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SISTERS OF SONG: TILLIE OLSEN'S WOMEN

by

Susan Mazza Sullivan

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

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September 3, 1982
Date

Professor in Charge

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ABSTRACT

This paper responds to the majority of critics who evaluate Tillie Olsen's art by merely superimposing her life upon her fiction and noting the similarities. Believing, however, that her work deserves more serious technical appraisal and, therefore, a wider audience, I focused my study on how her style reveals character.

Limiting this evaluation to Olsen's women, undeniably the center of her work, uncovered several patterns: the author gradually moves from creating predictable, sometimes sentimental figures in Yonnondio to more perfectly-crafted, realistic portraits in "Tell Me a Riddle," her latest fiction; the theme of hope stems from the promise of the next generation--the daughters--and illuminates the mothers' lives, permeating even the darkest tale; and, most significant, the language ascribed to these mothers and daughters appropriately reflects their roles in and perceptions of life.

The mothers--the narrator of "I Stand Here Ironing," Anna Holbrook in Yonnondio, Helen in "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" and "O Yes," and Eva in "Tell Me a Riddle"--have no time to pursue private interests or pleasures. Instead, they are consumed by the constant physical and emotional demands of nurturing new families, a responsibility often compounded by the necessity of having to

work outside the home. Accordingly, their speech is mainly composed of long, verb-laden sentences to reflect their continual movement, bereft of the rest that even a comma's pause would allow.

The daughters, natural beneficiaries of their mothers' determination that life will be better for them, are more confident, more vocal than their predecessors. Their language mirrors this newly-won luxury of time; their sentence structure, although still long and complex, is smoother-flowing, slower, and more figurative.

The diction and rhythm of Tillie Olsen's women reflect both disappointment and delight in their lives.

INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf's "angel in the house"--the responsible mother/wife whose own work is always subordinate to the needs of her family--and the artist's muse have wrestled for attention during most of Tillie Olsen's life, just as they now wrestle for dominance in the critics' response to her writing. It seems, however, that despite the artistic resolution Olsen ultimately achieved, the biographical criticism prevails. Indeed, Tillie Olsen's struggle as a writer has become, for most reviewers, a reverently recalled legend. Concentrating their praise on her triumph of spirit over circumstance, hailing her as the embodiment of feminist ideals, they inadvertently diminish the import of her art.

Her life is still worth mention, for it clarifies the differences between how she lived and what she wrote and illuminates the power of her gifts. Born in Nebraska in 1913 to Russian-Jewish immigrants, jailed at seventeen for attempting to organize packing-house workers in Kansas City, Tillie Lerner developed a social consciousness quite early, as evidenced by the novel she began at nineteen. This work, Yonnondio, not only reflected the heart of her working class experiences, but displayed the refinement of an imagination thematically and stylistically indebted to Whitman as well as

to a then-forgotten work by Rebecca Harding Davis. Set in the twenties and centering on the trials and joys of a poor migrating family, her only novel, created to speak for those unable to voice their own frustration, was an uneven work. Although sometimes didactic and sentimental in content, it stunned by its poetry and its compelling portraits of women. Yonnondio had to be put aside unfinished, however, as Olsen's own responsibility to mothering began crowding her days, muffling the muse's voice for almost thirty years.

Miraculously, then, in 1961 Tillie Olsen won the O. Henry short story award for the title novella of her Tell Me a Riddle collection, and her literary reputation began slowly rising. From the start, however, partly because she was a fifty-year-old woman who wrote, among other things, about women, critics erroneously labeled her subject narrowly self-reflective. But even those who misunderstood her source and misspelled her name (sometimes "Tilly"; oftentimes "Olson") had to marvel at her prose: some comparing "Riddle"'s evocative diction to the compression characteristic of lyric poetry,¹ and

¹Richard Ellman, rev. of Tell Me a Riddle, by Tillie Olsen, Commonweal, 8 Dec. 1961, p. 295.

others admitting "Riddle"'s Eva to be "as delicately done as a perfect fugue."² What had once been polemical in her prose became poetic and universal as Olsen found her center writing about families--not her family specifically, but families in general; what had been only flashes of stylistic brilliance in Yonnonidio was carefully integrated in both character and theme in Riddle. Tillie Olsen at last understood and refined the lesson she had learned from Rebecca Harding Davis, her predecessor in both literature and life--that art can come from the experience of ordinary people.

Olsen first encountered Davis's philosophy at fifteen when reading Life in the Iron Mills, a piece first published in the April 1861 edition of the Atlantic Monthly. Forty-four years later she was able to repay this literary debt when she successfully generated enough interest to have Iron Mills printed again. Included in this 1972 edition was Olsen's powerful afterward, a piece suggesting how far the student's work surpassed the teacher's.

Olsen's superior craftsmanship had been evident even when writing her first fiction, for although Davis's

²Rev. of Tell Me a Riddle, by Tillie Olsen, Time, 27 Oct. 1961, p. 101.

reliance on the pathetic fallacy and her didactic narrative intrusion did filter into Yonnondio, her unreal, stereotypical characters did not. Where Life in the Iron Mill offers only a cardboard male hero and a typically forebearing, weak appendage of a female "heroine," Tillie Olsen's work was hailed as "the story of real people."³ And while an accurate summation of Iron Mills, found in its closing pages, may be as "a rough, ungainly thing..." with "touches, grand sweeps of outline, that show a master's hand,"⁴ Olsen's imitation yielded a stronger, more cohesive impression. The critics were clearly impressed: "What is a losing struggle with words in Davis is distinctively rhythmic in Olsen. Yonnondio, whose language is often achingly beautiful, is an elegy that acts on the reader indirectly by its emotional suggestiveness, rather than by its direct succession of events," wrote John Alfred Avant in the New Republic.⁵

Of course such praise was offered after Olsen had achieved considerable success. Charting the page numbers

³Rev. of Yonnondio: From the Thirties, by Tillie Olsen, New Yorker, 25 Mar. 1974, p. 140.

⁴Rebecca Harding Davis, "Life in the Iron Mills," Atlantic Monthly, Apr. 1861 (Rep. in Silences, Tillie Olsen, New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Laurence, 1978), p. 282.

⁵Rev. of Yonnondio: From the Thirties, by Tillie Olsen, New Republic, 30 Mar. 1974, p. 28.

on which her reviews appear in various publications dramatically illustrates the progress of this critical acceptance: when Riddle was first published in 1961 its merits were discussed on page fifty-four of the New York Review of Books; in 1974, however, with publication of the Yonnondio fragment, its appraisal began on page five of the more prestigious New York Times Book Review, accompanied by a large picture of the author. Finally, in 1978, by the appearance of her most recent book, Silences, Tillie Olsen was deemed worthy of review on the front cover of that same magazine.

This last Olsen work, non-fiction, meant to function (as did Yonnondio) as voice for the voiceless, speaks of the imposed literary silences of women in general and of the author's in particular. Ultimately, to speak of silence is to say little, however, and while Olsen's passion cannot be denied, her prose is fragmented and repetitive, sadly illustrating her present "silent" condition. The issues she raises concerning the under-representation of women in literature courses and the lack of master's theses on women authors are valid and important, but her logic is weak and her own melodious voice seldom heard in the midst of her busy quoting of others.

Much of the critical disappointment in Silences focused on how little the author discussed her own life, reflecting, as stated earlier, the general current of

criticism evoked by her works in the last twenty years. Helen MacNeil's remark in the Times Literary Supplement that "part of Olsen's present high reputation in America admittedly springs from her role as heroine of her own life"⁶ is disturbingly accurate.

Tillie Olsen deserves better, for her art, while encompassing feminism, widens to politics, racial and social oppression, revolution, and religion. In short, Olsen's corpus is universal in scope, concerned with everyday problems, ordinary lives. With the information gathered here as a springboard, I will, in this paper, concentrate on a close textual reading of her fiction. Focusing on her women, not solely as they mirror Olsen, but as they reflect her art both stylistically and thematically, I will chart the growth of these portraits from Yonnondio through the short stories. I will show a connection between the function of a character and the stylistic treatment she receives, beginning with Olsen's mothers, whose general frustration (and infrequent jubilation) is reflected in their diction. Next, I will discuss the daughters as they illustrate a freer style, naturally paralleled by the

⁶"Speaking for the Speechless," rev. of all of Tillie Olsen's work, Times Literary Supplement, 14 Nov. 1980, p. 1294.

larger vistas open to them. I will end with the character of Jeannie, tracing her growth through Olsen's last three stories until she emerges in "Riddle"--the synthesis of mothers' hopes and daughters' harangues--as Olsen's ideal archetypal woman in what is acknowledged as the author's quintessential work. In shaping this portrait of Jeannie and in crafting this most perfect tale, Tillie Olsen best displays the skill on which her reputation should rest, demonstrating possession of that quality Virginia Woolf attributed to Shakespeare's imaginary sister: "the quickest fancy for the tune of words."⁷

⁷A Room of One's Own (1929; rpt. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957), p. 49.

Chapter 1: Interrupted Rhythms: The Mothers

"Mama, Mama, you must help carry the world." ("O Yes,"
p. 52)

In Silences Tillie Olsen speaks of motherhood as both "transport" and "core" of women's oppression.¹ Not surprisingly, the mothers characterized in her fiction embody this paradox: although able to experience a unique and joyous witnessing of their children's triumphs, they are physically and emotionally drained by "the passion of tending,"² the total selflessness that continual nurturing demands. All of them are, to some degree, frustrated artists, women who love literature, painting, and music most of all. The satisfaction, therefore, that husbands (no matter how loving) and societies (no matter how enlightened) expect that they should derive from mothering are not enough for Tillie Olsen's women. "Surely that was not all, surely there was more," ("Riddle," p. 84) mourns Eva, the dying grandmother of "Tell

¹Silences (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Laurence, 1978), p. 202.

