is stalled by the awareness of the triggers of their admittedly despicable behaviour. They are not shown as somehow inherently immoral; instead it is the moments of greatest stress and economic strife that prompt Jim's abuse and Anna's anger (59, 79, 101, 105, 108). Their anger and frustration at the world around them and their helplessness overflows and is unfortunately misdirected at their children. Even Anna herself acknowledges this fact, despairing after she hit her children that "twasn't them I was beatin up on" (9).

Olsen also explicitly resists the reader's temptation to see the continuous disaster and strife in the novel as an entertaining but distant spectacle. When discussing the explosion of the mine Olsen directly addresses the reader and questions "could you not make a cameo of this and pin it on to your aesthetic hearts? . . . these grotesques, this thing with half the face gone and the arm" (28-29). Olsen is directly addressing the tendency of the upper classes, of those who do not truly know the strife she is writing about, to make a disaster aesthetic in the process of learning about and consuming it. In this process elements of the horrible conditions of the lower classes are lessened or twisted to such a grotesque extent that they become like an artistic cameo: an idealized but unrealistic portrayal of real life. This is the same tendency that Stallybrass and others have found mired in the Victorian social problem novels, driven by the inexplicable tension between judgment and repulsion as well as morbid fascination. By drawing the reader's attention to their own prejudices and tendencies, she prevents this process from occurring, working to impress upon the reader the horrid realities of the lower classes while avoiding any means by which they can emotionally distance themselves from the text.

In *Yonnonidio*, Olsen also simultaneously appropriates and eschews Bakhtin's method of employing the grotesque. Admittedly, Olsen would not have been aware of Bakhtin's work when she originally wrote *Yonnonidio* in the early thirties: Bakhtin's work on Rabelais was published long after the Great Depression (Stallybrass and White 6). But while he did not publish until the mid-nineteenth century, he was forwarding a theory on how the images of the grotesque *had* been used by the lower classes to invert "official" and "unofficial" discourse in a statement of rebellion and power (7). This inversion was predicated on the division between high and low culture that was often employed in popular discourses (2-3, 8-9). The richest socio-economic groups historically were the ones with the power to dictate what was high (like philosophy, art, and literature) and what was low (*i.e.* the discourses of the marginal, the peasantry, and the urban poor) (4). Furthermore, according to Stallybrass and White, this binary of high and low is not limited to discussions on philosophy and art but is also embedded in the way people discuss everything from the body to the nation (2). For Bakhtin, the key component of his theory on the grotesque and carnivalesque was that these two binaries were ultimately reversed (say, in depictions of the body) through parody and laughter, the reversal then acting as the means of subverting conventions and critiquing authority (7-9). These inversions of high and low culture either occurred at the carnival or were designated carnivalesque, and laughter was an essential feature because it had the power to both degrade and renew (8). For example, Bakhtin identified what he called *grammatical jocosa*, where linguistic and grammatical rules are transgressed in order to reveal the underlying social conventions or simply "erotic and obscene . . . counter-meaning" (10-11). The vulgar speech of the lower classes (full of slang, misspellings, and innuendoes) that was excluded from the official discourse of the upper class could be used to achieve this counter-meaning through parody, inversion, and puns (*ibid.*). Throughout *Yonnonidio*, Olsen periodically breaks the boundaries of what is considered conventional in her grammar and structure, slipping between tenses as well as points of view, with her sentence structure collapsing during moments of greatest stress (Olsen 6, 89, 99, 100). But in these critical moments, the carnivalesque *laughter* is missing. When Anna continually mispronounces "education," characters leave out apostrophes, or Mazie sings nonsense songs (1, 135, 159), attention is being drawn to their form of speech as both unconventional and indicative of their uneducated class. If anything, they are people to laugh *at*, not people who are laughing themselves. None of the characters are active participants in their own transgression of the norms that dictate proper speech (as they

would be in a carnival); at no point is there any intentional rebellion in the way they break grammatical conventions. Unlike Bakhtin's optimistic view of flourishing of 'folk' humour and speech as powerful means of resistance, here their breakdown in language is simply a means of marking them as abnormal, their speech indicative of a lack (of knowledge, proper terms, and the correct lyrics) as a result of their poverty.

Moreover, the characters are often shown as laughing *at* each other rather than with each other. For Bakhtin, folk humour that consisted of "curses and slang . . . where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled" (Stallybrass and White 8), was another means of violating and flaunting conventions. In *Yonnondio*, the mocking rhyme aimed at Mazie as she scales the ice trucks to steal ice fulfills the first half of that description; the boys shout out "Girl go to London, go to France / Evrybody sees your pants. / Girl shimmy shimmy shimmyhigh / Evrybody sees your pie." (Olsen 157). In this rhyme, historically and culturally important places like London and France are juxtaposed with girl's underwear and genitalia with the slang "pie," while the grammatical structure itself breaks down in the misspelt word "evrybody" and the condensation of "shimmyhigh." Undoubtedly vulgar, created not only by the lower class but by children, such a poem likely would have repulsed upper class readers of Olsen's book, as well as any upper class characters in the world of *Yonnondio*. But unlike the carnivalesque, the laughter that the chant evokes is not renewing or powerfully transgressive. Instead the chants of Will and the local boys act as a means of excluding Mazie by instilling in her a sense of shame based on her body (157) and her breach of proper gender roles in climbing the ice truck like a boy. In fact, here Olsen confronts one of the harsher realities of the carnival that Bakhtin ignored in his own writing, that it often tended to demonize and oppress the weaker minorities through an act of *displaced abjection* rather than launch an attack on the upper classes (Stallybrass and White 19). This method of *displaced abjection* was used to consolidate one's own position by excluding others in the same way that Victorians reinforced their class position by rejecting the poor in the Victorian social problem novel. Here then, Olsen illustrates how mocking carnivalesque laughter can be used to reinforce hierarchies rather than break them.

