I Stand Here Ironing Study Guide

I Stand Here Ironing by Tillie Olsen

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Tillie Olsen's story "I Stand Here Ironing" recounts a poor working woman's ambivalence about her parenting skills and her eldest daughter's future. Published in Olsen's first collection of stories, *Tell Me a Riddle*, in 1961, this first-person story contains many autobiographical elements. Central to the plot is the metaphor of a mother ironing her daughter's dress as she mentally attempts to "iron" out her uneasy relationship with her daughter through a stream-of-consciousness monologue. The narrator, a middle-aged mother of five, as Olsen was when she wrote the story, is the type of woman whose story was seldom heard at that time: that of a working-class mother who must hold down a job and care for children at the same time. "Her father left me before she was a year old," the mother says, a circumstance that mirrored Olsen's predicament as a young mother. The story was heralded by the emerging women's movement of the early 1960s as an example of the difficulty of some women's lives and as a portrayal of the self-doubt many mothers suffer when they know their children are not receiving all the attention they deserve. Love or longing is not enough, Olsen says; everything must be weighed against forces that are beyond one's control. Though the story is not overtly political, it presents the type of economic condition that inspired Olsen to become active in left-wing labor causes at a young age. "I Stand Here Ironing," an unromantic portrait of motherhood, is perhaps the most frequently anthologized of Olsen's stories.

Overview

"I Stand Here Ironing" recounts a poor working woman's ambivalence about her parenting skills and her eldest daughter's future. Published in Olsen's first collection of stories, Tell Me a Riddle, in 1961, this firstperson story contains many autobiographical elements. Central to the plot is the metaphor of a mother ironing her daughter's dress as she mentally attempts to "iron out" her uneasy relationship with her daughter through a stream-of-consciousness monologue. The narrator, a middle-aged mother of five—as Olsen was when she wrote the story—is the type of woman whose story was seldom heard at that time: a workingclass mother who must hold down a job and care for children at the same time. "Her father left me before she was a year old," the mother says, a circumstance that mirrors Olsen's predicament as a young mother. The story was heralded by the emerging women's movement of the early 1960s as an example of the unfairness of some women's lives and as a portrayal of the self-doubt many mothers suffer when they know their children are not receiving all the attention they deserve. Love or longing is not enough, Olsen says; everything must be weighed against forces that are beyond one's control. Though the story is not overtly political, it presents the type of economic condition that inspired Olsen to become active in left-wing labor causes at a young age. "I Stand Here Ironing," an unromantic portrait of motherhood, is perhaps the most frequently anthologized of Olsen's stories.

"I Stand Here Ironing" is a monologue—a speech delivered to an unidentified character with whom the reader comes to identify.

In the first few lines the narrator explains what she is doing—ironing—and what she is responding to—a request that she meet with a school official about her daughter, now nineteen years old. The occasion prompts her to recall her daughter's childhood and the effect she had on the girl as her mother.

All the while she continues to iron, drawing parallels for herself and the reader between telling the story and ironing the wrinkles from a dress.

At the outset the mother confesses her powerlessness over her daughter, asking, "You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key?" She is worried that if she is asked to recall those early days of parenting, she "will become engulfed with all I did or did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped." Despite these fears, the mother says at the beginning: "She was a beautiful baby."

Gradually the mother reveals the details of her daughter Emily's childhood, and a pattern of poverty and abandonment emerges.

She was only nineteen herself when Emily was born. Her husband abandoned her, and she had no access to welfare or other services. Eventually she was forced to take her to the father's family and leave her.

Emily was two years old before her mother could afford to come and pick her up. The little girl dutifully attended nursery school with "never a direct protest, never rebellion." As she recollects these days, the mother wonders about the long-term effects of that kind of obedience: "What was the cost, the cost to her of such goodness?"

The narrator recalls how different Emily was from her siblings; she did not smile or laugh easily. The narrator had loved her as much as the others but had not yet learned to show it. Even with a "new daddy" the somber child's troubles were not over. She developed a terrible case of measles that isolated her from her mother and siblings and caused her to be sent to a convalescent home in the country. She did not get better; instead, she became even thinner and sadder. The mother vividly recalls the scene during their brief visits: "The parents stand below shrieking up to be heard, and between them the invisible wall 'Not To Be Contaminated by Parental Germs or Physical Affection.'"

After eight months of convalescence Emily returned home, thin, frail, and resistant to physical affection. Her adolescence provided little relief. Her mother remembers her as "thin and dark and foreignlooking at a time when every little girl was supposed to look or thought she should look like a chubby blonde replica of Shirley Temple." But one day in the midst of "that terrible world of youthful competition, of preening and parading, of constant measuring of yourself against every other, of envy," Emily called her mother from school, weeping with joy and fear. She had taken her mother's advice and had entered the talent show and won: "Suddenly she was Somebody, and as imprisoned in her difference as she had been in anonymity."

This memory returns the narrator to the beginning of her train of thought. What is she supposed to do with a talent like that:

"The control, the command, the convulsing and deadly clowning, the spell, then the roaring, stamping audience, unwilling to let this rare and precious laughter out of their lives"? Emily herself interrupts her mother's thoughts at this point, dismissing her mother's anxieties with a quick kiss and teasing her for spending so much time ironing. Emily has no concern for the future, especially tomorrow's exams. Her mother, however, has "been dredging the past, and all that compounds a human being is so heavy and meaningful," she "cannot endure it."

Finally, Emily's mother takes stock of Emily's life and confesses, "I will never total it all." But she does total it all, reducing her rambling monologue to one terse paragraph. Finally she decides on a course of action—"Let her be." She adds only the hope that Emily will come to know "that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron"—in other words, that she is more than the sum of her experiences.

The four stories that Olsen wrote during the 1950s and then published as Tell Me a Riddle in 1961 are the first and only short stories she has published. Besides these stories, her published work totals one novel and a number of essays. Nonetheless, Olsen's four short stories have had an impressive impact on the literary world since their first appearance. They have been reprinted in countless anthologies, and Olsen has

been heralded as an early champion of a new feminist movement in literature. In the New York Times Book Review, the prominent contemporary novelist Margaret Atwood described the importance of Olsen and her work, particularly to women: "Few writers have gained such wide respect based on such a small body of published work....

Among women writers in the United States, 'respect' is too pale a word: 'reverence' is more like it."

When Olsen published her volume of stories upon completion of her studies at the Stanford University Creative Writing Program, her work was immediately well received by critics. Initially, her stories were often seen as beautifully crafted but bleak in outlook. In a 1961 review in The Commonweal, for example, Richard M. Elman described "I Stand Here Ironing," in his view the best of Olsen's stories, as "a catalogue of the failure of intimacy." A 1963 essay by William Van O'Connor in Studies in Short Fiction also seemed to find nothing but despair in a story that features a daughter who imagines that nothing matters because we will all soon be killed by atomic bombs and a mother who wants to believe that there is "still enough to live by" but is unable to convince her daughter.

Subsequent critics, perhaps informed by more feminist sensibilities, have seen more optimistic elements in the story. For example, Elizabeth Fisher, editor of Aphra: The Feminist Literary Magazine, suggested in a 1972 essay in The Nation that "I Stand Here Ironing" is "also a hopeful story of how children survive, sometimes even making strength, or talent, out of the deprivations they've endured." Joanne S. Frye, in a 1981 Studies in Short Fiction essay, argued that Emily, despite her quip about everyone being "atom-dead" soon, "does not, in fact, succumb to that despairing view; rather, she is asserting her own right to choice as she lightly claims her wish to sleep late in the morning." Frye went on to argue that the mother, despite her despair over being unable to "total it all," does finally manage to "recenter her thoughts" and ultimately triumphs as a parent in her acknowledgment of her daughter's independence. Frye judged the mother's final resolution—"Let her be"—as an indication that the mother "trust[s] the power of each to 'find her way' even in the face of powerful external constraints on individual control."

Olsen's work has also inspired a great deal of critical analysis that takes a "biographical" approach, perhaps because the author has been so candid about the effect of circumstances in her life on her writing.

Olsen, an acclaimed critic and lecturer in her own right, has acknowledged that the demands of her marriage and four children have distracted her from writing and limited her literary output. Many of Olsen's fellow writers and critics have expressed admiration for her ability to overcome these obstacles. Women writers, in particular, have seen her as a role model.

Many critics have pointed to the obvious parallels between Olsen's life and that of the narrator in "I Stand Here Ironing."

Olsen, too, was abandoned by her first husband during the Depression after giving birth to one child, and she also later had more children with a second husband. Critics have found metaphors in Olsen's story for her own literary career and for the process of writing in general. Just as Olsen's literary career has been interrupted by the heavy demands placed on a working mother, so the narrator has been distracted from providing the kind of nurturing she would have liked to give her eldest child. The narrator is also interrupted from telling her story and from finding its "total." Critics have suggested that the mother-narrator and her account of the special challenges she has faced through motherhood parallel the unique challenges faced by women writers.

Author Biography

Tillie Olsen was born in 1913 in Omaha, Nebraska, to Russian Jewish immigrants whose political activities had forced them to leave their homeland in 1905. During her childhood, Olsen's father was the state secretary of the Socialist Party, and she likewise became politically active at an early age by joining the Young Communist League. After high school, she worked menial jobs until she was jailed in Kansas City for attempting to organize packinghouse workers into a union.

By 1933, Olsen had moved to California where she resumed her union activities and began writing articles for left-wing publications. She had one daughter from her first marriage to a man who promptly abandoned his young family. In 1936 she married Jack Olsen and spent the next twenty years raising three daughters while working full time as a factory worker and a secretary. Most of her short fiction dates to the 1950s, when her youngest child entered school and she was awarded a creative writing fellowship at Stanford University.