²Tillie Olsen, "Tell Me a Riddle," in Tell Me a Riddle, 12th ed. (1961; rpt. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1979), p. 83. This volume also includes "I Stand Here Ironing," "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" and "O Yes." All references to these works are to this edition.

Me a Riddle," as she refuses to be content with contemplating the past for present pleasure and aches to recapture even a fraction of the time and energy she poured into her young motherhood.

But just as those once-needed moments of solitude can never be retrieved, neither can the lost creations of art ever be reclaimed, and with her mother/protagonists Tillie Olsen makes this point--and her own agony of silence--very clear. In Eva and in her daughter-in-law Helen, in Anna Holbrook, and in the mother of "I Stand Here Ironing," Olsen "squarely confronts the most universal problems of the artist,"³ according to William Peden, as well as the most common dilemma of all people: how can an individual create some semblance of order and beauty amid chaos?; how can one remain fully human in an insensitive, uncaring world?; how can each life count for more than "a drop" ("Ironing," p. 10) among innumerable others? In portraying motherhood--the "least understood [and] most tormentingly complex experience to wrest to truth" (Silences, p. 254)--Olsen relies on a style that employs a striking sort of verb-stringing to accurately capture the immediacy of this rhythmical

³William Peden, rev. of Tell Me a Riddle, by Tillie Olsen, New York Review of Books, 12 Nov. 1961. p. 54.

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tending and mending. Sometimes the effect of this unique approach mirrors joy as participles nearly tumble over one another, free of the punctuation that separates and therefore restricts such unbridled emotion; sometimes theme and style merge in a more halting list of past-tense prediction, thumping tired like a mother's stop-start progress. Regardless of whether the action builds to a momentary ecstatic crescendo or runs itself down from weariness, however, Olsen's verb-heavy sentences perfectly parallel the frustration of her women: they never realize the true artist's stance, never find the time or objective distance needed to piece together the meaning of their frenzied lives.

The mother that Olsen depicts in "I Stand Here Ironing" (the first work she deemed publishable after her own mothering responsibilities were fulfilled) attempts to reconstruct her past in order to achieve just such objective evaluation. Significantly, this woman is nameless, her selfhood subsumed by years of responding exclusively to others' needs, identifiable only in relation to her role as "Emily's mother." Her diction too is inextricably bound to her station, reflecting a mother's tendency to carefully measure out exact portions--regardless of whether the commodity she divides and distributes is flour, or time, or love.

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Prompted by a school counselor's concern for her talented but troubled eldest daughter, she searches her memory for a key to explaining Emily's attitude. After nineteen years, however, and the wisdom that comes from having raised four children, this mother is not yet able to make all the pieces of the past cohere:

And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total? I will start and there will be an interruption and I will have to gather it all together again. Or I will become engulfed in all I did or did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped. ("Ironing," pp. 1-2)

When Tillie Olsen reads this passage aloud, as she does in a 1980 NPR interview with Susan Stamberg, she pauses after each infinitive in order to allow these kitchen-connected verbs--"to gather," "to sift," "to weigh," "to estimate," "to total"--individual and ample weight.⁴ With this interpretation she also underscores what has become one of the hallmarks of her style--the natural rhythm frequent parallelism evokes, and a perfect merger of this form with theme. The repetition of "and," typical Olsen and perfectly suited to her purpose here, emphasizes the "something else" that a mother is always expected--without pause--to do. Even as the protagonist pursues her artistic ordering of the past, the

⁴Tillie Olsen interview with Susan Stamberg, All Things Considered, National Public Radio, 800303, 1980.

all-pervading role of mother dominates her efforts as her daughter's interruption indicates: "Aren't you ever going to finish ironing, mother? Whistler painted his mother in a rocker. I'd have to paint mine standing over an ironing board" ("Ironing," p. 11).

The adult Emily's chiding remarks have the same power to impede her mother's progress as the young Emily's accusing tears had a decade before. Thus Emily's mother, like the rest of Olsen's mother/protagonists, sometimes rises beyond her clearly-defined individuality to become an emblem of the author's belief that "motherhood means being instantly interruptable, responsive, responsible" (Silences p. 18). In fact, Emily's mother is so accustomed to outside interruption that she approaches her examination of the past hesitantly, as if waiting with a mother's ear to hear the cry that will again force abandonment of her own pursuits.

Her initial remarks clearly indicate this tentativeness, her thoughts emerging in simple, halting form: "She was a beautiful baby"; "I nursed her" ("Ironing" p. 2). But even when it seems that she will be free to continue her exploration undisturbed, the mother is drawn back into the jolting rhythm to which she has grown accustomed. Obstructing the analysis with her own questions now ("Why do I put that first?" [p. 2]), she arrives at the beginning once again: "She was a beautiful

baby." Desperate to stay with this thesis, the mother tries to catalogue only Emily's pertinent ("beautiful") characteristics, but soon strays from her point once again in a telling exposition:

I was nineteen. It was the pre-relief, pre-WPA world of depression. I would start running as soon as I got off the streetcar, running up stairs, the place smelling sour, and awake or asleep to startle awake, when she saw me she would break into a drugged weeping that could not be comforted, a weeping I can hear yet. ("Ironing," pp. 2-3)

This passage begins, as do the earlier ones, with a straightforward resolve to stay with the facts and, accordingly, the first two sentences are simple ones. The movement of the third sentence, however,--the most revealing and most typical of a mother's sentence in Olsen's work--breaks this pattern. The participles--"running" (once repeated), "smelling," and "weeping"--connote the urgency of a mother's actions and mimic a sort of "mother rhythm." This long meandering line also shifts its dramatic focus from the mother to the apartment to Emily, and back to the mother again. Time also shifts here, for the "I" at the beginning of the sentence is the young mother's, while the final "I" belongs to her older counterpart.

This excerpt also illustrates the writer's fascination with sensory images, evident (though imperfectly employed) in Yonnondio: From the Thirties, her first

work, but emerging here with more precise control. In "Ironing" Olsen skillfully manipulates her prose in order to weave imagery with content so that the reader not only responds to the writer's message, but also envisions the mother's swift blur of movement, smells the staleness of the room, and hears Emily's cry from the past as well as its echo in the present. Such carefully-worked union of theme and style makes the shifts in action, time and focus believable.

Finally, Olsen's humanist philosophy (a major theme that is, again, more expertly blended here than in the earlier work) informs the third sentence. Her purposeful emphasis, through parallelism, on "pre-relief, pre-WPA depression" reminds the reader that, for some of its believers, the American Dream has twisted into a nightmare. As she does in her other works, Olsen places the burden for this corruption on Big Business or Big Government, not on her characters, whom she portrays as well-meaning, but often disheartened people. Emily's mother appears largely a victim of circumstance; even Emily's father, although directly responsible for many of his wife's and daughter's problems, receives rather sympathetic treatment from Olsen: his farewell note reveals a pathetic creature who abandons his family when he can "no longer endure" (p. 2) helplessly sharing their poverty.

Charged then with sole responsibility for Emily's survival, Emily's mother obtains full-time work. In reconstructing that part of her life she inadvertently describes herself, defining her daughter's talent as one that has "as often eddied inside, dragged and clotted, as been used and growing" (p. 11). Now seeking Eva's "reconciled peace" ("Riddle," p. 69) through examination of the past, she is again shaken from her reverie by the last of Emily's dark interruptions. But this time, because of the memories so newly resurrected, the mother cannot easily ignore the sentiments she has heard before: for a moment she acknowledges defeat, rationalizing that she "will never total it all" and that "there is still enough [for Emily] to live by" ("Ironing," p. 12).

She is more hopeful in the final passage, however, where the true artistic and thematic power of this story emerges. Here Olsen's belief in the inherent strength of the individual and her finely controlled style complement one another. Although Emily's mother has not consciously acknowledged the success of her recollecting, the author allows the reader to perceive more than the character does--even if this woman has failed "to total it all," she has at least accurately estimated the worth of one particular human being. In the closing lines the author underscores her major themes--feminism and humanism--by

the formal back-and-forth glide of the monologue, recalled in one perfect kitchen-connected image: "Only help her [Emily] to know--help make it so there is cause for her to know--that she is more than this dress upon the ironing board, helpless before the iron" (p. 12).

Olsen most often employs this see-saw rhythm, her stylistic signature, when chronicling the actions and thoughts of her mothers. She purposefully deviates from this pattern, however, with Helen, the mother in "O Yes" and "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" Unlike Emily's mother and Eva in "Riddle," this mother is caught at the point in her life when she is most needed by others and, therefore, most in need of time for herself. Helen is so busy living for these "others," in fact, that Olsen appropriately disallows this character a stray moment for mental self-examination--a luxury that the older mother/protagonists achieve with the distance of years.