Olsen also confronts the physical aspect of the grotesque in her portrayal of the body but actually ends up inverting the very same conventions Bakhtin saw as a method of critique. For example, Sheen McEvoy and Erina (the two most visibly deformed people in the text) both fit the descriptions of the grotesque as obscene and gaping (Stallybrass and White 9). Sheen's face is a writhing, shapeless "red mass of jelly" (Olsen 16) while

Erina is a self-declared ugly young girl prone to slobbering (172, 173). However, both Sheen and Erina are stunted in some way, be it their mind or arm, and so their grotesque incompleteness is not something in constant renewal but something which has been curtailed and truncated. There is no Bakhtin-like fertility or renewal implied here in their grotesque bodies. Instead, Olsen essentially employs the imagery while removing the intention and power Bakhtin saw as inherent in such figures. If anything, they fit more closely into the historical discourse of the time, during the Great Depression, that treated disability and deformity as a reflection of disillusionment (where the loss of the ability to work and sustain their own lives through a deformity was a devastation) (Fahy 4). In fact, it is Olsen's portrayal of the rich capitalists that better fit this image of excess that is constantly renewing and full of "brimming over abundance" and "outgrowing all limits" (Stallybrass and White 9). Jim's boss is "puffed up like a balloon, with a smaller red balloon of a face wobbling on top" (Olsen 86), and Anna's friend Else is "fat" and squeezed into a "tight yellow dress" that cannot contain her (79). Moreover, during Olsen's digression into the world of Andy Kvaternick, bosses are directly personified as "fat bellies" (8). This is in contrast to the poor like Mazie who is so starved her skin remains indented when pushed in, or Anna who becomes increasingly skeletal as the novel progresses (24, 31 131). Here Olsen utilizes the imagery of the grotesque as symbolic of excess and then displaces it onto the bodies of the rich upper class as a political commentary. In the midst of the Great Depression and burgeoning Marxist ideals, images of excess became problematic, and here they operate as emblems of capitalist greed and waste (as opposed to signs of success and wealth or fertility and renewal), their physical forms embodying their inner corruption. Furthermore, here it is also the bodies of the rich (or at least, *richer*) that are described in wide sweeping collective terms. According to Bakhtin, "the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of the word because it is not individualized" (qtd. in Gumpton 96). The lower classes for Bakhtin become a grotesque faceless collective through the carnivalesque, powerful in their unity. Once again, however, Olsen defies expectations by making the rich the faceless enemy. Other than Else, in fact, none of the rich receive names, which simultaneously depersonalizes them and transforms them into an immovable force as opposed to fellow human beings who can be reasoned with. Such a portrayal of the rich undermines Bakhtin's slightly naive conception of the grotesque poor as collective agents of power. Olsen instead demonstrates the reality of the lower classes' situation as single individuals who are powerless, oppressed, and sur-

rounded by the embodiment of forces larger than themselves (like large corporations). Meanwhile, the lower classes are in fact highly individualized in contrast to the upper classes. It is through the eyes of the lower class that we see the entire story of *Yonnonidio*, through incredibly memorable characters like Sheen or Erina, while Olsen periodically accesses the lives or consciousness of even minor poor characters like Jim Tracy or Andy Kvaternick (Olsen 6-9, 88-92). More importantly, however, the entire novel focuses on the story of the Holbrooks, of one specific family living in poverty. It is through the close connection Olsen fosters between the reader and Mazie, by individualizing her and making her real, that sympathy for their plight is truly realized and their pain is prevented from becoming a spectacle.

Throughout *Yonnonidio* Olsen repeatedly employs the grotesque in her descriptions, but the way in which she uses it often resists the two historical methods of depicting the poor as grotesque. The Victorians, for instance, tended to both reject and condemn the lower classes (whom they saw as appalling degenerates) while transforming the grotesque poor into a spectacle to be consumed as a means of reaffirming their own class status. Olsen, however, makes it clear that the poor's physical circumstances do not reflect on their morals or intellect and refuses to allow any clear moral judgments to be drawn on their characters. Olsen also resists allowing their situation or lives to be made into a spectacle by directly confronting this proclivity in the reader. In doing so, Olsen prevents the readers from distancing themselves from the story and the harsh, unpleasant realities of poverty. Furthermore, the grotesque for Bakhtin was a means for the lower classes to critique the implicit societal hierarchies of power by transgressing conventional norms established by the upper class for what is proper. Yet in *Yonnonidio* the vital component of laughter and rebellion in the grotesque is missing, demonstrating how acts like *grammatical jocosa* that Bakhtin saw as transgressive are actually articulations of the lower classes' lack of knowledge and power, as well as a harmful means of excluding and rejecting members within their own subgroup. Olsen also subverts conventions by applying the same imagery of the grotesque as excessive and faceless to the rich as a political commentary on their corruption and greed. The result of all of this is that Olsen presents a subtle and sympathetic picture of the lives of the working class, fully demarcating their horrid circumstances and oppression through the use of grotesque imagery and techniques while refusing to blame or make a spectacle out of them.



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