Critical acclaim followed the publication of *Tell Me a Riddle* in 1961, the same year the title story won the O. Henry Award for best short story. The works in the collection revolve around a central theme: how external forces undermine the ambitions of individuals. For example, in "I Stand Here Ironing" a mother laments the fact that her young daughter's creative talent will be squandered because of the family's limited income. The award-winning title story, "*Tell Me a Riddle*," concerns David and Eva, a Jewish immigrant couple married for forty-seven years, and the compromises and disappointments Eva has endured to satisfy her family. The book quickly became a favorite among participants in the fledgling women's movement.

Olsen's only novel, *Yonnondio*, was published in 1974, though it takes place in the 1930s. The novel is narrated by six-year-old Mazie Holbrook who tells of the harsh life of her impoverished family. The socialist concepts of the exploited proletariat and capitalism's damaging effects on family life are prominent in the novel, echoing the author's lifelong activism in leftist causes.

In 1978, Olsen published a book called *Silences* which contains two long essays; one on the silenced voices of women writers, the other concerning how writers confront periods of silence in their own lives. Though the book received less attention than Olsen's fiction, it augments the small body of work for which she has received much praise. Olsen has lectured at many universities, including the University of California at Los Angeles, and has served as writer-in-residence at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In addition to receiving several honorary degrees, her stories, including "I Stand Here Ironing," have appeared in more than one hundred anthologies.

About the Author

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Plot Summary

Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" is a monologue, a speech delivered by a narrator with whom the reader comes to identify. In the first few lines the narrator explains what she is doing—ironing—and what she is responding to—a request that she meet with a school official about her daughter, now nineteen years old. The occasion prompts her to recall her daughter's childhood and the effect she had on the girl as her mother. All the while she continues to iron, drawing parallels for herself and the reader between telling the story and ironing the wrinkles from a dress.

At the outset the mother confesses her power-lessness over her daughter, asking "You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key?" She is worried that if she is asked to recall those early days of parenting she "will become engulfed with all I did or did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped." Despite these fears, the mother begins at the beginning: "She was a beautiful baby."

Gradually the mother reveals the details of her daughter Emily's childhood, and a pattern of poverty and abandonment emerges. She was only nineteen herself when Emily was born. Her husband abandoned her, and she had no access to welfare or other services. Eventually she was forced to "bring her to [the father's] family and leave her." Emily was two years old before her mother could afford to come and pick her up. The little girl dutifully attended nursery school with "never a direct protest, never rebellion." As she recollects these days, the mother wonders about the long term effects of that kind of obedience: "what was the cost, the cost to her of such goodness?"

The narrator recalls how different Emily was from her siblings; she did not smile or laugh easily. The narrator had loved her as much as the others but had not yet learned to show it. Even with a "new daddy" the somber child's troubles were not over. She developed a terrible case of measles that isolated her from her mother and siblings and caused her to be sent to a convalescent home in the country. She did not get better; instead she became even thinner and sadder. The mother vividly recalls the scene during their brief visits: "The parents stand below shrieking up to be heard, and between them the invisible wall: 'Not to be Contaminated by Parental Germs or Physical Affection."1

After eight months of convalescence, Emily returned home thin, frail, and resistant to physical affection. Her adolescence provided little relief. Her mother remembers her as "thin and dark and foreign-looking at a time when every girl was supposed to look or thought she should look like a chubby blonde replica of Shirley Temple." But one day in the midst of "that terrible world of youthful competition, of preening and parading, of constant measuring of yourself against every other, of envy," Emily called her mother from school, weeping with joy and fear. She had taken her mother's advice and had entered the talent show and had won: "suddenly she was Somebody, and as imprisoned in her difference as she had been in anonymity."

This memory returns the narrator to the beginning of her train of thought. What is she supposed to do with a talent like that, "the control, the command, the convulsing and deadly clowning, the spell, then the roaring, stamping audience, unwilling to let this rare and precious laughter out of their lives" ? Emily herself interrupts her mother's thoughts at this point, dismissing her mother's anxieties with a quick kiss and teasing her for spending so much time ironing. Emily has no concern for the future, especially tomorrow's exams. Her mother, however, has "been dredging the past, and all that compounds a human being is so heavy and meaningful," she "cannot endure it."

Finally, Emily's mother takes stock of Emily's life and confesses "I will never total it all." But she does total it all, reducing her rambling monologue to one terse paragraph. Finally she decides on a course of action: "let her be," and adds only the hope that Emily will come to know "that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron." In other words, that she is more than the sum of her experiences.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The mother of a 19-year-old girl reflects on her daughter's childhood while she does the ironing. Her thoughts are prompted by the request of a stranger, perhaps a teacher or counselor, who perceives the daughter, Emily, to be in need of help. The potential helper has asked the mother to "come in" to discuss her daughter's needs, and the mother imagines the conversation that might occur at this meeting as she irons.

She begins by questioning what good it will do to discuss her daughter with this interested stranger. She wonders why anyone would think that she has a key to Emily's psyche just because she is her mother. The mother also wonders where she is supposed to find the time to analyze the relative importance of occurrences in Emily's upbringing. If she begins to reflect, she knows something will interrupt her: the duties of her daily life, the needs of her other children, the practical requirements of keeping a house. After noting the uselessness of the request and the problems associated with it, however, she does make a start.

The mother's reflections begin with the memory of how beautiful Emily had been as a baby. She makes a conversational aside in the imagined conversation to comment that it might be difficult for a person who sees Emily now to understand that her current, lovely appearance came only after years in which the girl thought herself ugly and worried about how she looked.

Her mother remembers that Emily would look at her baby pictures repeatedly, demanding that her mother tell her what a beautiful baby she had been. Her mother always assured her that she would be beautiful again; and that she was now, as well, for those who took the time to see her inner beauty. No one could see it then, however, not even her mother.

The mother continues by mentioning, somewhat to her surprise, that she had breast-fed Emily as she had all her other children. With Emily, however, she was a new mother with her first child, and she followed the recommendations in books by so-called experts, feeding her according to a strict time schedule. She goes on to discuss Emily's babyhood: how she loved movement, color, light, textures and music, how she experienced her days in "ecstasy."

Everything changed when Emily was eight months old, and her mother had to go to work during the day. It was during the Depression in the 1930s, and Emily's father had left the family because he could not stand sharing their poverty. There were no public relief programs at the time, so the mother was forced to put her daughter into the care of a downstairs neighbor woman, for whom the baby girl was not the "miracle" her mother felt her to be.

During this period, the mother would run home after work to be with her daughter, who would begin to cry as soon as she saw her. The mother then took a job at night so she could be with her daughter during the day, and things improved for a while, but soon she was forced to take her baby to the father's parents and leave her there because she could not support her.

It took a long time for the mother to raise the money necessary to bring her daughter home, and when she had finally raised the money, Emily caught chickenpox at the same time and could not travel. When she rejoined her mother at the age of two, Emily was almost unrecognizable, having taken on the quick and nervous characteristics of her father. She had pockmarks on her face from the chickenpox, as well.

Because she was two years old, the experts thought she was old enough to go to nursery school, and her mother really had no choice, since there was no one to care for Emily while she was at work. Looking back on the decision to put her into the nursery school, the mother acknowledges that she sensed at the time that the environment was less than supportive for the children who went there. She remembers how a teacher had belittled a boy who was afraid to go outside during recess and how Emily disliked going there. Emily never cried when she was left at the school as many of the other children did, but she did try to find reasons to stay home. She never protested or rebelled directly, however, and her mother wonders what effect this "demand" to be good had on her daughter as a child. The mother remembers that, during this period of their lives, a neighbor told her that she should smile at Emily more. She remembered this remark when she had her other children and put the suggestion into action, but it was too late for Emily.

Now, Emily has grown into a young woman who does not smile easily, but she has learned to use the flexibility of her face to act out comedies or pantomimes on stage, tapping into a talent recognized by everyone who sees her.

The mother wonders where this talent for comedy comes from. It certainly was not evident when Emily returned to her after the mother had remarried, and the girl had to adjust to a new father. The mother believes this was a better time for all of them, except for the occasions when she and her new husband went out, leaving Emily alone because they thought she was old enough. Then Emily would demand to know when they would be home and if they would be back soon. Once, they returned to find her still awake, the front door wide open and the clock on the floor in the hall. Emily had opened the front door to make it easier for them to come home. She admonished them, saying they did not come back soon after all, and the clock had scared her when it "talked loud" while they were gone.

In another memory, the mother recalls that Emily told her the clock "talked loud" the night she went to the hospital to have her second daughter, Susan. Emily had a bad fever from measles at the time, but she was aware of everything that happened during the week her mother was gone and during the week, she was not allowed to come near her mother and the new baby because of her illness.

After getting measles, Emily never fully recovered. She stayed very thin and did not want to eat. She had nightmares every night, and when she would call out for her mother, the mother never went to comfort her unless she had to be up to tend to the new baby anyway. Now, the mother comments, when she hears Emily being restless in the night and goes to check on her, Emily just tells her to go back to bed, that she is fine.

Because of her failure to recover, experts at a clinic convinced Emily's mother to send her away to a convalescent home to get well. They said she would have better food and care there and that the mother would be free to focus her attention on the new baby. The mother notes that children are still sent to this home. She comments that the home looks good in pictures, but they never show the children. When Emily was sent there, all the girls were required to wear white dresses with red bows, and the boys had to wear white suits with red ties.