The "mother rhythm" still sounds in these works, however, although not filtered through Helen's consciousness. The imagery, sentence structure, and themes that are typically Olsen's emerge instead from Whitey in "Hey Sailor" and from Helen's daughter Carol in "O Yes." At twelve, in addition to experiencing the usual physical changes, Carol is for the first time aware of social pressure as well. Part of her wants to remain a child, free

to pursue a child's delights with the friend of her early youth; part of her, however, cannot ignore the promise of "just budding breasts" ("O Yes," p. 59) or, even more important, those at school who disapprove of her associating with Parry, her black--and once best--girl friend. All too quickly, little girl's problems have given way to adult dilemmas, and Olsen adjusts not only the substance, but the shape of Carol's thoughts accordingly:

The dollhouse stands there to arrange and rearrange; the shell and picture card collections to re-sort and remember; the population of dolls given away to little sister, borrowed back, propped all around to dress and undress and caress. ("O Yes," p. 59)

In this long sentence echoing those of Emily's mother, the passive voice shifts focus toward the objects and away from the speaker, just as the parallel structure emphasizes the action instead of the actor. Inclusion of inner rhyme (dress/undress/caress), unique to this story, but not to this character, also functions thematically since the music of negro spirituals and black jive and blues reverberate in both dialogue and exposition. It is, after all, the dichotomy that exists between the salvation promised by the songs and gestures of the congregation at Parry's baptism and the strange new beat to which Parry moves that confuses Carol about their friendship. Further reflecting the effect this dilemma produces is the wishful nostalgia permeating

Carol's diction and tone. She strains for a shelter far removed from the urgency of her problems, for time to pause so that she can examine and assimilate what is happening and what she is feeling. In short, her frustrations parallel those of Olsen's mothers and of Helen in particular, as does her reluctant acknowledgement of responsibility: "Oh why is it like it is and why do I have to care?" ("O Yes," p. 61).

Whitey, the central character in "Hey Sailor, What Ship?", also voices Helen's (and the author's) concern with the outside pressures that force human beings apart. Like Carol who cries over the inevitable dissolution of her relationship with Parry, this battered, aging sailor (long-time friend to Helen and her family) curses the disintegration of fraternity in his union. In his story, like Carol in hers, he provides a voice for the voiceless Helen as well as an ear for the "things she wouldn't even tell Lennie [her husband]" ("Hey Sailor," p. 20). Although his ability to offer such comfort is disappearing in an alcoholic haze, the old sailor still cares deeply for Helen, Lennie and the girls.

In expressing this love, Olsen again turns to the diction and cadence of motherhood, as elemental a rhythm as that of Whitey's beloved sea. In both shape and content Whitey's interior monologues so closely resemble those of Olsen's mothers one could easily be mistaken for

the other. An example of this appears early in the story when Whitey, realizing how different he is from the man Carol (then only nine) idolizes, simultaneously yearns for and suffers from her embrace: "this helpless warmth against him, this feel of a child--lost country to him and unattainable" ("O Yes," p. 20). Forced by the touch of a child into a position she fears, Eva, the grandmother in "Tell Me a Riddle," also experiences a similarly described inner recoil from the resulting "long drunkenness, the drowning into needing and being needed" (p. 84).

Even more evocative of the diction and style usually reserved for Olsen's mothers is this passage of Whitey's:

And up rises his old vision, of how he will return here, laden with groceries, no one in the littered house, and quickly, before they come, straighten the upstairs (the grime in the washbasin), clean the downstairs, scrub the kitchen floor, wash the hills of dishes, put potatoes in and light the oven, and when they finally troop in say, calmly, Helen, the house is clean, and there's steak for dinner. ("O Yes," pp. 24-25)

The winding turns of a single, long sentence, the shift of focus from the actor to those for whom the actions are performed, and the overflow of kitchen-verbs that echo "feminine" acts of cleaning, ordering, and loving would seem better suited to Helen rather than to a crusty old seaman.

As mentioned, Helen, with the rest of Olsen's mothers, shares the impulse to live for (instead of with) others, but she differs from them in that she is captured

by the author at the moment of immediacy, of giving. While Olsen portrays both Eva and Emily's mother at an age and circumstance where they are able to reconstruct and "wrest to truth" what happened to them during those tumultuous early years, Helen is frozen on the page at the point of pure action. We see what she does, not how she thinks, for she has no time for contemplation. Even Carol realizes that "Mommy oughta quit work...she's tired. All the time" ("Hey Sailor," p. 17) when Whitey remarks that Helen doesn't look well. Caught in the thick of life, Helen can display her artistry only in arranging the lives of her family, an art in which she is, perhaps, over-zealous: "She's organized the life out of us," remarks Lennie resentfully (p. 27). Driven to this state by the constant pressure to bring home extra money, keep the house clean, and nurture the family, Helen now has to face the imminent disappearance of her one outlet for release--Whitey.

When he, her only confidante, appears at her door while on a bender, Helen cries as much for herself as for him. But even as she mourns losing Whitey's compassionate--though infrequent--services ("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" (p. 37), she continues to do what is expected--putting others' needs first. She acts as a buffer between her oldest child Jeannie (who sees and is angered

by Whitey's condition) and her guest; she surreptitiously calls in a doctor to examine the ailing sailor; she makes room for him at her table and in her home, and she leaves a note brimming with mother's kindness (but bereft of "mother rhythms") when she leaves for work the next morning:

Bacon and eggs in the icebox and coffee's
made. The kids are coming straight home
from school to be with you. DON'T go
down to the front, Lennie'll take you
tomorrow.

Love

("Hey Sailor," p. 24)

No longer her refuge, Whitey has become another person for whom Helen is responsible: dutifully she reminds him of what to eat, where to be (where not to be), and-- always--her love.

Two years later (as reckoned by the age differences in her daughters) in "O Yes," Helen, left without even Whitey's company now, has become more harried, more frustrated. Her only solace lies in a regression to false naïveté, a movement thematically paralleled by Carol's similar resistance to reality. Like her daughter, Helen tries to block out social pressure surrounding the friendship between Carol and Parry Phillips; she invents occasions so the girls can be together. When Jeannie perceives the intent of her mother's machinations, she decides to confront her outright: "That's all through, her [Carol] and Parialeee Philips, put away with their

paper dolls" ("O Yes," p. 53). Faced with the truth, Helen still rails against it and retreats to relying on Carol's tone and Carol's tactic of claiming a headache when problems become unmanageable.

Her motivation for insisting that Carol witness Parry's baptism is only partly explained by Helen's desire for the girls to remain friends; this mother is also desperate to find some peace of her own in her friend Alva Phillips' faith. This attempt to find a haven, "a place of strength" where one can "scream or sorrow," and where there are "loving hands to support and understand" ("O Yes," p. 62) fails, however. In the end Helen is denied even the "illusion of an embrace" ("O Yes," p. 62), the only comfort which she, the ever-dutiful mother, can offer her daughter.

Because Anna Holbrook in Olsen's unfinished novel Yonnonidio is, like Helen, at the prime of her motherhood, the reader may expect her to be similarly cut off from personal creative and contemplative time. Surprisingly, Anna's inner life is richly depicted and her thoughts distinctly rhythmical. Even more surprising is the decidedly closer bond between the author's first mother (outlined when Olsen was only nineteen) and Eva, her last. Their stories--one a book fragment that was lost for forty years and the other, "Tell Me a Riddle," an award-winning novella--are strikingly similar, illustrating that

the mature, experienced author was stirred by the same issues as the young writer.

Both fictions, according to Sally Cunneen, reflect "the larger dimensions of America's loss of contact with its idealistic, hardworking, communal roots"⁵; both echo the author's personal witness to her favorite line from Kafka: "Evil is whatever distracts." This is not to imply, of course, that the twenty-five years that separate the two works made little difference in Olsen's art. What emerges in the novel is a young writer's only partly successful struggle to integrate her politics with her poetic, imagistic style; to control emotionalism and sentimentality, and to free herself from Rebecca Harding Davis's heavy-handed didacticism. What blooms in "Riddle" is the flower of Olsen's labor, the perfect hybrid in which character, style, and theme are joined. Like the mothers and daughters in Olsen's works, the second generation of her fiction learns from and surpasses the first.

Thematically, "Tell Me a Riddle" is an extension, with the themes more clearly defined, and an abbreviation, with one novel's sprawl reduced to one quarter the size of the earlier work. In both, Olsen is concerned with how her characters interact with their families as well as

⁵"Tillie Olsen: Storyteller of Working America," Christian Century, 97, July, 1980, p. 572.

how they perceive and function in the outside world. This care extends to the husbands and fathers she portrays for, to her credit, even in the early imperfect Yonnondio, she rejects Davis's cardboard villains and offers a male portrait worthy of its female counterpart.

Jim Holbrook, like his wife, is frustrated by the world's restrictions, duped by America's promise of equal opportunity for citizens on all levels of society. He has chased a new life for his family from the coal mines of Wyoming to the tenant farms of Nebraska to the stinking slaughterhouses of Chicago. With each move he has been progressively drained of spirit. Holding his tongue with belittling bosses, helplessly watching poverty grind down and fragment his family, Jim also seeks relief. He finds it, temporarily, in the insularity of cold-heartedness and the distancing fog of drink, but never in shirking his duty to the family. Just as Anna is consumed (and often overwhelmed) by continual emotional nurturing, so is Jim consumed by the responsibility for putting food on the table (despite the cost--even the price of Marie's fairy tale books). The essence of practicality, he is denied even one of Anna's dreamy flowing passages. Olsen further clarifies Jim's thematic importance by showing that despite everything he remains human, loving. In his way Jim cherishes Anna, fretting over her ill health, making secret plans to save money

in order to buy her the gift of time-- a sewing machine.

In "Riddle" David and Eva's love for one another remains at the story's center. Despite past injustice and the bitter present, Eva, in a rare moment of melancholy, reveals her heart: likening the eyes of her granddaughter to David's, she remembers that he once was--and still remains--"her springtide love" (p. 92). David too, in his turn, gradually recognizes the enduring depth of their passion as he lives through his wife's final days. His epiphany--the moment of acknowledging this love--is appropriately framed in the language and form of a poem:

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.

