

Yonnondio: From the Thirties Study Guide

Yonnondio: From the Thirties by Tillie Olsen

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Contents

Yonnondio: From the Thirties Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Chapter 1.....	3
Chapter 2.....	5
Chapter 3.....	7
Chapter 4.....	9
Chapter 5, Part 1, pp. 67-88.....	11
Chapter 5, Part 2, pp. 88-113.....	13
Chapter 6.....	15
Chapter 7.....	17
Chapter 8, Part 1, pp. 149-167.....	19
Chapter 8, Part 2, pp. 167-191.....	20
Characters.....	22
Objects/Places.....	25
Themes.....	27
Style.....	29
Quotes.....	31
Topics for Discussion.....	33



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Mazie Holbrook is a six-year-old girl who lives with her family in a coal mining town in Wyoming. Life is very hard there for the families of the miners, and the miners sometimes die in the dangerous mines.

Mazie's father, Jim, works in the mine, like almost every man in the town. One morning, he picks up thirteen-year-old Andy Kvaternick for his first day working in the mine. This is sad, because Andy's father Chris was only recently killed in a mining accident, but Chris did not want his children to have to follow in his footsteps. Instead of getting an "edjication" as his father intended, Andy begins a life of back-breaking, lung-destroying work in the darkness, hoping that the mine will not claim his life too soon. After Andy emerges from his first day of work, he can barely breathe because of the coal dust in his lungs, and he knows that he will never get the dust out.

Mazie tries to help out around the house, and tries to understand why it seems like everyone wants to cry all the time. She helps with cooking, and takes care of her three younger siblings. Sometimes she lies in the stinking yard of their shack, pondering all the things she knows, and thinking about the nature of life. Lately, things have been getting worse, with Jim always angry and hitting his wife, Anna, and the children, and Anna deals with it by also hitting the children. One night, when Jim angrily comes home before going to the bar, Mazie decides to ask him why things are bad. She apprehensively follows her father out into the street, and when he hears her questions, he feels bad for being so mean. He buys her a sucker, and goes into the bar, leaving her outside.

As Mazie watches a beautiful sunset, crazy Sheen McEvoy approaches her. McEvoy has had his entire face blown off in a mining accident, which also left him insane. McEvoy decides that the reason the mine claims the lives of so many men is that the mine really wants a child. He picks up Mazie and goes to the mine shaft, determined to throw her in. The night watchmen sees them, and attacks McEvoy just as he throws Mazie down, and she just barely misses the mine shaft, rolling to the side. After a scuffle, McEvoy himself falls to his death down the mine shaft.

The night watchman takes Mazie to the bar, and when Pop hears about McEvoy, he is horrified. He takes Mazie home, and he and his wife, Anna, look her over, worried that McEvoy might have beaten her up or sexually abused her. Mazie seems all right, so they give her some hot whiskey, knowing that there is no real possibility of getting a doctor. Jim decides that they must leave this horrible, squalid life behind, and vows that he will start saving every penny. In the spring, the family will move away, to South Dakota, and he will try to become a farmer.



Chapter 1 Analysis

Right away, the story drops the reader into a brutal, horrifying situation. This is made all the more appalling because it is shown through the eyes of a small child, who understands little about life except squalor and misfortune. Since Mazie has no basis for comparison, she does not think of herself as being ignorant of the world, but actually thinks that she is very knowledgeable. She shows understanding beyond her years as she begins to be preoccupied with worries about death and debilitating accidents, because she knows that these things are real. Mazie thinks of her own experience as normal, and can hardly believe the rumors about the wealth of her father's boss, who has an indoor bathroom and a flush toilet.