Parents could visit their children every other Sunday, unless they were told otherwise. Emily's parents were not permitted to visit for six weeks. When they were finally allowed to see her, they had to follow the institution's rules: no "contamination by parental germs or physical contact." To accomplish this, the children stood on a second-story balcony, and the parents stood on the ground below. Everyone had to yell to be heard. Emily usually stood holding the hand of a smaller girl whose parents never came to visit her. After a while, Emily was alone again. They had moved the little girl to another cottage, Emily yelled down to her parents. She said the authorities at the home "don't want you to love anybody here."

Emily wrote a letter home every week as required. Her letters were riddled with spelling errors and filled with hope for the award of a star if the letter was well written. Her mother remembers that Emily never received a star.

Emily did not do well at the convalescent home. She hated the food and she was not allowed to keep any of the letters her family wrote to her. After eight months, her mother was allowed to take her home, chiefly because the girl had not gained as much weight as the experts had expected.

The mother recalls how Emily began to worry about her appearance. The girl was dark and thin at a time when little girls were expected to look chubby and blonde like Shirley Temple. Emily had a few friends, but none ever came to the house; maybe because they moved so many times, her mother thinks. Emily once stole money from her mother's purse to buy candy for a boy she loved, but he still preferred another girl despite her efforts to please him. Her mother remembers the pain she felt when Emily asked her why this happened.

Emily was a slow and conscientious learner in school at a time when teachers favored quickness and glib answers. She worried about school and was always trying to catch up to the other students. She was absent often, sometimes because of an illness - Emily had asthma - but sometimes because her mother just wanted to keep her home

to be with her and her younger daughter, Susan. Her mother remembers that Emily's asthmatic breathing filled the house with a "curiously tranquil sound."

The days on which Emily stayed home from school were the only times she and Susan enjoyed a peaceful relationship. In general, there was a "corroding resentment" on the part of Emily toward her younger sister. Susan was everything that Emily was not: blonde, chubby, quick thinking, and confident. Susan was drawn to Emily's things and would often misplace them or break them. Susan would entertain company with jokes and riddles Emily had taught her and never gave Emily credit for them. Although five years younger, Susan was almost even with Emily in terms of physical development. The mother comments that she was glad Emily developed slowly because the girl was too vulnerable to withstand the adolescent world of sexual competition.

In the midst of her recollections, as she had predicted, the mother must see to her small son, Ronnie, who is still in diapers. She notes that the cry of a child in need is rare in her life now that her childbearing years are nearly over. She cuddles with Ronnie for a while, watching the lights of the city, and he speaks a family word meaning "comfort" as he snuggles next to her. The mother remembers that Emily had invented the word – *shoogily* - and Ronnie's inheritance of it represents one of the ways Emily has put her "seal" on the family.

During the years of World War II, the mother had no time for Emily. She had four smaller children, and Emily had to help her take care of them and the house. The girl had to do her schoolwork, as well, and the smaller children were always writing on her papers or misplacing her books, making it more difficult for her. Emily could only do homework late at night when they were asleep. She attended a very large school where her individuality was not recognized, where she struggled to keep up, and where she was always unprepared for class. She worried over her lessons each night, while her mother ironed or prepared food or wrote to her husband, who was away at the war. During this period, Emily developed a huge appetite for food; her appetite became legendary in the family.

To entertain her mother during this difficult period, Emily would sometimes imitate an event that happened at school. She was good at it, showing a real talent for comedy, so her mother encouraged her to enter an amateur show at the school. Emily decides to enter, and to her surprise, she wins first prize. She tells her mother that the audience loved her and applauded her act for a long time. Suddenly, Emily became "somebody" and she was asked to perform in other venues. Her mother remembers that she did not recognize Emily the first time she watched her perform: the girl on stage had so much control and such a comedic talent. People told the mother that she should "do something" about her daughter's gift, but what could she do without money or knowing how to start? She remembers that she had to leave it all to Emily, who was forced to handle it by herself. Her talent could end up being stifled within her as easily as it could grow, the mother thinks.

As the mother reflects on her daughter's history, Emily returns home and runs up the stairs. The mother can tell that Emily is happy at this moment, so whatever had

prompted the concern that led to the request for her to "come in" did not happen on this day. Emily is in a communicative mood and jokes with her mother about the way she is always ironing.

The mother watches her and realizes how beautiful her daughter has become. She wonders again, what prompted a stranger's concerns. She believes that Emily is capable of finding her own way.

As Emily goes up to bed, she says she does not want to be awakened early with the rest of the family. When her mother asks her about the mid-term exams she is scheduled to take the next day, Emily dismisses the thought casually, saying that, in a few years' time, when everyone is dead, the tests will not matter at all. Her mother knows that Emily has said this kind of thing before, but because she has been thinking so much about the past and has recognized the way it weighs on both her and her daughter, she cannot stand to hear this thought on this particular night.

The mother realizes that she will never be able to understand everything about Emily or how she has come to be the person she is. She can list events and reflect on memories, but these will not provide an answer to the riddle that is Emily. The mother understands that she has become wise too late and that Emily was forced to learn to rely on herself and to keep many things inside her. The mother decides that Emily is a child of "her age, of depression, of war, of fear."

Concluding the imaginary conversation she has been having with the person who asked her to "come in," the mother instructs this stranger just to let Emily be. She acknowledges that, perhaps, Emily will not fulfill all of her potential – perhaps no one does – but she is likely to fulfill some of it, and that will be enough.

The mother only asks one thing for her daughter, the problem child: that she will know and find ways to help her understand that she is more than someone who must merely "fit in" or be helpless before the forces of life.

Analysis

The author, Tillie Olsen, uses the character of a mother having an imaginary conversation with a stranger about her daughter while doing the common household chore of ironing, to show the depth of experience that occurs internally while a person appears, externally, to be engrossed in the performance of a mundane task. In other words, there is much more going on inside a human being than anyone can see. The transformation of the daughter, Emily, from a sad, misfit child to an unexpectedly talented stage performer echoes this theme.

Several other themes are addressed in the story as well. Olsen discusses the way economic and social forces shape lives. She illustrates the problems faced by single mothers with small children, mothers who want to do the right things, but who do not believe in themselves enough to fight so-called experts. The story describes the way ordinary tasks eat up a lifetime, taking time away from the important things, like helping

one's children. It illustrates how the power of humor can bring human beings up out of despair and how comedy has its roots in pain. The story discusses the way that children can be strangers to their parents, and vice versa. The author ultimately expresses her fundamental optimism and hope by describing how Emily overcomes her difficult and sad childhood through her talent for comedy, making her more than the "dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron."

The last sentence of the story is key. Much of the story is taken up with the mother's descriptions of the difficulties both she and Emily faced during the daughter's childhood. The iron represents these difficulties, which were imposed in large part by external economic and social forces. The iron "presses" the wrinkles out of the dress; the dress cannot fight the weight of the iron, and it gives up its "wrinkles," which represent the individual marks of experiences that make people who they are in order to conform or to be acceptable to society. The iron goes back and forth, not stopping until it has evened everything out, just as a person's life experiences may weigh so forcefully upon him/her that he/she becomes part of a homogenized and conforming society. External forces and events can "flatten" an individual, creating hopelessness and prompting a retreat into conformity for comfort.

The story provides some new images for well-known ideas. The idea that humor and comedy arises from pain is not new, but the story gives it an especially poignant expression by using the formative experiences of a child as an illustration of the concept. The difficulties of parent-child communication have been acknowledged for a long time, as well, but the problem is interpreted anew when it is illustrated by the image of parents and children yelling back and forth to make their selves heard to each other at the convalescent home.

The author uses the image of ironing, which permeates the story simply by being the focus of its title, to show how the mother, and perhaps all parents, are unwittingly "pressed" into the service of conformity by a conventional wisdom that purports to know what is best for everyone. The mother in the story did not want to feed her child according to a strict time schedule, but she does so because experts told her it was best. She did not want to send her daughter to nursery school, but experts said it was time to do so. She did not want to send Emily away to the convalescent home, but she was talked into it by authorities that convinced her they could take care of her daughter better than she could.

Both Emily and her mother are caught beneath the "iron" of external forces. They are too uncertain of their own power to act against convention until Emily discovers her talent. With this discovery, the author suggests that the way out of a stifling conformity may be through art, at least for those lucky enough to have the gift of talent. The author also suggests that creating humor out of sorrow and difficulty may be the best way for individuals to show their unique humanity.

Characters

Emily

Nineteen-year-old Emily is the eldest child of the narrator. Her mother regrets much about Emily's upbringing, saying: "She was a child seldom smiled at." Her father deserted the family less than a year after her birth, during the worst of the Depression. While her mother struggled to make ends meet, young Emily was handed over to a variety of temporary caretakers. As young girl, Emily was considered homely—"thin and dark and foreign-looking at a time when every little girl was supposed to look or thought she should look a chubby blonde replica of Shirley Temple"—and she became shy and passive. After her mother's second marriage, Emily was eclipsed by her younger, more self-assured half-sister Susan. To her mother's surprise, Emily has developed a talent for comedic acting—a "deadly clowning"—which wins her an audience, but she seems to lack motivation. At the end of the story, Emily chooses to sleep through her exams and quips that "in a couple of years when we'll all be atom-dead they won't matter a bit." Though her mother is convinced that "all that is in her will not bloom," she expresses hope that Emily may nevertheless know "that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron."