("Riddle," p. 111)

Emblematic also of the grandfather's newly-won sensitivity is the narrator's deliberate use of the "mother-rhythm" in reporting his actions:

He took up the cards, put them down,
circled the beds, walked to the dresser,
opened, shut drawers, brushed his hair,
moved his hand bit by bit to the mirror
to see what of the reflection he could
blot out with each move, and felt that
at any moment he would die of what was
unendurable. ("Riddle," p. 115)

In a perfectly congruous variation of the method, the long verb-heavy sentence reveals a person who is driven

to avoid thinking. The twist on the usual form, of course, is that David is in control here. He is not forced, as are the mothers, to move puppet-like while others pull the strings. His pace is self-imposed; the resulting numbness deliberately sought.

Just as the development of David's character, when compared to Jim's, proves the maturation of Olsen's technique, so is Eva's image more finely carved than Anna Holbrook's. Eva's memories are Anna's reality, however, and the objectivity that time affords does not dim the sisterhood of these two women. Like their husbands, both have subscribed to and been disappointed by America's Promise; but while their husbands, concerned mainly with the present, felt betrayed by their belief that economic security would be the sure reward for honest labor, they, burdened with the forward view, see education as the hope of their children.

Eva believes passionately that the human spirit, when fired with education (not religion) will breed the "loftier race" ("Riddle," p. 110) she once joined a revolution to safeguard. Anna takes in extra laundry when she has little enough time to do her own so that she can save \$.25 a week, her dream guarantee of a "sure edjication" (Yonnondio, p. 135) for the children. She troops her reluctant offspring to the library with the assurance that knowledge will rescue them from their

dreary lives: "You read books, you'll know all that. That's what books is: places your body ain't ever been, can't ever get to go" (Yonnondio, p. 138).

But seeing that the children (wary of the letters that cause such anguish in school) mistrust such miracles, Anna is overwhelmed by the frustration of her efforts even as she acknowledges that, as a mother, she must continue to try:

It was not that the clothes were beyond or almost beyond mending and that there were none others and no money to buy more; not that four children slept here in this closet bedroom, three on a mattress on the floor; not that in the corners dust curled up in feathers, dust that was Dirt That Breeds Disease You Make Your Children Sick....It was that she felt so worn, so helpless; that it loomed gigantic beyond her, impossible ever to achieve, beyond any effort or doing of hers: that task of making a better life for her children to which her being was bound. (Yonnondio, p. 127)

The repetition in these typically meandering, but perfectly balanced, rhythmical sentences stresses the important distinction between a mother who is merely physically weary and the more complex Olsen mother who is also emotionally spent. Anna Holbrook, like the rest of Olsen's mothers (and, by admission, like the author herself) pays a "psychic cost" (Silences, p. 38) for a burden she finds "heavy to take up again, being poor and a mother" (Yonnondio, p. 120).

Although not a Jew, she exists in the manner dictated by Eva's rejected Scripture: she is "ground under" in life, able to anticipate serving as a "footstool for her husband" ("Riddle," p. 81) in Paradise. Even the infrequent peace she obtains in daydream or in the open air is continually snatched away by the innocent probing of a child. Five-year-old Ben Holbrook is capable of tugging his mother back to reality with a gesture or a word--any small reminder of her responsibility: "Let's go in, momma....We got to go in. It's supper time. Mommas always goes in" (emphasis mine) (Yonnondio, p. 139). Mommas also listen respectfully to children's (and grandchildren's) recitations and to husbands' complaints, even as their bodies dutifully carry on with the "kitchen help, farm help,...[and] washerwoman help" (Yonnondio, p. 58).

Like a child, a woman's home can also become a demanding presence, a resistant enemy, as Anna believes, an intruder that Eva imagines invading her "like a giant ear pressed under he heart" ("Riddle," p. 86). The grandmother does achieve relief from this, however, for although her death-bed litany chronicles this suffocating agony of invasion, she offers a counterpoint--her yet undiminished hope for humankind. Still in the throes of young motherhood, Anna's only semblance of serenity comes

from inuring herself to the discrepancy she discovers between "the life she had dreamed and the life that had come to be" (Yonnondio, p. 123). Her pragmatic response is in keeping with the theme and style of the novel: Anna has little time to dream at all as mother's chores and mother-rhythms threaten to swallow her up. Soothing a hot, colicky baby with one hand as she puts up preserves with the other, she moves to the predetermined (and, by now, well-established) beat: "skim, stir; sprinkle Bess [with water]; pit, peel, and cut; sponge; skim, stir" (Yonnondio, p. 185).

Clearly, both women are gasping for air, seeking "coherence, transport, meaning" ("Riddle," p. 85). Like all of Olsen's characters, they find comfort in retreat. Where Helen chooses simply to feign ignorance rather than acknowledge the existence of racial discrimination, Anna and Eva (more world-weary and worldly-wise) need more powerful antidotes for the horror of their realities. Their moments of transcendence emerge in dream, memory, and song. Even sickness is looked upon as some measure of relief. Happily for readers, however, it is in Olsen's depicting her mothers' fleeting spells of brightness (regardless of their source) that we find the highest order of her art.

But before "transport," suffering; before imagery, realism. Heavy with her fifth child, Anna Holbrook lapses into a "dream paralysis" (Yonnondio, p. 57) in order to survive her husband's cursing both the ease of "a woman's goddamn life" (p. 56) and the troubles caused by "a woman's goddamn brats" (p. 58). Four months after the birth of this child, Bess, Anna retreats to a semi-trance so she can endure Jim's badgering about her inability to stretch his meager paycheck. But even as she protectively withdraws, Anna continues to fulfill all of her obligations as reported in the typical mother rhythm: "Remote, she fed and clothed the children, scrubbed, gave herself to Jim, clenching her fists against a pain she had not strength to feel" (Yonnondio, p. 80).

Gradually the pain increases until it blocks out all else--an odd respite that Anna nevertheless dubs "lucky" (p. 106). Welcoming pain in order to free a mother's reality is a tenuous trade-off, however, and Anna pays dearly for those few moments of relief. Her agony culminates in a horrific scene when Jim, home after a ten-day binge, rapes her, initiating the miscarriage that her body had long been battling. Still, two days later the mother is back struggling to combat the hunger and dirt. Mercifully, her body is wiser than she as delirium and weakness combine, forcing her back into the protective numbness.

But as soon as she grows a little stronger, Anna feels more confined than ever, obsessed with the need to steal some time alone. She half-seriously considers putting Bess in the yard to scream outside of hearing and wishes that for once she could forget the chores so she might "lay her forehead on the table and do nothing" (p. 186). Acquiescence to duty always overcomes a mother's desire "to have done" (p. 186), however. Beginning to relax, "fold[ing] herself into the beauty and singing" (p. 154) of a family party, Anna voluntarily snaps the spell, aching over her daughter Mazie who sits apart from the celebration.

Although Eva's children are all grown, the old grandmother is still being forced into doing what others think she must do--namely, to travel around the country visiting her family. At her daughter Vivi's, determined to defy outside pressure and desperate for time alone, Eva hides--literally--in a granddaughter's closet. But even there, temporarily free from her grandchildren's questions and her children's memories, she imagines herself doomed, like Sisyphus, to have her efforts fall crashing back upon her.

Eva finds her only enduring solace in art--in the books she has memorized and, especially, in the music

she still strains to hear. In singing a Russian love song of fifty years past, she "can breathe" at last, her lungs becoming "rich" with air ("Riddle," p. 75). Throughout the novella Olsen works with this connection between Eva and song, likening the grandmother to a bird that is always filled with the "leaping" of song. Even when imminent death diminishes her body (but not her spirit) to a wraithlike fifty-nine pounds, Eva remains characterized positively in this image: "light she grew, like a bird, and, like a bird, sound bubbled in her throat while the body fluttered in agony" (p. 108). Olsen's recalling the previous hopeful references to song and her using the musical verbs "bubbled" and "fluttered" serve to make this description of a dying woman strangely beautiful.

She also relies on the bird metaphor for connoting the freedom that both mothers find in the "unconfined air" (Yonnonidio, p. 133) as well as in song. Having played piano by ear, Anna, like Eva, also feels a special connection to music. The moments of delight in Yonnonidio, underscored by their rareness, are connected with song: travelling to the Nebraska farm, the Holbrooks join in a family sing; meeting in the oasis of a friend's home in Chicago, they share tunes of their youth. During a dandelion-gathering expedition with the children, when

Anna simultaneously achieves a moment of profound understanding with Mazie as well as an instant of perfect, private release, she celebrates her joy by crooning the words of hope and protection:

Oh Shenandoah, I love thy daughter
I'll bring her safe through stormy water.
(p. 145)

The "fragile old remembered comfort" (p. 145) she recalls with her music seems to flow from her body into Mazie's, and Mazie in turn recognizes how special this moment is for her mother, understanding that Anna's "strange happiness" emanates from a separation born of "farness [from the children] and selfness" (p. 146). Anna, momentarily transformed, strokes her daughter's hair with "unfolding wingedness, boundlessness (p. 146) --she, like Eva, becomes another luminous, flight-blessed creature. But swift and high as her exultation soars, it quickly plummets as Ben's inevitable cries of hunger, Jimmie's begging for recognition, and the fickle, shifting wind that carries the smell of the packing house join forces to insure that "the bounds [are] reclaimed" (p. 147).

The narrator's too-obvious reference to the stench of the city followed by further overuse of images to underline his point (describing Anna as "tethered" to Mazie's hand) reflects a young writer's growing pains.