The whistle is seen as the voice of the mine, and the miners imagine it as screaming cruelly at them. The whistle wakes them all in the morning, and Jim curses the whistle for calling him down to the bowels of the earth, to the unending blackness. Mazie also hates the whistle, as does her mother, but because, if the whistle sounds during the day, it means that someone has been killed or maimed in the mine. Mazie's father tells her that ghosts chase after the men in the mine, angry that their home is being invaded and excavated. When the ghosts are lucky enough to catch someone and kill him, they scream with laughter, and it sounds just like a whistle.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Since Jim and Anna Holbrook have made the decision to leave in the spring and start a new life, they must save all winter so they will have the money to move. This is hard, since they are already desperately poor. Anna begs around town and gets the superintendent's family to hire her to do some extra cleaning and washing, for fifty cents a day. She also has to try to find ways of saving money on household expenses. She makes winter coats for the children out of an old quilt, and feeds them nothing but fatback and cornmeal, and she stops using soap when she washes their clothes. Jim no longer goes to the bar on payday, but spends every evening with his family, no longer hitting his children. The kids, who are used to their parents being angry and violent, are frightened by the change in their father. He gets some extra winter work, but it is very dangerous.

One afternoon, Anna is frustrated with her crying baby, and she tells Mazie to shut the baby up. Mazie takes the baby and her little brother Will to a clearing a little ways away from the town. She lies down in the leaves and answers his questions about life. As they listen to the howling wind, the noise gets louder, until it is the screaming of the whistle, telling everyone that there has been an explosion in the mine. Everyone has been worried that this would happen, because the new man in charge of checking for gas buildups is the superintendent's nephew, who does not bother to do his job correctly. A few tired men are brought up from the mine shaft, to be received by the silent crowd waiting at the top. They know that most of the men are buried in the mine, but no one knows if the men are still alive.

When Jim emerges from the mine a few days later, still alive, he is more determined than ever to leave this life behind. He buys a very cheap, old wagon and horse, hoping to leave in March. Since the weather is too nasty in March, the family leaves in April. A few women show up to bid them goodbye, but not with envy. As the family closes up their house and leaves, only Mazie looks back.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Anna tells her children about the place that they are hoping to move to, and the life that they will live, with trees around, and with them able to see Jim during the daytime. When Will hears about this, he asks if it is a fairy story. When he and Mazie are lying in the leaves, Mazie tells Will about the fairies that she imagines live in the sky, with the wind as their words. Will seems to attribute anything he does not really understand to fairies and ghosts. This is foreshadowing, that perhaps Jim and Anna's dream is as realistic as a fairy tale. There is earlier foreshadowing that also indicates that the family's new life is doomed, just after Jim decides that they should move. As he talks to Anna over the delirious, fever-addled Mazie, telling Anna of his decision, Mazie erupts in

a burst of evil-sounding laughter. This is a sort of omen that Jim and Anna are deceiving themselves to think that they can make a better life for themselves.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

For several days, the family travels in their wagon across Wyoming and Nevada. At night, Jim pulls a canopy over the wagon, and they all sleep in the wagon. They are in high spirits, and Anna sings the whole way. Looking around at the beautiful desert scenery, and hearing her mother's happy singing, Mazie feels closer to happiness than she ever has before. The air is fresh and clean, and soft to breathe, not like the coal-dust wind left behind in Rascoe, the mining town. The ancient wagon makes a happy jingling noise, and Mazie's parents are full of laughter.

When Nellie, the horse, stops suddenly, it is all Jim can do to finally get the horse moving. Then Nellie takes off in a run, with the wagon careening behind her, and Jim can barely catch her. Then, of course, she refuses to budge, prompting a farmer nearby to suggest that they get a mule, because it would be less stubborn. When they tempt Nellie with grass on the end of a stick, the horse runs at full speed for several hours, making the family clutch the sides of the wagon and laugh some more.

After the fourth day or so of traveling, it begins to get cold, and by nightfall, it is snowing hard. Soon the road is so covered with snow that Jim must use the fences on either side of the road as his only guide for where to go. They look in vain for a farmhouse where they can stay the night. The horse suddenly stops, because one of the wagon wheels has sunk into a big puddle, hidden by the snow. Jim lies under the wagon and manages to pick up one corner, and Mazie rolls a stone under the wheel, to brace it. They move on, and come to a hotel, or at least what passes for a hotel in the middle of nowhere. The kind couple there take care of the family for two nights, since the roads are impassible in the morning.