Narrator

The narrator in "I Stand Here Ironing" is never described physically nor referred to by name. Her identity is revealed through the explanation she gives of her relationship with her eldest daughter, Emily. The narrator has endured a great deal of hardship in her life. She was deserted at age nineteen by her first husband, less than a year after Emily's birth, during the worst of the Depression. Money has always been short, and the necessity of working long hours made it impossible for her to be sufficiently attentive to her daughter. She remarried and had more children, to whom she feels she has been a better mother. She seems to regret much about how her first daughter was raised and feels that, as a result of her shortcomings as a mother, "all that is in [Emily] will not bloom." Readers have had varying reactions to the narrator's final resolution about her daughter—to "let her be." While some see passive resignation in this statement, others see it in a more positive light as an acknowledgement of her daughter's independence and ability to "find her own way."

Susan

Susan is Emily's younger half-sister. According to their mother, Susan is a better student than Emily, as well as better looking and more popular: Emily's "younger sister seemed all that she was not." Emily is competitive with Susan and feels slighted when their mother is more attentive to Susan. The mother feels that because Susan was raised in

a more nurturing environment than Emily, it was inevitable that Susan would outshine her older half-sister.

Setting

The story is set in the late 1950s or early 1960s in the working-class home of the narrator as she stands before the ironing board reflecting on her relationship with her eldest daughter.

Social Concerns

"I Stand Here Ironing" is an incredibly dense story, packing a number of profound social concerns into an extremely small space. It is important, then, for the reader to infer a great deal when reading Olsen's story and constantly to ask questions about what social forces have frustrated the narrator and why. To do so is to become aware of Olsen's concerns about the inequitable treatment of women, the lack of social services (child care in particular), the inadequacy of pay for menial jobs, and the pressure the mass of people put on individuals to conform to seemingly arbitrary standards.

Such concerns do not just appear in Olsen's fiction; they pepper her biography.

Olsen's first experiences as a professional writer actually occurred during her years as a political activist. In 1931, she joined the Young Communist League and took on a series of political tasks, including union organizing among women in factories and writing dramas for the Communist Party.

Olsen even served jail time in Kansas City for attempting to organize packinghouse workers. There and in other cities she fought tirelessly to ensure fair pay for good work.

Political activism deferred her career in literature. Though mixing biography with literary criticism carries certain dangers, it is, with Olsen, important to keep these biographical facts in mind while trying to make sense of her social concerns.

Chief among the social concerns in "I Stand Here Ironing," as in Olsen's other works, is the disproportionate load women must carry in rearing children. The birth of Emily, the first daughter of Olsen's narrator, provokes the husband to abandon both wife and child. Left alone with an eightmonth-old, the narrator remembers, "I worked or looked for work and for Emily's father," who "could no longer endure" (he wrote in his good-bye note) "sharing want with us." This brief note is the only mention of Emily's father and his abandonment in the story. Yet it is dense with suggestion. By writing in his farewell that he could not "share want," the narrator's husband asserts that the privations and labor of child rearing are the purview of the mother alone.

Fathers might aid in the struggle out of love but, he seems to believe, are not obligated to do so. By depicting the struggle her narrator must face when thus left alone with her child, Olsen characterizes such a cavalier attitude toward the welfare of wife and child as a social disease. She also implicitly critiques the social structure that allows such abandonment to go unpunished; in this regard, it is crucial to remember that Olsen sets her tale in the 1930s, long before compulsory child care payments and laws carefully constructed to track down deadbeat dads.

The absence of such mechanisms for ensuring accountability is only one of the omissions Olsen believes American society makes in taking care of its citizens. She explains the depth of her poverty after Emily's birth in part by noting that "it was [the] pre-relief, pre-WPA world of the depression. I would start running as soon as I got off the

streetcar." Only with President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal did the social safety net people later took for granted come to comfort those who, for one reason or another, are unable to support both themselves and the children they are expected to raise. Though Olsen's second marriage to a more supportive man certainly aided in making the rearing of her second and third child easier, her reference to the dark days before welfare underscores her commitment to socialist ideals about the government's duty to guarantee the basic needs of its citizens. The mother in "I Stand Here Ironing" certainly did not give Emily the attention and care she needed as a small child; without the wherewithal to do so, how could anyone expect her to?

Adding to the narrator's difficulties was the lack of jobs that provide a living wage.

To be sure, the awful fact of the depression contributed to her poverty in the first years of Emily's life. Nevertheless, Olsen suggests that there is something wicked about forcing a young mother to work a night shift, leaving her young girl in the care of others. Today, parents are justifiably concerned about the quality of the childcare centers to which they send their children. In the days of Emily's youth, however, sending a child out of the house for care could be an even less appealing option. Distressed by her illness and unable to handle both Emily and the new children, the narrator agrees to send Emily to a convalescent home.

Though a "handsome place," the home is cruel, forcing parents to shout from the ground while their children shout back from balconies high above. Committed to the eradication of disease, the home views the children only as organisms in need of treatment deemed by science to be the best available. Nowhere in Emily's treatment are her values or needs as an individual considered. Olsen suggests in this scene that only parents can appreciate a child's singleness; the mass care of them, then, seems to her to have a high potential for dehumanization.

Olsen's final social concern revolves around her repeated use of the seemingly innocuous word, "they." Her first use of the word comes in her discussion of Emily's very first days when "I nursed her. They feel that's important nowadays. . . . Though her cries battered me to trembling and my breasts ached with swollenness, I waited till the clock decreed." She never names the source of the so-called wisdom that inspired her to fight against her natural instincts to nurse her daughter when both of them are ready. By referring only to an anonymous "they" who think it best to breastfeed only at scientifically determined intervals, Olsen suggests that an ominous and faceless entity insinuates itself into an individual's life and turns the person against the natural impulses that would otherwise do a fine job of organizing behavior.

While the court of public opinion might have its place in maintaining law and order, Olsen fears it when it comes into an intimate relationship like that between a mother and her daughter, or, perhaps even more insidious, when it affects a young girl herself. Emily suffered a great deal in her youth: she "fretted about her appearance, thin and dark and foreign-looking at a time when every little girl was supposed to look or thought she should look [like] a chubby blonde replica of Shirley Temple." The one more frightening fact than that the nameless "they" might expect Emily to look like Shirley

Temple is that they can make Emily herself believe that she should resemble the child star. Here the narrator's act of ironing throughout the story comes to take on a metaphorical significance. While dresses might be ironed, Olsen insists that people should not be. After all Emily, like all people, "is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron." Though once active in the Communist Party, Olsen has none of the interest in conformity which people often associate with totalitarianism.

Instead, her most pressing social concern is with the inviolability of the individual, the sacredness of a person's uniqueness.

Social Sensitivity

The narrator of "I Stand Here Ironing" describes her daughter as "a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear." Though the story was published in 1961, it has been seen as having ties to the Depression era and to "the socially conscious literature of the thirties." Regardless of whether Olsen's work in 1961 bears much resemblance to writings from the 1930s, the Great Depression remained very much a part of the American psyche long after the decade was over. Even during the more prosperous 1950s and 1960s many people still remembered the severe deprivations caused by the country's disastrous economic collapse in the 1930s and lived in fear of repeating the experience. Differences in the values of those old enough to remember the Depression years and the values held by their children, who were too young to remember those years, have been cited as a major cause of the "generation gap" that came to characterize America in the 1960s.

Many people who lived through the Depression, including Tillie Olsen, were radicalized by their experience and joined Communist and Socialist movements. The U.S. government began massive efforts to provide relief to the poor through programs like the Work Projects Administration (WPA).

Writers from the period, such as John Steinbeck, Katherine Anne Porter, and Richard Wright, hoped to inspire reform by creating literature that depicted the plight of the poor in a realistic manner.

The relatively prosperous 1950s were characterized by a growing conservatism and mistrust of radical intellectuals. Having won World War II after dropping an atomic bomb on Japan, the United States began its cold war standoff with the Soviet Union. Many people felt it was important to root out radicals living in the United States and to neutralize the "threat" that they were thought to represent. Thus began the infamous House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings, a series of public "trials" of suspected American Communists conducted by members of the U.S.

Congress, most notably Senator Joseph McCarthy. The HUAC hearings have since come to represent one of the darkest moments in American history. Before Senator McCarthy was exposed for falsifying evidence and otherwise violating the civil rights of those he accused, the lives and reputations of hundreds of innocent people had been ruined.

The 1950s also saw a rapid expansion of the middle class and the rise to prominence of the suburban lifestyle. Some have seen it as an era of rigid conformism. For many of the women who had worked outside the home during World War II, being cast once again into the role of housewife seemed particularly oppressive. The repressed frustration and anger of suburban, middle-class housewives contributed a great deal to the new "women's liberation" and feminist movements of the 1960s, particularly following the publication of Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique.

Techniques

Much of the power of "I Stand Here Ironing" comes from the way in which the story is told. In a sense, Olsen's story is not a story at all. The events that take place during the duration of the narrative are the narrator's ironing and Emily's entrance. All the other narrative elements are events remembered while a mother irons, trying to piece together the moments that made her daughter the young woman she now is.

Thus, Olsen provides a kind of extended interior monologue. This kind of presentation seems particularly well suited to a story fundamentally about the psychology of motherhood. "I Stand Here Ironing" is remarkable for the way in which it matches its structure to its content, telling the tale of a mother's mental development by simply presenting a moment of that character's cogitation. It also reflects such thought in the physical action it depicts; as the narrator vacillates between guilt and pride she physically moves the iron back and forth over the ironing board.