In Yonnonidio Olsen has difficulty keeping her narrator out of the foreground. This distracting voice often falls into didacticism, corny lyricism, and obvious sentimentality. Sometimes the images cloy, as when the Holbrooks follow their dream to the farmlands of Nebraska: it is springtime and Jim whistles while the wagon makes "gay silvery sounds"; meanwhile the children gaze at "small streamlets [that are] like open silver veins in the ground"; "dots of cattle" provide that backdrop, and Anna "feels like a bride" (p. 133). The reliance on cliché continues when, during a stifling Chicago summer, this last image recurs in a similarly contrived manner: Anna, weary and hot, is dumping the garbage, swatting flies out of her face, and fighting nausea when she notices "a white foam of bridal wreath in the sea blue sky" (p. 123). Body and spirit instantly revolted by this mockery, she clenches her fists and stalks into the house, determined to attack the lately-ignored filth. Certainly her response is positive, reflective of renewal, but it comes too easily, and is not as effectively handled nor as subtly woven into the fabric of the text as is, say, Eva's quiet determination "never again to be forced to move to the rhythm of others" (p. 68) in "Riddle."

At times the novel's narrator actually freezes the action by stepping aside to address--and chastize--the

reader, again insuring that no one misses her point:
"And could you not make a cameo of this [frightened women at the scene of the mining accident] and paint it on your asthetic hearts?" (p. 28) she sneers. Later, in a similarly accusing tone, she nudges us again, gauging our reactions, suggesting that another particularly dismal scene will "frighten" us as we pass (p. 106).

There are other times, of course, when Olsen maintains better control of her narrator, times when the repetitions reverberate with accumulated meaning and the images are fresh. In the previously-discussed fourth chapter, for example, the section that introduces the happiest time in the Holbrook chronicle--their life on the farm--the prose earns its explosion into music:

The farm. Oh Jim's great voice
rolling over the land. Oh Anna,
moving rigidly from house to barn
so that the happiness with which
she brims will not spill over.
Oh Mazie, hurting herself with
beauty. (p. 40)

The repetition of address is appropriate, for to enunciate the "O" is to echo the wonder that this physically and spiritually-starving family feels when sharing the communion of fresh eggs and milk. Anna is appropriately depicted as a vessel, for she is the carrier of precious commodities--love, happiness and life. The image of her stiff, careful step is simple but accurate, avoiding what could have easily been clichéd because, by now, the

reader knows that Anna knows better than anyone how fragile the good moments are.

The narrator recalls this form describing the Holbrooks after their disappointing move to Chicago, using the "Oh" repetition to emphasize the underside of their dream and the dark turn that their lives have taken:

Oh Will, hoe in hand chopping viciously the air, running down the block away from his father's stricken face, his mother's convulsed words; oh Ben, clutching first his mother's legs and then his father's legs, trying vainly to still them, curling up now close to Mazie, heaving his asthmatic breaths; oh Mazie, stopping up her ears so as not to hear; yelling out a song to Jimmie and Ben so they will not hear.
(p. 130)

Here using the "mother rhythm" in the same way that David does in "Riddle," the children dart about, hoping to ward off catastrophe with sheer movement.

Such tightly constructed passages, providing only odd moments of brilliance in Yonnondio, permeate "Tell Me a Riddle," as the storyteller synchronizes her rhythm to Eva's, making the prose a mirror of that "first mother, singing mother"(p. 107). Didacticism becomes unnecessary as the "lessons"--that each individual must accept responsibility for her own actions and beliefs, that with this personal responsibility comes accountability for the rest of humankind--grow naturally out of the situations and dialogue, free of the hindrance of narrative

underlining. Even in a deathbed scene, sentimentality is avoided by the invocation of music and the light touch of a granddaughter.

In "Riddle," time swings easily from present to past and back again, curving in a smooth arc carried by image and connotation. Olsen nimbly shifts from Eva's discomfort ("A long travel from, to, what the feel of a baby evokes" p. 82) to her uneasiness on the plane ride over to visit the child. The three paragraphs in which the author accomplishes this feat--and more--are representative of the genius and grace of Olsen at the height of her power:

In the airplane, cunningly designed to encase from motion (no wind, no feel of flight), she had sat severely and still, her face turned to the sky through which they cleaved and left no scar.

So this was how it looked, the determining, the cruel sky, and this was how man moved through it, remote above the dwindled earth, the concealed human life. Vulnerable life, that could scar.

There was a steerage ship of memory that shook across a great, circular sea: clustered, ill human beings; and through the thick-stained air, tiny fretting waters in a window round like the airplanes--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. And the polar winds hurled themselves across snows trackless and endless and white--like the clouds which had closed together below and hidden the earth.

Now they put a baby in her lap. (pp. 82-83)

Eva connects her being forced to hold the baby with her being pressured into making the trip; she associates the womb from which the infant has recently emerged with the womb-like structure in which she journeys. This leads next to her musing about how strong the air must be in order to withstand the knifing velocity of the plane, and how much more vulnerable is human life--her life--permanently damaged with a word. Her thoughts remain on humanity, pondering the insignificance of one person in relation to this vast, invulnerable sky and wishing all people could band together to achieve such wholeness and strength.

Allowing the "ship of memory" to carry her ever-deeper into the past, Eva experiences a flashback within a flashback. She recalls Russia during the 1905 Revolution when she fought and was imprisoned for such idealism. The image of the "circular sea" on which she travels connotes the pool of memories, the past, which in turn calls forth time's movement--translated here into the roundness of the moon and the sun. Memories spill over and run together as she travels from the round houses of Olshana, her village, to the airplane's circles of glass and finally to her own eyes--smaller windows tearing with "tiny fretting water"--as she recalls that during her exile only these were allowed to travel.

Her reverie vacillates between the near and distant past as she likens the engulfing whiteness of the Russian winter to the cloud blanket that renders the earth and all its creatures invisible. This last reminder of earth and its inhabitants jolts Eva back to the present and to the thing that began her typically fragmented mental flight--bane and blessing of a mother's existence --the baby in her lap.

Chapter Two: Hopeful Strains: The Daughters

"...And yet the tree did bear fruit."

Silences, p. 177.

In Silences, her latest work, Tillie Olsen offers the above response to underscore and counter William Blake's admonition that should a tree bear fruit despite disease, observers must not interpret the bloom as being result of the blight. Olsen's retort, an epigraph to her chapter on women writers whose voices have been heard, acknowledges the damage, but emphasizes the hardy, although diminished, yield. Those responsible for such rare fruit, named "survivors" by the author, have accurately recorded the despair, delight, and dreams of all women and have celebrated these subjects in their art. Tillie Olsen is, of course, one of these.

Then to hear this writer weep over the creative time lost because of economic and family responsibilities and to encounter in others the same anguish chronicled again and again in Silences is to see only one side. Look at Olsen also as the woman who survived and continues as teacher, lecturer, and model of perseverance for other women, writers and non-writers alike. The survivors in her fiction--like her, ordinary people who, after having

suffered grave, even life-threatening injuries, invariably elect to go on. Their resilience provides a strong undercurrent of hope that the biographical and cursory readings miss.¹

A meticulous review of Olsen's writing, on the other hand, reveals what William Peden calls the "beating, throbbing denial of denial itself."² This hope comes alive as parents give their dreams to their children. Olsen's "daughters" substitute for "children," however, for only Anna Holbrook and Eva have sons, none of whom are of consequence in their tales. These daughters are powerful characters, their vitality the very heart of Olsen's fiction. They are less naive, less vulnerable, more perceptive and articulate than their mothers. Although not entirely liberated from poverty and prejudice, they profit simply by belonging to the next generation with its economic and social advances. Olsen clearly illustrates this slow but inexorable progress in the varied concerns of her women. Eva, Mrs. May, and those

¹Such as Gene Baro's rev. of Tell Me a Riddle, New York Herald Tribune Book Review, 17 Dec. 1961, p. 8; Irene Gitomer's rev. in Library Journal, 86, 15 Sept. 1961, p. 2693; the unsigned rev. in the New Republic, 145, 13 Nov. 1961, p. 22.

²William Peden, rev. of Tell Me a Riddle, by Tillie Olsen, New York Review of Books, 12, Nov. 1961, p. 54.

of the immigrant generation engage their energies in a battle for physical survival; their daughters, adequately nourished, deal with the problems of spiritual renewal, and their grandchildren, relatively free of both impediments, are secure enough to turn their talents to helping others.

Just as Tillie Olsen the writer was able to speak aloud the disappointment in both God and government that her mother silently carried after the failed 1905 Russian Revolution, so the sometimes shrill voices of the daughters in her work interpret and lessen the burdens of the fictional mothers. Their language reflects progress and hope. Even when their lives occasionally slip into the interrupted mother rhythm, their language remains free of the burdened syntax. Some of these girl-women--Emily, Marie, and Parialee Phillips--assume the mother role of caring for younger siblings while still children themselves; those free from such physical binding--Carol and Jeannie--wrestle prematurely with the emotional and spiritual concerns of adults.

Their speech, depending on circumstance, may be either clipped and direct, indicating their new-generation confidence and candor, or more languid and poetic, reflecting the luxury of time and imaginations that their mothers could little afford. In either case, the

daughters express what the mothers were compelled to suppress. With the exception of Jeannie, whom I will discuss in a separate chapter, the daughters share one major character flaw--the inclination to retreat from rather than confront disappointment--they exhibit hope even in flight. Unlike their mothers, whose neglected potential withered, these young women are prepared to test their powers, to display their talents. Sometimes the result is simply therapeutic, sometimes art.

Emily is the most elusive Olsen daughter (she does not allow the narrator access to her thoughts; she does not tell her own story) and the most damaged. Although free from Mazie Holbrook's physical privations, she is also bereft of the special closeness with her mother that Mazie shares with Anna. "I Stand Here Ironing," her mother's interior monologue, explores the history and implications of the estrangement of mother and daughter.

Emily, a beautiful baby who delighted in her senses, treasuring texture, color, light and sound, grew to be an awkward, shy, introverted little girl. Her father's leaving, her mother's full-time work and her own uneasy shuffling from one form of child-care to another compounded Emily's insecurity, forcing her into herself. Pressed into service as a "little mother" when her mother remarried and began another family, Emily resented the

step-siblings who received the love and attention of two parents.

She was also isolated from her peers, out of step with them physically, socially, and intellectually; going to school was painful for her. A knack for invention that, normally developed, might have emerged as bright after-school games of make-believe with friends twisted into tiny lies for survival. Desperate to avoid the embarrassment of the classroom, Emily fabricated: "Momma, you look sick. Momma, I feel sick. Momma, the teachers...[are] sick...There was a fire last night... it's a holiday today" (pp. 3-4).

As with Olsen herself, however, Emily's life "fed her art."³ What was intended for protection became a source of amusement for and ultimately a way of communicating with others. When she invented a word--"shoogily"--to stand for comfort, the feeling that always eluded her, it endured as part of the family vocabulary. Her desire to relieve her own and her mother's anxiety by comically re-enacting the often-troubling events of the day was the seed for her considerable acting success, and although her catharsis was incomplete, her attitude

³Selma Burkorn and Margaret Williams, "De-Riddling Tillie Olsen's Writings," San Jose Studies, 2 (Feb. 1976), p. 78.

sometimes chillingly fatalistic ("In a couple of years... we'll all be atom-dead" [p. 11]), hope for Emily, though qualified, is well-earned. She has a creative outlet, a concerned public (impetus for her mother's retrospection came from the inquiries of a school counselor), and a mother's prayer for her growth into more than a piece of cloth "helpless before the iron" (p. 12).

Parialee Phillips, a secondary but finely drawn character in "O Yes," shares Emily's troubled background. Like her counterpart, first-born of a teen-aged mother, she was left to be raised by others when her father abandoned them, and her mother had to find work. She was also the victim of a much-abbreviated childhood, inheriting the responsibility of caring for a second family that her mother and new husband had begun. Most significant for her character and creative development, however, is the prejudice she encounters when she reaches junior high. While Emily was teased for her slowness and her looks, Parry is ostracized by teachers and students alike because of her color. Even her once best friend Carol (Eva's granddaughter, Helen's child) succumbs to social pressure and begins easing out of their relationship, suddenly finding less time to share with her, making fewer after-school plans.

The portrait of Parry and her response to this seeming conspiracy to isolate her is a tribute to

Olsen's range and skill at merging characterization and style. If Emily's art was silent, perfectly suited to her introverted nature, Parry's is, appropriately, all finger-popping and song. Song, always weaving in and out of Olsen's writing, is especially significant in this unjustly ignored story. Gospel music counterpoints Carol's agonizing during Parry's baptism over how to handle the too-swift changes in herself and in her friend. Sounding more flamboyantly in the rhythm-and-jive injected talk that Parry adopts, music is integrated with her way of puzzling out the same dilemma.

Forced to adopt a new posture because of her blackness, troubled by the usual uncertainties attendant to adolescence, Parry exaggerates her act. Despite the jumping, bumping, and acting too cool to care, however, she lets slip a longing for easier times when color didn't matter and Carol was always a jump-rope twirl away. Like Emily, Parry is at once protected and imprisoned by the artful barrier she has fashioned for survival. Tillie Olsen captures this fragile shell perfectly. In a virtuoso performance spanning three pages, Parry, between snatches of song, displays the confusion of her feelings, her mixture of pride, sadness and surprising wisdom. While addressing a sick and dozing Carol to whom she is delivering homework assignments, she spins, struts,

and reveals her heart. Olsen avoids sentimentality and Parry never misses a beat:

Hey frail, looka here and wail....All
your 'signments is inside; Miss Rockface
says the teachers to write 'em cause I
mightn't get it right all right....For
sure. (Keep mo-o-vin.)....How come
(softly) you Long-gone you....NEXT mump
is your buddybud Melanie's turn to tote
your stuff. I'm gettin' the hoovus goovus.
(pp. 57-8)

Parry believes that the pain of hurt feelings and awkward silence will not overtake her if she follows the command to "keep mo-o-vin." So her tongue spills out rhyme--a double protection, for it maintains the lately-sprung separation between the two girls and preserves a lightness that says the new situation is cool, her adjustment complete.

But in the next line Parry exposes her vulnerability, momentarily slipping as she recalls the principal's reservations about her ability to accurately relay the assignments; swiftly, though, she scuffles to camouflage the pain with a rhymy tag-line ("mightn't get it right all right"). Another stumble into nostalgia is cancelled by her emphatic ("NEXT") determination to display only a disinterested acknowledgement that another has replaced her in Carol's life. She concludes this monologue back in the security of jive. The rhythm of her leavetaking physically parallels the compulsive patter of her entrance:

Fluffing out smoothing the quilt with exaggerated energy....Tossing up and catching their year-ago, arm-in-arm graduation picture, replacing it deftly, upside down into its morror crevice.... Twanging the paper fishkite, the Japanese wind bells overhead, setting the mobile they had once made of painted eggshells and decorated straws to twirling and rocking. And is gone. (p. 59)

Omission of the comma between "fluffing out" and "smoothing" illustrates Parry's frenzy as she prepares to leave the sickroom. Knowing that she is probably leaving the girlhood memories that belong there for the last time, she brushes all of the once-cherished objects of friendship in a single sweep of motion. Although disillusioned, Parry is not defeated. She has little bitterness and no tears. Instead, she accepts the way one world is and deals with it creatively, within the bounds of her personality. She has a strong foundation in the support of Alva Phillips, the mother from whom she has learned the gentleness and compassion that a mock-tough exterior cannot hide, embodying what Olsen envisions as the potential for all people to unite in "one glad rhythm" (p. 41).

Carol too ultimately emerges as a source for optimism in humankind. An increasing concern for others paralleled by her physical maturation begins in "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" and culminates in "O Yes." In the first of the pair ten-year-old Carol is simply a carefree, clever young girl. Having always enjoyed the stability

of two devoted, hard-working parents in providing emotional and financial support, she is naturally more candid and confident than either Emily or Parry at that age. Although her part in this story is small, Carol's character does reveal traces of the sensitive adolescent who will emerge to dominate the action in "O Yes."

Already she is aware of and obviously concerned about Helen's working too hard, spontaneously volunteering this information to Whitey, their guest. Carol also demonstrates her open, loving nature in her relationship to this physically and mentally beaten old sailor who still shines in her eyes like the gift-giving yarn-spinner of the old days. Borrowing his expressions, begging him to recite "Crown and Deep," she accepts and welcomes him without the reservations that her older sister Jeannie now shows.

Carol's caring for those who, like Whitey, suffer the world's injustice precipitates a crisis two years later (in "O Yes") when she is torn between compassion for the oppressed and guilt over joining the ranks of the oppressors. This guilt is compounded by its personal nature, for when she participates in the "sorting" (dividing by caste and color as Jeannie defines it) that occurs at school, she must disassociate herself from her once-best friend Parry.

She ponders this circumstance when she and her mother attend Parry's baptism. The only white people in the congregation, both are mesmerized by the shouting and song, unbridled expressions of faith, of those around them. Helen, absorbed in seeking a peace that has lately eluded her, is oblivious to her daughter's increasing agitation. Carol, for a moment captivated by the joyous energy surrounding her, taps in time to the choir's song. But seeing Eddie from school shatters her communion, reminding her of the social pressures outside of the church doors.

Fearing that she will be recognized and her presence there subsequently echoed through the school's halls, Carol wishes to become invisible so she might anonymously witness and analyze the scene. Disturbed and confused by seeing someone whom teachers and friends label "trouble" participating in this ritual of holiness and unity, Carol wishes to record the scene so she can puzzle out its significance. Olsen contrasts this uncertainty with the congregation's faith by once again incorporating music into her text:

Ezekiel saw that wheel of time
Every spoke was of humankind... (p. 42)

This gospel incantation, revealing that all people are finite, similar, and equal, further aggravates Carol's guilt-ridden conscience: she knows she is being

hypocritical even as she sits, having come to the ceremony only because Helen cajoled her. She knows also that Parry has always been a loyal friend, but that if Melanie and the others were to discover that she still felt strongly about a black girl, they would separate themselves from her as she had distanced herself from Parry. Her dilemma is magnified by those in the congregation who are acting out the Day of Judgement (punishment for all sinners) on the platform above her. For a moment she once again slips into the church's spell, but then a scream permanently disrupts her peace as Vicky, another of the "bad" ones from school, appears in the aisle.

Carol panics. It seems like the River Jordan is washing over her, its waters chilling and deep. Feeling guilty and unworthy of salvation, she gasps for air, for release, but is overwhelmed by its power:

The voices in great humming waves, slow,
slow (when did it become the humming?),
everyone swaying with it too, and up
where Eddie is, a new cry, wild and open,
"O Help me, Jesus," and when Carol opens
her eyes she closes them again, quick
but still can see the new known face from
school (not Eddie), the thrashing, writhing
body struggling...the torn, tearing cry:
"Don't take me away, life everlasting,
don't take me away." (p. 48)

This single winding sentence is distinct in pace and purpose from the equally-long phrases found in the mother-rhythms. It is instead slower and more poetic,

perfectly in keeping with Carol's character and situation. Here she is slipping out of consciousness, drifting from one thought to another, not moving frenetically from chore to chore as the mothers I discussed in the first chapter were forced to do. Carol drowns in assonance, alliteration, and onomatopoeia in the "the sluice of the slow singing and the sway" (p. 48), not suffocating from the mothers' burden of forced continual motion but less accepting of her situation than her forebearers. Like the girl who fights salvation even as she approaches it, Carol goes down writhing and struggling, torn between wanting to give in to the singers' promise and fearful of disobeying the inner voice that sounds like Melanie, reminding her that these are not her people. Yearning for baptism's cleansing grace, she has not yet formed the words to ask for and accept it.