Olsen makes much out a brief story by referring to historical events and periods as well as by crafting vivid images. Rather than describing the Depression in great detail, Olsen only refers to it briefly, trusting to her readers' knowledge of the squalor people had to endure during that dark period of American history. She also creates poignant and enduring images in only a few words. She writes for only a couple paragraphs of the narrator's visit to Emily at the clinic, but readers are haunted by the image of the mother and daughter separated by a chasm as the one shouts up and the other shouts down from a balcony. The mother does not elaborate on the pain and loneliness Emily experienced in that place.

Instead, she uses language to describe the scene.

Thematic Overview

The principal theme explored by "I Stand Here Ironing" involves the powerful and mysterious bond between mothers and daughters. The drama of the story derives from the narrator's struggle with guilt at allowing her first daughter to endure pain and privation in her youth. Furthermore, the mother seems to suffer from a kind of anxiety at the realization that her child has developed into a person fully independent of her.

The story opens with what seems like a direct address: "I Stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron." Throughout the rest of the story the narrator does vacillate between feeling guilt and recalling the extenuating circumstances that absolve her.

What provokes this evaluation of her child's upbringing is a note from a teacher, counselor, or social worker. It reads, in part, "I wish you would manage the time to come in and talk with me about your daughter.

I'm sure you can help me understand her."

Rereading these words, the narrator begins to go back over Emily's first years, trying to understand her for herself to determine how effective she might be in helping the teacher or counselor to understand the now adolescent girl.

The conclusion the narrator reaches is that she cannot help, for she herself could never fully understand the woman her daughter has become. Daughters are separated from their mothers at birth, and all of the struggle and joy of living only serves to widen the breach. After considering all the facts of Emily's childhood at length, then totaling them in a brief paragraph, Olsen's narrator only says, "Let her be. . . . Only help her to know—help make it so there is cause for her to know—that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron." Mothers, Olsen asserts, cannot mold their children as easily as they smooth the folds from their shirts and dresses. Motherhood is a process whereby one individual does the best she can to foster and provide opportunity for another individual. When the son or daughter succeeds, the mother should, as Olsen's narrator does, feel pride. The narrator of "I Stand Here Ironing" does not, however, accept the corollary: that mothers should take the blame when children do not achieve the full potential that others see in them.

Another important theme that pervades both "I Stand Here Ironing" and Olsen's other works is the need for personal expression. Having had her first attempts at fiction writing stifled by the responsibilities of work, motherhood, and political activism, Olsen is keenly aware of how important and difficult it is for an individual to find that essential outlet. For much of the story, Olsen only discusses this compulsion indirectly, by demonstrating the difficulty her narrator has in merely organizing her thoughts. The burdens of everyday life, it seems, are too heavy to allow the mother even to think without interruption. She opens her retrospective look at Emily's life with a question: "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." Again, at the close, she notes the calling of her baby boy and the entrance of Emily, the event that finally closes her narration. The story is recorded, written down, but by presenting it as the musings of a woman who never stops working (she irons throughout the story) Olsen reminds us of the limits on her capacity to organize and express her thoughts.

Emily's maturation also points to the importance of expression for the individual's overall health. After years as a sickly and unattractive girl, Emily finally achieves a degree of happiness when she discovers her talents on the stage. After winning first prize at a talent show, Emily realizes that "she was Somebody, and as imprisoned in her difference as she had been in anonymity." Expression, then, has a dark side, exposing the writer or actor to the public in such a way that the audience comes to feel ownership. Recognizing her gifts, Emily's peers and teachers urge her to explore and refine it. Thus, Olsen's advocacy for selfexpression is tempered by a crucial caveat: self-expression requires vigilance and fidelity to the self.

Themes

The Search for Identity

The issue of the boundary between the individual identities of the mother and daughter is raised early in the story. The narrator seems disturbed by the idea of being asked to help someone understand her daughter: "You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key? She has lived for nineteen years. There is all that life that has happened outside of me, beyond me." Yet, even as the narrator questions "what good" her insights into her daughter are, she also lays claim to a special knowledge of her daughter, more complete than that of any hypothetical questioner: "You did not know her all those years she was considered homely."

The story presents the identities of both mother and daughter as incomplete, still in the process of "becoming." The adolescent daughter is still struggling to find independence, and her guilt-ridden mother is still working through her assessment of her role. The shy daughter appears to have talent as an actress, much to the surprise of her mother who is prompted to wonder, "Was this Emily?" The daughter becomes "Somebody," it seems, by pretending on stage to be someone else. Yet, even in the apparent freedom Emily achieves through acting, she is still "imprisoned" by the public nature of acting and by the people in her audience whose applause "wouldn't let [her] go." Her mother feels at a loss for how to nurture this talent in her daughter, and readers are left wondering whether Emily's gift will end up being left unexpressed— "clogged and clotted" inside of her.

The mother's desire to define herself also seems unfulfilled in the end. She concludes that the task of "dredging the past" and sifting through "all that compounds a human being" is too much for her. Convinced that she will never be able to "total it all," she resolves not to heed the request that she "come in and talk" to the school official. Her thoughts about her daughter and about her own role as a mother remain private, communicated only to the reader.

Limitations and Opportunities

A deep sense of deprivation pervades "I Stand Here Ironing." The mother describes numerous limitations she has had to confront: poverty, abandonment by her first husband, housework, and motherhood itself. The many hardships in her life seem to compound one another and even impair her ability to tell the story: "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." The limited resources of the mother limit the daughter as well. The mother feels helpless to encourage her daughter's budding talent as an actress. The mother seems to blame her own youth and distractedness for the fact that "little will come" of her daughter's potential.

Apathy

Both daughter and mother appear to be apathetic at the end of the story: the daughter toward her future, the mother toward her own perceived failures. The daughter decides to sleep late despite having exams the next morning because "in a couple of years when we'll all be atom-dead they won't matter a bit." The mother, exhausted from "dredging the past," resolves to "[l]et her be." Yet the story also presents evidence that there is at least a desire to overcome this apathy. The image of the mother's iron, which frames the story, provides an interesting emblem of this desire. In the first sentence, the iron, along with the narrator's thoughts, "moves tormented back and forth." In the last sentence, she articulates her hope that her daughter will be able to break free and learn "that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron."

Style

Structure and Point of View

The story is told through the interior monologue of an unnamed mother as she irons her daughter Emily's dress. The catalyst for the monologue appears to be a request from an unspecified source, perhaps a school guidance counselor, for help in understanding the narrator's troubled daughter. The monologue consists of the narrator's fantasies, presented in a stream-of-consciousness manner, about what she might say in response to such a request.

Such a narrative structure not only provides a dramatic context to draw the reader's attention, but it also serves to quickly establish the story's confrontational tone and introduce the narrator's repressed, frustrated character. Olsen's challenge is announced in the very first sentence, with the unusual appearance of the second person pronoun: "what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron." The narrator begins questioning the validity of her own perspective on her daughter's psyche early in the story and wonders whether what she has to say "matters or ... explains anything."

In addition to the insights the narrator shares with readers directly, her character is also revealed indirectly through the occasional interruptions of her monologue, which are caused by pressing demands from her daily life: "Ronnie is calling. He is wet and I change him." In the end, the central paradox in the character of the narrator is also illustrated through the story's dramatic narrative "frame": she in fact has many insights into herself and her daughter, but she chooses not to express them either to her daughter or to whomever asked her to "come in and talk."

Language and Imagery

In "I Stand Here Ironing," Olsen attempts to portray experiences and characters not typically given expression in literature. Perhaps her most admirable technical accomplishments lie in her ability to use language and imagery to believably portray the voice and thoughts of an intelligent but overburdened mother. Olsen intersperses the story with run-on sentences and expressive coinages, such as "I think of our others in their three- and four-year oldness." These techniques evoke the difficulty the narrator has answering unanswerable questions and imposing order upon the chaos that has been her daily life.

Simple images from the world familiar to the narrator are used to express complex emotions. The most notable of these is the act of ironing referred to in the story's title. Associated with the social role of women, ironing—a back-and-forth motion that results in the elimination of wrinkles—becomes a symbol for the imperfections and frustrated desires of the narrator. One passage suggests that this also represents a less sentimental and more realistic image of motherhood: Emily muses that if she were to

paint her mother's portrait, the pose Whistler had used in painting his mother's portrait—seated in a chair—wouldn't do. "I'd have to paint mine standing over an ironing board," she says. The act of ironing epitomizes the endless tasks that have beset the narrator. She expresses the hope that her daughter can transcend such frustration, nse above her circumstances and learn "that she is more than the dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron."

Historical Context

The Great Depression

The narrator of "I Stand Here Ironing" describes her daughter as "a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear." Though the story was published in 1961, it too has been seen as having ties to the Depression era and to the socially conscious literature of the thirties. Regardless of whether Olsen's work in 1961 bears much resemblance to writings from the 1930s, the Great Depression remained very much a part of the American psyche long after tine decade was over. Even during the more prosperous 1950s and 1960s, many people still remembered the severe deprivations caused by the country's disastrous economic collapse in the 1930s and lived in fear of repeating the experience. Differences in values present in those old enough to remember the Depression years and values held by children too young to remember those years have been cited as a major cause of the "generation gap" that came to characterize America in the 1960s.

Many people who lived through the Depression, including Olsen, were radicalized by their experience and joined communist and socialist movements. The United States government began massive efforts to provide relief to the poor through programs like the Work Projects Administration (WPA). Writers from the period such as John Steinbeck, Katherine Anne Porter, and Richard Wright hoped to inspire reform by creating literature that depicted the plight of the poor in a realistic manner.