Her body finally collapses under the strain and she faints. After returning home Helen avoids discussing the incident, pretending that Carol was merely overheated and that she and Parry are experiencing a temporary lull in their friendship. Carol, too, remains silent about the incident until, a few months later, she is home sick with a fever so high that Helen must miss work to care for her.

When Helen turns on the radio and a gospel station blares out, Carol, in her delirium, screams a howling

echo of the girl in the aisle and of Alva Phillips's scream of recognition, when she had a vision of the fires of hell and the other, brighter path to salvation. Now Carol can at last speak her heart, forcing Helen to hear her questions and recognize her pain; the mother's usual tactic of ignoring the difficult, crumbling in the face of such directness. Wordlessly, for a long time, she holds her daughter, working to articulate the lesson that she has, without speaking it, over the years imparted to Carol: "It is a long baptism into the seas of humankind. ...Better immersion than to live untouched" (p. 61).⁴ Carol's responding questions ("Why is it like this?"; "Why do I have to care?") are significant and hopeful. They are important because she, unlike Helen, is able to acknowledge and voice her concerns; they are positive because Carol has resolved at least some of her doubts: although she cannot say why, she now knows that she is committed to others, she does "have to care."

The most sensitive of this group of daughters, the embodiment of Olsen's major theme of hope amid desolation, is Mazie Holbrook. Six and a half when Yonnondio

⁴A thorough discussion of Carol's baptism into womanhood may be found in Annette Bennington McElhiney's "Alternative Response to Life in Tillie Olsen's Work," Frontiers: Journal of Women Studies, 2 (Sept. 1977), 78-9.

begins and only nine at its close, Mazie ultimately accepts and discovers a source of hope in the responsibilities attached to being the oldest of five children in a poor family during the thirties. Like Emily she is ridiculed for her appearance; like Parry she is discriminated against (for her sex rather than her color); like Carol, she is concerned about the feelings of others, but she is closer in spirit to Carol's sister Jeannie. Just as Anna Holbrook provides the rough outline for Eva, Jeannie's grandmother, and Yonnondio the seed for the more perfectly-worked "Riddle," so does Mazie stand as prototype for the quintessential Olsen daughter.

Like Jeannie, she is an artist, her medium words instead of paint, and, like Jeannie, she brings life to the people she loves. Critic W. T. Lhamon Jr. judges, in fact, that Olsen's creation of Mazie and her reliance on surreal and lyric prose to express the girl's character and thoughts are what saves the novel from degenerating into a sentimental tract on the poor.⁵ While Mazie speaks the best lines, they are not merely pretty constructions that she fashions to decorate a child's dream world. Her imagery provides shelter from the death-knell mine whistle

⁵W. T. Lhamon Jr., rev. of Yonnondio, by Tillie Olsen, Library Journal, 99, 15 Ap. 1974, p. 1150.

and the packinghouse stench that drifts over a dumpyard playground--a poetry formed, as was Emily's art, out of necessity. Paradoxically some of Olsen's most colorful passages appear in what some consider her darkest work.

The novel begins with Mazie's ascending to wakefulness, half-consciously weaving everyday morning sounds with the recent memory of the whistle-shriek herald of a mine disaster. Her thoughts are "like flowers growing lovely over a hideous corpse" (p. 3), the strangely mixed imagery typifying her ability deal with the horrific by re-naming it. Similarly, when Mazie gazes at the fire of a culm bank she likens it to "babies' tongues," a metaphor that recurs to serve to psychologically distance her from that scene of her own near-death. When a crazed Sheen McEvoy, maimed survivor of a mine explosion, spies Mazie standing by one culm, he reasons that in sacrificing her to the she-demon of the pit he will save the lives of future mine workers. At the last moment, however, as Mazie squirms in McEvoy's grip, another miner kills the would-be murderer, and in Mazie's mind the shots echo "one, two, three; lovely fire-colored like the culm" (p. 17). In her shock, she instinctively turns to an artistic method of mentally transforming reality, relying on one comparison she had made earlier to work the charm.

Months later, on that April morning when the Holbrooks, finally spurred by the McEvoy incident, quit the mines of Wyoming for North Dakota and the promise of a farm, no one looks back--except Mazie, that is, who sees only the culm's shadow crowned in small white clouds that wave with "almost fairy hands" (p. 32) as they drive off.

Mazie's personifying the clouds and "almost" diminishing their horror with the cover of fairy tale is also typical of the character. To a girl with a childhood as traumatic as hers, traditional fairy tales are so unreal that their power to offer the solace of escape is rendered impotent. More useful to Mazie in obliterating the vision of Sheen's jelly-like face or the sting of Jim's thrashings are the stories that she herself can conjure up. The few months that the Holbrooks spend tenant-farming provide the reserve that sustains her imagination when the family moves on--hoping once again for the magic of a new location--to Chicago.

Most of the time Mazie's method succeeds as she anesthetizes herself from the new city's nightmare with the sweet ether of the farm. Even when her body performs the daily chores (deftly caring for Anna when she is sick; for Jimmie when he is tired; for Will and Ben when they are distressed), her mind remains apart:

Clutching a pail of lard, dreaming a
sweet dream of twilight on the farm
and darkening over a fragrant world,
her face not shadowed by the buildings
above, her nostrils not twitching with
the stink in the air, her eyes not
bewildered by the seething of people...
(p. 98)

The familiar long, participle-heavy Olsen sentence is structurally similar to those sentences reflecting mother rhythms, but its pace and tone are quite different: cocooned in her dream, Mazie moves carefully, slowly, not in the frenzied pace of the mothers.

Her protective aura, however, is disappearing as the repetition of negative phrases indicates. Quickly confirming this assessment, a body hurtles into Mazie, knocking her onto the sidewalk and out of her fragile shelter. As the man's spittle rains down on her, Mazie, stunned by such unexpected re-entry into the nightmare world, tentatively tests her surroundings: "Harsh, the pavement grated over. It was real then. She moved her hand over the walk. Yes, it was real" (p. 99). The sentences here are short and stripped of all participles and prettiness, like the world to which Mazie has reluctantly returned. Her horror deepening, she fears the solidity of a lamp post for its unquestionable proof of this hellish reality.

Her fears reach a climax that night when Mazie awakes to hear a drunken Jim raping Anna. After the din

subsides, Mazie creeps out of bed to discover her mother curled on the floor suffering a miscarriage. Overwhelmed, she flees, head whirling and spinning until her willed near-trance again reveals a world where "the street lamps stretched far and far... and the beautiful street shimmered" (p. 112). Breaking through his daughter's waking dream, Jim appears to apologize, console and bring her home.

Jim is truly contrite and vows to better control himself and better understand Anna and the children. Both parents offer Mazie this model of renewal and endurance, undiminished hope in a new place or a new day, as several critics note. Catharine Stimpson asserts that although the Holbrooks exist "in shadows" they are "heroes and heroic"⁶; Annie Gottlieb concurs, also emphasizing the family's resilience despite brutalizing conditions.⁷ Mazie is finally convinced that she too is worthy of accepting this hope during the dandelion-gathering excursion with Anna, Jimmie and Ben.

Although Mazie dominates the novel's first five chapters, Anna's consciousness takes over in the last

⁶Catharine R. Stimpson, rev. of *Yonnondio*, by Tillie Olsen, Nation, 219, 30 Nov. 1974, p. 565.

⁷Annie Gottlieb, rev. of *Yonnondio*, by Tillie Olsen, New York Review of Books, 31 Mar. 1974, p. 5.

three. But while this search for nutritional greens occurs late in the book, Mazie shares this moment equally with her mother. At first they exchange roles, Anna braiding the stems like a carefree child, leading her brood down unfamiliar streets. Mazie (like the other daughters, possessing a keener social sense than her mother) is embarrassed by and protective of the little group, walking through an affluent neighborhood. The subject of haughty stares, she tries to rein them in by shaking Anna out of her reverie.

But when Anna, reminded of her childhood by the smell of catalpa, shares the joy of that time in her "remote and shining" way, Mazie is lulled into the reminiscence. The mother's remembered comfort streaming down to her daughter evokes a moment of true connection between them; Mazie is for the first time aware of Anna's selfhood, her being, separate from her role as caretaker for children, husband and home, and, by extension, envisions her own possibilities as well.

Although the novel is unfinished, ending soon after this incident, the hopeful tone that carries through to the last page cannot be overlooked. Tillie Olsen, after all, did sift, piece together and shape the several drafts and manuscripts to create a coherent--and consistently positive--statement. This tone, apparent in all of the

fictional Olsen daughters, sounds most clearly when Olsen reads (as she does in a 1980 NPR interview) the last few lines of Yonnondio, focusing here on Bess Holbrook, only a few months old, who, in the middle of a scorching July day rallies the family to laughter and the sheer joy of life.

Awakening to her own power as she pops the lids off of Anna's newly-canned peaches, Bess exults in what the author offers as translation of a baby's rapture: "I can do...I can do. I!" (p. 190). Olsen's lively rendition of the passage, punctuated by a chant-like "I" and "do," emphasizes promise. The scene is complete, all heat and disillusionment transcended, when Will hooks up a radio--the family's first encounter with such "magic congealed"--lending appropriate background to the celebration. Mazie perceptively interprets the connection between these two astonishing feats, finding in the "meshes of sound...human and stellar" (p. 191), the hope for ideal union, the always pulsing promise of life.

Chapter Three: Harmony: Jeannie

"And every life...shall be a song."

"Riddle," p. 111

Jeannie--a minor but significant character when first introduced in "Hey Sailor, What Ship?", a more powerful force in "O Yes," and the essential shaping hand in the climax of "Tell Me a Riddle"--fuses the rich tradition of her grandparents' generation with the hope and vitality of her own. Like Jeannie's grandmother Eva, Tillie Olsen obviously holds a special affection for this character, evidenced by her featuring of Jeannie in all three stories. But more important than the amount of attention Jeannie receives is the position she holds in the author's corpus, ultimately emerging as the archetypal Olsen woman in "Riddle," the quintessential Olsen work.

Like the other mothers and daughters who populate these stories, Jeannie is an artist. But unlike Emily, who relies on her pantomime to block out the rest of the world, or Mazie, who burrows into poetically-embellished memories when problems arise, Jeannie squarely confronts hypocrisy, prejudice, disease and death, using her compassion (and her art) to guide others to similar acknowledgement and better understanding of these realities.

She was not always so efficient at sharing her enlightenment, however, for Jeannie blossoms gradually as the stories unfold. In "Hey Sailor" she is mainly a typically self-centered fourteen-year-old, more concerned with impressing her friends than with considering the feelings of others. Because she is expecting guests, she indignantly chastizes her mother for welcoming Whitey, a battered, drunken sailor, into their home, ignoring his status as long-time family friend. To her credit Jeannie, unlike the other daughters, is comfortable with speaking her mind, but unfortunately, she is not yet mature enough to frame her thoughts appropriately. Her shrill remarks to Helen escape the kitchen to wound her former Prince, the sailor.

Although her social sense is better-developed than Helen's, providing an accurate gauge of how outsiders will judge the old alcoholic, she is not yet perceptive enough to understand how desperately Whitey needs support and how tactfully her parents are trying to provide it without offending him. She is similarly oblivious to Whitey's sincere attempts to recapture the old and better times, to remind her that he was once her beloved. Instead, the girl responds by directly confronting him with what she only half-correctly perceives as a bribe. When he presses his suit, mentioning a watch he had once

given her, she explodes:

I lost the watch, remember? 'I was too young for such expensive present.' You keep talking about it because that's the only reason you give presents, to buy people to be nice to you and to yak about the presents when you're drunk. (p. 31)

But despite the harangues, Jeanne does offer a glimpse of the woman she will become. Already she possesses the strength to face rather than flee from unpleasant situations; already she displays an artist's eye, wishing for a camera to capture "a study in contrasts, Allie's face and Whitey's" (p. 22).

Most important, she has the courage to ask forgiveness after having hurt someone else. Upon returning from her friend's house to discover that a doctor has attended Whitey and that he really is sick, she is immediately contrite. Approaching him shyly, she offers a peace token: she will share her graduation with him by putting his name on the diploma in place of hers.

Jeannie reveals her growing sensitivity to others in "O Yes," but her attempts to share this concern are still overshadowed by her abrasive, overly-emphatic delivery. Since her message cannot yet serve as a model, it remains useful mainly for her own catharsis. Although Lennie, her father, considers her opinion a valid assessment of Carol's mental condition following her fainting

spell at Parry's baptism, Helen, the person to whom Jeannie's speech is addressed, remains too pre-occupied with her own need to dismiss the incident as inconsequential, to hear the truth. As in the previous story, she and Jeannie reverse roles in the same way Anna and Mazie do during the dandelion-gathering expedition: when the mothers deliberately disassociate themselves from the reality of society's influence, the daughters accept the responsibility of reining them in.

Entering the story after Carol's physical manifestation of the inner turmoil she faces over the erosion of her relationship with Parry Phillips, at first Jeannie listens silently to her parents arguing its possible significance. But having lived through a similar experience herself when Carol's age, Jeannie has a clearer view than either of them concerning the reasons behind and the consequences of Carol's reaction. Anxious to shatter Helen's stubborn naïveté about the possibility of prejudice affecting her daughter's life, Jeannie finally speaks--her words tumbling out as they had in the diatribe she had one aimed at Whitey. Telling Helen to "grow up," she outlines the reality of the "sorting" that occurs among adolescents: the so-called "good" kids band together, scornful of those who look, dress, or think differently than they do.

Acknowledging that while her mother and Parry may have been bewildered or hurt by the incident, she delivers a loud, impassioned analysis of Carol's dilemma. Remembering her own reaction, she defines the problem that Carol faces daily in the mixed messages she hears from parents and teachers: "Stay friends with Parry--but be one of the kids. Sure. Be a brain--but not a square. Rise on up, college prep, but don't get separated" (p. 55). No longer satisfied with merely condemning what she feels is wrong, Jeannie now acts as catalyst, attempting to spur her parents to action and to urge Helen into initiating a serious discussion of the episode with Carol. Although her mother, whether because of Jeannie's delivery or her own narrow perception of the world, rejects her daughter's advice, she eventually returns to its truth when Carol finally breaks down and confesses her confusion.

It is in "Tell Me a Riddle," however, the work in which the author's full power emerges, that Jeannie realizes her potential for sharing her insights with humankind. Just as Olsen had by then learned to subdue the didacticism and sentimentality of Rebecca Harding Davis's influence in favor of allowing the music of inner voices to more subtly convey her themes, so Jeannie has distilled her fervor into an accessible model for others. What had earlier been a headlong frenzy to make her point

has become a "lightness" that director Lee Grant accurately chose for her film adaptation of the novella. Although not appearing until the final third of the story, Jeannie shapes the ending: her good humor and good sense help make Eva's last days peaceful, David's acceptance of that peace possible, and a story about death ring with life and honest emotion.

Jeannie has become a visiting nurse, a healer of the body as well as the spirit, and as such, acutely aware of the connection between the two. Nursing does not prove to be the ideal profession for a person of her sensibilities, however; she becomes so involved with her clients that compassion overwhelms her pledge to enforce the rules. Rather than report a Mexican family to the Health Board for following their native custom of waking the dead at home, she resigns. Exchanging her thermometer for a paint brush, Jeannie finds equilibrium in the objectivity of art.

Upon learning of Eva's plight--cancer-ridden, shuttled around the country to spend farewell visits with a family that refuses to discuss the farewell--Jeannie becomes an artist of another sort, an arranger dedicated to providing her grandparents' comfort. Securing for them an apartment that offers "ocean closeness," she regularly travels forty miles round-trip to check on them. She lends a radio, makes a party, shares

a friend, encourages laughter. Later, when Eva's condition worsens, she moves in down the hall and teaches David how to care for his wife.

More important, she openly discusses Eva's dying with her, actively encouraging the long-silent woman to share the memories that are suddenly spilling out. She so revels in her grandmother's stories, in fact, that David, noticing her glow, accuses her of being in love. One generation removed from the new-American mentality of her father and aunts, free from the shame they felt over their parents' foreignness, Jeannie provides a link for Eva between past and present, between the long-ago life once charged with idealism and the same humanistic spirit that her granddaughter radiates. In fact, the dying woman likens Jeannie to her beloved teacher Lisa, calling each "noble in herself" (p. 103). Both are doers, life-givers: the Russian Lisa encouraged Eva's interest in the forbidden knowledge of books, while Jeannie encourages her returning to those times as a solace for pain.

But David, suffering without such release as the days wear on, is frustrated by his wife's fascination with recalling good times from the distant past and resurrecting only bad times from their life together. Heavy with the guilt evoked by these selective reminiscences,

he almost succumbs to the pain of waiting and listening. Just as he is about to give up and run (as Eva has accused him of wanting to in the past) by ringing for Jeannie to relieve his vigil, he spies the sketch she had made of them sleeping.

In a dramatic example of life copying art, David uses the picture as if it were an instruction guide, following the example that his granddaughter scratched in ink. Returning to his bed next to Eva's, holding the picture like a life line that "could shield against the monstrous shapes of loss, betrayal and death" (p. 115), he embraces her right arm (spiritual sustenance) while her left arm remains attached (physical nourishment) to the huge pillar on the other side: here art makes sense out of chaos, just as Olsen and through her, a faithful granddaughter, attempts to do.

Contrary to Jacqueline Mintz's view that Jeannie's last words to her grandfather are inappropriate and misguided,¹ Jeannie's remarks remain consistent with her role in the story and illustrate Eva's repeated maxim that the living must comfort the living--and, in this case, help them to understand the dying. When Eva's body

¹"The Myth of the Jewish Mother in Three Jewish American Feminist Writers," Centennial Review, 2 (1978), 349.

writhes in pain on the final day, Jeannie reminds David that her mind, at least, is back in a more tranquil time: "Leave her [spirit] there, granddaddy, it is all right. She promised me. Come back, come back and help her poor body to die" (p. 116).

Jeannie's portrait, drawn and colored over twenty years ago, still remains the most recent in Tillie Olsen's small but select gallery. Creative and caring, the union of artist and humanist, this most perfect of Olsen's women serves as emblem of an interrupted mother/writer's triumph over noisy circumstance. Her character, as much a miracle as her creator's four daughters, illuminates the promise and articulates the hope that Tillie Olsen will overcome present circumstance, this unnatural silence, to resume her song.

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