The Eisenhower Era

The relatively prosperous 1950s were characterized by a growing conservatism and mistrust of radical intellectuals. Having won World War II after dropping an atomic bomb on Japan, the United States began its Cold War standoff with the Soviet Union. Many people felt it was important to root out radicals living in the United States and to neutralize the "threat" these people were believed to represent. Thus began the infamous House Unamerican Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings, a series of public "trials" of suspected American Communists conducted by members of the U.S. Congress, most notably Senator Joseph McCarthy. The HUAC hearings have since come to represent one of the darkest moments in American history. Before Senator McCarthy was exposed for falsifying evidence and otherwise violating the civil rights of those he accused, the lives and reputations of hundreds of innocent people were ruined.

The 1950s also saw a rapid expansion of the middle class and the rise to prominence of the suburban lifestyle. Some have seen it as an era of rigid conformism. For many of the women who had worked outside the home during World War II, the role of housewife into which they were recast seemed particularly oppressive. The repressed frustration and anger of suburban, middle-class housewives contributed much to the

new "women's liberation" and feminist movements of the 1960s, particularly following the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*.

Critical Overview

The four stories which Olsen wrote during the 1950s and then published as *Tell Me a Riddle* in 1961 are the only short stories she has published. Besides these stories, her published work totals one novel and a number of essays. Nonetheless, Olsen's four short stories have had an impressive impact on the literary world since their first appearance. They have been reprinted in countless anthologies, and Olsen has been heralded as an early champion of a new feminist movement in literature. In The New York Times Book Review, prominent contemporary novelist Margaret Atwood describes the importance of Olsen and her work, particularly to women: "Few writers have gained such wide respect based on such a small body of published work—Among women writers in the United States, 'respect' is too pale a word: 'reverence' is more like it."

When Olsen published her volume of stories upon completion of her studies at the Stanford University Creative Writing Program, her work was immediately well-received by critics. Initially, her stories were often seen as beautifully crafted but bleak in outlook. In a 1961 review in *The Commonweal*, for example, Richard M. Elman describes "I Stand Here Ironing," in his view the most excellent of Olsen's stories, as "a catalogue of the failure of intimacy." A 1963 essay by William Van O'Connor in *Studies in Short Fiction* also seems to find nothing but despair in a story which features a daughter who imagines that nothing matters because we will all soon be killed by atomic bombs and a mother who wants to believe that there is "still enough to live by," but is unable to convince her daughter.

Subsequent critics, perhaps informed by more feminist sensibilities, have seen more optimistic elements in the story. For example, Elizabeth Fisher, editor of *Aphra, The Feminist Literary Magazine*, suggests in a 1972 essay in The Nation that "I Stand Here Ironing" is "also a hopeful story of how children survive, sometimes even making strength, or talent, out of the deprivations they've endured." Joanne S. Frye, in a 1981 *Studies in Short Fiction* essay, argues that Emily, despite her quip about everyone being "atom-dead" soon, "does not, in fact, succumb to that despairing view; rather, she is asserting her own right to choice as she lightly claims her wish to sleep late in the morning." Frye goes on to argue that the mother, despite her despair over being unable to "total it all," does finally manage to "recenter her thoughts," and ultimately triumphs as a parent in her acknowledgement of her daughter's independence. Frye reads the mother's final resolution—"Let her be"—as an indication that the mother "trust[s] the power of each to 'find her way' even in the face of powerful external constraints on individual control."

Olsen's work has also inspired a great deal of critical analysis which takes a biographical approach, perhaps because the author has been so candid about how circumstances in her life have affected her writing. Olsen, an acclaimed critic and lecturer in her own right, has acknowledged that the demands of her marriage and four children have distracted her from writing and limited her literary output. Many of Olsen's fellow writers and critics have expressed admiration for her ability to overcome these obstacles. Women writers, in particular, have seen her as a role model.

Many critics have pointed to the obvious parallels between Olsen's life and that of the narrator in "I Stand Here Ironing." Olsen, too, was abandoned by her first husband during the Depression after giving birth to one child and later had more children with a second husband. Critics have found metaphors in Olsen's story for her own literary career and for the process of writing in general. Just as Olsen's literary career has been interrupted by the heavy demands placed on a working mother, so the narrator has been distracted from providing the kind of nurturing she would have liked to for her eldest child. The narrator is also interrupted from telling her story and from finding its "total." Critics have suggested that the mother-narrator and her account of the special challenges she has faced through motherhood parallel the unique challenges faced by women waters.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton is the coordinator of the Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin. In the following essay, she explores the autobiographical elements in "I Stand Here Ironing," and discusses Olsen's inclusion of poor and underrepresented people and their situations in her work.

"I Stand Here Ironing" is the first story in *Tillie Olsen*'s awarding-winning collection, *Tell Me a Riddle*, which was first published in 1961 when Olsen was in her late forties. In this story, which is considered her most autobiographical, Olsen breaks new literary ground in creating the voice of the mother-narrator and in crafting a narrative structure that mirrors as well as describes female experience. Like the four other stories in the collection, "I Stand Here Ironing" portrays the "aching hardships of poverty and the themes of exile or exclusion." This story, according to critics Mickey Pearlman and Abby Werlock in *Tillie Olsen*, "presents us with the inexorable riddle of human existence: it paradoxically comprises not merely the endurance of poverty, bigotry, illness, and pain but the ultimate ability to transcend these."

Olsen is one of those authors whose life is so integral to her writing that any reading of her fiction is greatly enriched by comparisons between her life experiences and the fictional lives she creates. Olsen's critics, and Olsen herself in numerous speeches and interviews, have identified the three consuming passions of her life: politics, writing, and mothering. Her remarkable contribution to literature and to the advancement of women's causes, is her insistence that all three of these are connected: that motherhood always has a political dimension, and that politics cannot be separated from families, for example. What she also recognizes, however, is that the material conditions of women's lives prevent them from engaging in all three of these issues simultaneously; that political activism may disqualify one from motherhood; or that motherhood may consume the time and energy needed for writing. Twenty years separated Olsen's initial convictions that "she must write," and her first publications. In a 1971 speech, she explained that she "raised four children without household help... [and] worked outside the home in everyday jobs as well." She further stated that during "the years when I should have been writing, my hands and being were at other (inescapable) tasks."

Alice Walker once praised Olsen for rescuing the lives of forgotten and invisible people, and other critics have agreed that Olsen's work has preserved the histories of people who have traditionally been underrepresented in literature. Olsen's career proves her conviction that "literature can be made out of the lives of despised people." Walker also gave Olsen credit for her pioneering efforts to portray the lives of the poor, the working class, females, and non-whites well before these subjects received widespread attention. Critics have lauded "I Stand Here ironing" for articulating a strong female voice, especially in the mother-narrator's reflections on her life as a mother and a worker. The story is one of the best examples in literature—and certainly one of the first—to offer readers a glimpse into the lives of working-class women and families from a woman's perspective. The dedication to her book of essays, *Silences*, reads in part: "For our silenced people, century after century after their being consumed in the hard

everyday essential work of maintaining human life. Their art, which still they made— as their other contributions—anonymous; refused respect, recognition; lost."

"I Stand Here Ironing" appears to be straightforward and simple on the first reading, but a closer study reveals a sophisticated narrative structure and a rich pattern of imagery. Olsen frequently mentioned in interviews that she was especially proud of the story's first sentence, and wished she could duplicate its directness and economy: "I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron." The apparent simplicity of this sentence belies the complexity of the narrative situation. Readers are introduced to a woman who appears to be addressing them directly. While it quickly becomes clear that the "you" of the first sentence is in fact some school official, readers are drawn into the narrative and soon come to occupy the position of sympathetic listener. The mother revisits the nineteen years of her daughters life, but the narrative remains anchored in the present because of the act of ironing. Like most women with children, her story is constantly interrupted by other demands and she is accustomed to "engaging in her private thoughts while simultaneously carrying on with household tasks and family interactions." In fact, as her story reveals, her life has been interrupted by childbirth, desertion, poverty, numerous jobs, childcare, remarriage, frequent relocations, and five children. The pace and shape of this narrative is as familiar to the mother-narrator as is the act of ironing.

The mother's ironing not only keeps us attuned to the immediacy of her experiences, it provides the central metaphor for the story. Like Alice Walker's use of quilting in "Everyday Use," Olsen's ironing metaphor resonates both inside and outside the fictional boundaries of the story. On one level, the ironing metaphor is significant because it belongs almost exclusively to the domestic world of women. Not only is ironing women's work, but more often than not women iron for other people. On a more figurative level, mothering is also an act of ironing, of smoothing out problems, of making things right and ordered. But as the story of her first child's difficult upbringing unfolds, the iron begins to take on another, more sinister array of qualities. It is helpful here to recall another aspect of the author's personal life that bears on the story. Olsen spent many of her working years in factories, and as a young girl worked as a tie presser, laboring long hours with hot and dangerous equipment under deplorable working conditions. She has dedicated her life to fighting for social change and the rights of the oppressed, especially workers. She also was an active socialist in the 1930s and even spent time in jail for her role in a factory stake. With these things in mind, the attentive reader listens to the mother struggling with "dredging the past," knowing she will "never total it all." The iron comes to represent, then, the pressures of outside forces and the accidents of history into which we are born, such as poverty, divorce, illness, and prejudice.

After she asks a total of thirteen questions, critics have noted, ranging from "how could I have known?" to "what was the cost?" the narrator suddenly pauses (we can imagine her lifting the iron from the board). She concludes that "all that compounds a human being is so heavy and meaningful in me, I cannot endure it tonight." The adjective heavy focuses our attention on the iron, which has not literally grown heavier, though the narrator may be fatigued. But on a figurative level, it has become heavier, taken on

weight and significance as it has come to represent the pressures of outside forces on individuals in general and on Emily in particular. The mother's conclusion to "let her be" is not an abdication of her parental rights; rather it is a recognition that her powers as a mother cannot control the oppressive forces of the outside world. She ends her monologue with a prayer-like hope that her daughter will come to know "that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron." This ending suggests that the narrator comes to this resolution not despite the fact that her life allows her time for introspection only while working, but because of the work. The twin process of ironing and thinking out loud about the past do not simply move "tormented back and forth," but progress, from questions to answers, from unknown to known. Olsen's narrator learns something in the act of ironing, and the iron itself has been a crucial part of that process, leading her to a fuller understanding of her motherhood through its insistent metaphorical meanings.

Source: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, for Short Stories for Students, Gale Research, 1997

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpted essay, Kamel discusses "I Stand Here Ironing" and its theme of women whose potential for creativity, growth, and opportunity has been denied them due to their race, sex, religion, and socio-economic status.

In 1954... Olsen published the brilliant short story "I Stand Here Ironing," having served a prolonged apprenticeship during which "there was a conscious storing, snatched reading, beginnings of writing" and always "the secret rootlets of reconnaissance." This reconnaissance involved not only obsessive reading but internalizing the lives of women writers, especially writers who were also mothers.

Their emergence is evidence of changing circumstances making possible for them what (with rarest exception) was not possible in the generations of women before. I hope and I fear for what will result I hope (and believe) that complex new richness will come into literature, I fear because almost certainly their work will be impeded, lessened, partial For the fundamental situation remains unchanged Unlike men writers who marry, most will not have the societal equivalent of a wife—nor (in a society hostile to growing life) anyone but themselves to mother their children ..."I Stand Here Ironing" depicts a nameless mother-narrator, who, having received a phone call from her daughter Emily's high-school guidance counselor that Emily is an underachiever, pushes an iron to and fro across the board on which Emily's dress lies shapeless and wrinkled. The narrator begins "dredging the past and all that compounds a human being." Her thoughts flow with the rhythm of the iron as she attempts to grasp the "rootlet of reconnaissance" to explain why it was that her oldest child was one "seldom smiled at." What would appear as understandable reasons—the Depression, the nineteen-year old mother, who at her daughter's present age worked at menial jobs during the day and at household chores at night, the iron necessity that made her place Emily in a series of foster homes, the desertion of her first husband, bearing and rearing four other children of a second marriage, all clamoring for attention—should account for Emily's chronic sorrow; but somehow they do not. Necessity dominating the mother's life could have tempered Emily, but the reader soon perceives that there may be another reason why Emily and the mother-narrator are silenced counterparts. The mother has remarried, but material comforts, an emotionally secure middle-class existence, cannot assuage her loneliness. Never having experienced the celebratory rituals of working-class communality, middle-class anomie distances her from other women. Her entire adult life has been interrupted by child care described by Olsen quoting [Sally Bingham in *Silences*}:

My work "writing" is reduced to five or six hours a week, always subject to interruptions and cancellations ... I don't believe there is a solution to the problem, or at least I don't believe there is one which recognizes the emotional complexities involved. A life without children is, I believe, an impoverished life for most women; yet life with children imposes demands that consume energy and imagination at the same Ume, cannot be delegated —even supposing there were a delegate available.

In "I Stand Here Ironing," characteristic stylistic clues embedded in the occasionally inverted syntax, run-on sentences interspersed with fragments, repetitions, alliterative parallels, an incantatory rhythm evoke the narrator's longing not only for a lost child but for a lost language whereby she can order the chaotic dailiness of a working mother's experience.

She was a beautiful baby. The first and only one of our five that was beautiful at birth. You do not guess how new and uneasy her tenancy in her now-Ioveliness. You did not know her all those years she was thought homely, or see her pouring over her baby pictures, making me tell her over and over how beautiful she had been—and would be, I would tell her—and was now to the seeing eye But the seeing eyes were few or non-existent Including mine....

Ronnie is calling. He is wet and I change him. It is rare there is such a cry now. That Ume of motherhood is almost behind me when the ear is not one's own but must always be racked and listening for the child to cry, the child call We sit for awhile and I hold him, looking out over the city spread in charcoal with its soft aisles of light. "Shoogily," he breathes and curls closer. I carry him back to bed, asleep Shoogily A funny word, a family word, inherited from Emily, invented by her to say: comfort.

Emily's word play appears rooted in Yiddish (shoogily—meshugah) and there is something archetypically talmudic in her fascination with riddles (for which a younger sibling gets recognition) "that was my riddle, Mother, I told it to Susan...," foreshadowing the leitmotif Olsen will orchestrate in "*Tell Me a Riddle*." When language inventiveness fails to mitigate against Emily's lack of achievement at school, when she tries and fails to authenticate herself, she escapes into another's role. Desperate for attention, identity, she responds to the mother's suggestion that she try out for a high school play— [Olsen notes in *Silences* that] "not to have an audience is a kind of death"— and becomes a comic crowd pleaser to the sound of thunderous applause. Thus, Emily finally commands some attention and affection and to a limited extent a control of life's randomness. Nonetheless, only articulation through language can free her from oppression. Silenced at home she lacks and will probably continue to lack centrahty.

The story ends with the mother still ironing out the wrinkles in Emily's dress; like Emily she is "helpless before the iron," aware that this Sisyphus-like ritual cannot atone for the past, nor can she ultimately answer the riddle Emily poses within and without the family constellation. Certainly the chains of necessity should have justified the mother's past relationship with her eldest child.

We were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth I was a young mother. I was a distracted mother.

There were the other children pushing up, demanding. Her younger sister seemed all that she was not. There were many years that she did not want me to touch her She kept too much to herself,... My wisdom came too late. She has much to her and probably nothing will come of it. She is a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear.

Source: Rose Kamel, "Literary Foremothers and Writers' *Silences*. Tilhe Olsen's Autobiographical Fiction," in *MELUS*, Vol 12, no. 3, Fall, 1985, pp. 55-72.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Frye asserts that motherhood is presented in Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing " as a metaphor for the individual's search for selfhood and as a literary experience.

Motherhood as literary metaphor has long been a cliche for the creative process: the artist gives birth to a work of art which takes on a life of its own. Motherhood as literary experience has only rarely existed at all, except as perceived by a resentful or adoring son who is working through his own identity in separation from the power of a nurturant and/or threatening past. The uniqueness of *Tillie Olsen*'s "I Stand Here Ironing" lies in its fusion of motherhood as both metaphor and experience: it shows us motherhood bared, stripped of romantic distortion, and reinfused with the power of genuine metaphorical insight into the problems of selfhood in the modern world.

The story seems at first to be a simple meditation of a mother reconstructing her daughter's past in an attempt to explain present behavior. In its pretense of silent dialogue with the school's guidance counselor—a mental occupation to accompany the physical occupation of ironing—it creates the impression of literal transcription of a mother's thought processes in the isolation of performing household tasks: "I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron." Indeed, this surface level provides the narrative thread for our insights into both Emily and her mother. The mother's first person narrative moves chronologically through a personal past which is gauged and anchored by occasional intrusions of the present: "I put the iron down"; "Ronnie is calling. He is wet and I change him"; "She is coming. She runs up the stairs two at a time with her light graceful step, and I know she is happy tonight. Whatever it was that occasioned your call did not happen today."...

The story is very fundamentally structured through the mother's present selfhood. It is her reality with which we are centrally concerned, her perception of the process of individuation to which the story gives us access. Her concerns with sorting through Emily's past are her concerns with defining the patterns of her own motherhood and of the limitations on her capacity to care for and support the growth of another human being. As she rethinks the past, she frames her perceptions through such interjections as "I did not know then what I know now" and "What in me demanded that goodness in her?"—gauges taken from the present self to try to assess her own past behavior. But throughout, she is assessing the larger pattern of interaction between her own needs and constraints and her daughter's needs and constraints. When she defines the hostilities between Emily and her sister Susan—"that terrible balancing of hurts and needs"—she asserts her own recognition not only of an extreme sibling rivalry but also of the inevitable conflict in the separate self-definitions of parent and child. Gauging the hurts and needs of one human being against the hurts and needs of another: this is the pattern of parenthood. Butmore, itis the pattern of aresponsi-ble self living in relationship.

The story's immediate reality continually opens onto such larger patterns of human awareness. Ostensibly an answer to the school counselor, the mother's interior monologue becomes a meditation on human existence, on the interplay among external contingencies, Individual needs, and individual responsibilities. The narrative structure creates a powerful sense of immediacy and an unfamiliar literary experience. But it also generates a unique capacity for metaphorical insight into the knowledge that each individual—like both the mother and the daughter—can act only from the context of immediate personal limitations but must nonetheless act through a sense of individual responsibility.

The narrator sets the context for this general concern by first defining the separateness of mother and daughter: "You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key? She has lived for nineteen years. There is all that life that has happened outside of me, beyond me." Almost defensively, she cites too the difficulties of finding time and being always—as mothers are—susceptible to interruption. But in identifying an even greater difficulty in the focus of her parental responsibility, she highlights the thematic concern with guilt and responsibility: "Or I will become engulfed with all I did or did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped." She is, in other words, setting out to assess her own responsibility, her own failure, and finally her need to reaffirm her own autonomy as a separate human being who cannot be defined solely through her parental role.

When she identifies the patterns of isolation and alienation between herself and her daughter, she is further probing the awareness of her own separateness and the implicit separation between any two selfhoods. The convalescent home to which she sent Emily as a child is premised on establishing an "invisible wall" between visiting parents and their children on the balconies above. But, in fact, that wall is only an extreme instance of an inevitable separateness, of all the life that is lived "outside of me, beyond me." Even in her memory of deeply caring conversations with her daughter, the mother can only claim to provide an occasional external eye, a person who can begin to narrate for the daughter the continuity of the daughter's own past and emergent selfhood but who must stand outside that selfhood separated by her own experiences and her own needs....

The tension in Emily's personality—which has continually been defined as light and glimmering yet rigid and withheld—comes to a final focus in the self-mocking humor of her allusion to the most powerful cultural constraint on human behavior: nothing individual matters because "in a couple years we'll all be atom-dead." But Emily does not, in fact, succumb to that despairing view; rather she is asserting her own right to choice as she lightly claims her wish to sleep late in the morning. Though the mother feels more heavily the horror of this judgment, she feels its weight most clearly in relation to the complexity of individual personhood and responsibility: "because I have been dredging the past, and all that compounds a human being is so heavy and meaningful in me, I cannot endure it tonight." And when she goes on from her despairing inability to "total it all" to the story's conclusion, she recenters her thoughts on the tenuous balance between the powerful cultural constraints and the need to affirm the autonomy of the self in the face of those constraints: "Let her be. So all that is in her

will not bloom—but in how many does it? There is still enough left to live by. Only help her to know—help make it so there is cause for her to know—that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron."

Her efforts, then, "to gather together, to try and make coherent" are both inevitably doomed to failure and finally successful. There cannot be— either for parent or for story-teller—a final coherence, a final access to defined personality, or a full sense of individual control. There is only the enriched understanding of the separateness of all people—even parents from children—and the necessity to perceive and foster the value of each person's autonomous selfhood. Though that selfhood is always limited by the forces of external constraints, it is nonetheless defined and activated by the recognition of the "seal" each person sets on surrounding people and the acceptance of responsibility for one's own actions and capacities. At best, we can share in the efforts to resist the fatalism of life lived helplessly "before the iron"—never denying the power of the iron but never yielding to the iron in final helplessness either. We must trust the power of each to "find her way" even in the face of powerful external constraints on individual control.

The metaphor of the iron and the rhythm of the ironing establish a tightly coherent framework for the narrative probing of a mother-daughter relationship. But the fuller metaphorical structure of the story lies in the expansion of the metaphorical power of that relationship itself. Without ever relinquishing the immediate reality of motherhood and the probing of parental responsibility, Tillie Olsen has taken that reality and developed its peculiar complexity into a powerful and complex statement on the experience of responsible selfhood in the modern world. In doing so she has neither trivialized nor romanticized the experience of motherhood; she has indicated the wealth of experience yet to be explored in the narrative possibilities of experiences, like motherhood, which have rarely been granted serious literary consideration....

Source: Joanne S. Frye, "'I Stand Here Ironing'1 Motherhood as Experience and Metaphor," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 18, no 3, Summer, 1981, pp 287-92

Topics for Further Study

Olsen has a long history of political activism, and she was once jailed for trying to organize blue-collar workers to join a union. Explain how "I Stand Here Ironing" echoes Olsen's leftist politics, even though it contains no overt political statements.

What do you think Olsen believes is a more important influence in a person's life—the role of nature, or the role of nurture? Give some examples of Emily's character traits that her mother thinks are due to nature and some she believes are due to nurture.

Many psychologists believe that birth order influences personality. Research this idea and find out what some studies have found to be common traits among firstborn children. How is Emily's behavior representative of oldest children, and how is it different?

Compare and Contrast

1963: Betty Friedan publishes *The Feminine Mystique*, the first notable publication of the modern women's movement, in which Friedan outlines the position of women as second-class citizens in contemporary life.

1994: Mary Pipher publishes *Reviving Ophelia*, in which she illustrates how adolescent girls are forced to conform to strict societal conventions that are often at odds with a girl's true emerging identity.

1960: 39 percent of married American women work outside the home.

1995: 61 percent of married American women work outside the home.

1964: President Lyndon B. Johnson declares a "national war on poverty" and creates the Office of Economic Opportunity, which coordinates programs such as Job Corps and Head Start. Head Start provides low-income, at-risk children with early education and nurturing.

1994: A Republican-dominated Congress, led by House Speaker Newt Gingrich, declares a national war on welfare and suggests a return to the use of orphanages.

What Do I Read Next?

"**Tell Me a Riddle**" (1961) is Tillie Olsen's award-winning story about the sacrifices a Jewish immigrant couple has had to make in order for their marriage to survive.

The Second Sex (1949) by French water Simone de Beauvoir. A landmark book that outlines the biological, historical, and social origins of women's oppression. Recognized as one of the books that helped launch the feminist movement.

The Dollmaker (1954) by Harriette Arnow. A novel about a poor, Southern, working-class family that moves to Detroit during World War II. Chronicles the mother's growing disillusionment with modern society as she struggles to raise her children against the backdrop of the city's dangerous steel mills.

"Blues Ain't No Mocking Bird" (1972) a short story published in Toni Cade Bambara's collection Gorilly Love. An impoverished African-American family attracts the attention of a film crew gathering footage or a project on the county food-stamp program. Despite the protests of a grandmother and her husband, the men trespass on the family's property and refuse to stop filming the family's humble living quarters.

Topics for Discussion

1. Which aspects of this story would be different if it were set today and which would be unchanged?

2. How accurate or reliable do you suppose the mother's understanding of her relationship with her daughter actually is? What makes you think so?

3. Most married women in the 1950s were not employed outside the home, but the responsibilities of full-time housework and rearing younger children often limited their involvement with their older children, as described in "I Stand Here Ironing." How does this compare and contrast with modern society, in which most married women work outside the home?

4. Identify one key incident in the narrator's relationship with her daughter and describe why you think it is the most important element of the story in defining their relationship.

5. What does the narrator mean when she expresses hope that Emily will realize that "she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron"? What are Emily's prospects for education, employment, marriage, or motherhood?

6. The narrator describes her younger daughter, Susan, as a better student, better-looking, and more popular than Emily; the mother further suggests that because Susan was raised in a more nurturing environment, she would inevitably outshine her older half-sister. How reliable is this assessment, and what does it reveal about the mother?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Olsen has a long history of political activism, and she was once jailed for trying to organize blue-collar workers to join a union. Explain how "I Stand Here Ironing" echoes Olsen's leftist politics, even though it contains no overt political statements.

2. What do you think Olsen believes is a more important influence in a person's life—the role of nature, or the role of nurture? Give some examples of Emily's character traits that her mother thinks are due to nature and some she believes are due to nurture.

3. Many psychologists believe that birth order influences personality. Research this idea and find out what some studies have found to be common traits among first-born children. How is Emily's behavior representative of oldest children, and how is it different?

4. Write a character sketch of the narrator of the story. What does the reader learn about her through her revelations about her relationship with her eldest daughter?

5. Discuss the narrator's decision in the end to "let her be" when Emily declares that she wants to sleep in rather than attend her school examinations.

6. How do you suppose Emily would characterize her relationship with her mother? Rewrite a key incident or passage in the story from Emily's point of view.

Literary Precedents

Written in 1961, decades after the experimentation with narrative structure that typified high modernist prose, "I Stand Here Ironing" does not seem radical in its rendering of a story as an internal monologue.

That technique was used in a more radical way by William Faulkner in The Sound and the Fury (1929), a novel that opens with an internal monologue by a mentally disabled member of the Compson family. While it does take some intuition to put all the pieces of Olsen's narrative into a neat chronological sequence, deciphering the rambling of Benjy in Faulkner's novel is quite a bit more difficult.

Olsen also has renowned predecessors for social concerns and themes. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, best known for fiction such as "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), carefully explored the social and economic consequences of the inequitable treatment of women in her nonfiction treatise, Women and Economics (1898). Prominent a generation before Olsen's birth, Gilman lived a similar life. Discouraged from writing because of her gender, she eventually became an outspoken advocate for the recognition of women as full-fledged citizens. Reading the works of both women is useful because it gives some indication of how the battle lines in the fight for women's rights changed from the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth.

Thematically, Olsen's story is related to Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" as well.

In this unusual tale, a woman records her experiences as she endures one of the rest cures popular amongst middle-and upperclass women in the late nineteenth century.

These cures, based on the misogynistic theories of a prominent nineteenth-century neurologist, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, demanded that women suffering from depression abandon all physical and mental activity while their nervous systems recuperate from the strain of everyday life. As Gilman's narrator loses her grip, it becomes apparent that mental activity and personal expression in particular are crucial to the maintenance of her sanity. Olsen, more in other works than in "I Stand Here Ironing," draws on her own life experience to assert that writing and self-expression generally are just as important as food and water. Had Emily not found her outlet in performance, she might have experienced an emotional collapse similar to the one endured by the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper."

Further Study

Faulkner, *Mara Protest and Possibility in the Writing of Tillie Olsen*, University Press of Virginia, 1993, pp. 1-34. Faulkner examines the political aspects of Olsen's work and its representation of the lives of people outside of the literary mainstream

Frye, *Joanne S Tillie Olsen: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Twayne, 1995, pp 3-36.

Explores Olsen's works and their connections to her life as well as the lives of her readers.

Orr, Elaine Neil Tillie Olsen and a Feminist Spiritual Vision, University Press of Mississippi, 1987, 193 p.

Examines Olsen's works within a feminist context.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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