Finally the family gets moving again. They come to farm country, amazed by the beauty, and observe a farmer far away, plowing his field. The family is so excited, looking forward to their new life, and nothing seems impossible. Anna imagines school for the children, Jim working near her, white bread, and linen tablecloths. That night, they arrive at their new farm. Mazie immediately falls asleep on a mattress in the wagon, and Jim unloads the one bed that they have brought, setting it up in the barn for the night. The children have sweet dreams.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The tone of this chapter is in sharp contrast to that of the previous two chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on hopelessness, on poverty, on squalor, and on fear. The Holbrooks seem to have nothing good in their lives in Wyoming. They wake up in the mornings cursing about what they must face that day. Now everything is different. In many ways, the family has less now than they did before, but they feel that they are on



the threshold of something wonderful. It is a chapter of transition, beginning just as the family leaves Rascoe behind, and ending just when they arrive at their new home. There is mixed foreshadowing, since there is the beauty of the country and the love of the family, but there are also potential disasters, such as when the wagon gets stuck, and there is no one to help. The Holbrooks do not know what the future holds, and neither does the reader.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Mazie and her family love their farm. The corn comes up swiftly, the chickens lay eggs, and the cow gives milk. Everything is beautiful, and they are full of hope despite their neighbor Benson's warning. Benson tells Jim that it is impossible to make a living doing tenant farming, where the family rents the farm from the landowner. Jim ignores his naysaying. Mazie and Will start school for the first time, and the teacher is horrified that neither of them can read. They both start out in first grade, but soon learn to read and are promoted to second grade. They love learning all that they can, which makes Anna proud. Seeing the other school children, Mazie is ashamed of her poor clothing for the first time in her life.

One night, Mazie is stargazing, when her neighbor, Old Man Caldwell, joins her, and he tells her about astronomy and constellations. A few weeks later, Anna and Jim are very upset, and arguing because, somehow, after a year of farming, Jim actually owes the bank money. The bank wants to take the horse and cow, and several of the neighbors are also losing their barns or livestock to the bank. Upset, Mazie runs outside, ignoring the cornstalks cutting into her bare feet. She finds herself at the Caldwell house, and when she goes inside, finds that Old Man Caldwell is very sick. Old Man Caldwell tries to share his most important life lessons with Mazie, preparing her for a hard life, but he can not find the right words. He gives Mazie several books, telling her that she will certainly want to read them someday. A week later, Old Man Caldwell dies, but Jim takes the books to town and sells them.

When winter comes, school closes down, and the family has nothing to do but sit in the kitchen around the stove. Anna is pregnant again, and she neglects her housekeeping, so that the kitchen gets messier and messier. Jim starts to go stir-crazy, and starts arguments with the kids. One afternoon, they discover a brood of chicks born in the winter, and so they put the chicks in the warm oven to keep them from freezing. When Jim comes back into the kitchen after several hours, he realizes that the family has forgotten about the chicks, and they have burned alive in the oven. Jim punches Anna and storms out, and does not come back for ten days.

One night, Jim wakes Mazie, telling her that Anna is having a baby, and Mazie needs to help with the delivery. He leaves with the other children, leaving Mazie terrified and confused. Eventually, some other women come to help with the birth, but Mazie is traumatized by the experience. Jim decides that as soon as Anna recovers from the birth, the family will have to move on, since they can not make a living on the farm. He hopes he will be able to find a job at a slaughterhouse in a nearby town.



Chapter 4 Analysis

Old Man Caldwell is the first person that Mazie comes into contact with who has been educated. He is delighted with the wonder about the world that Mazie displays, and admonishes her not to lose that wonder, but to build upon it with knowledge, so that she can learn to understand the world. As he lies dying, he is unable to explain to her all that he wants her to learn, so he gives her his books, wanting her to have the same knowledge that he has. One of the books is a book of Greek mythology, which he has already shared with her when telling her about constellations. When Jim sells these books for fifty cents, Anna is very angry, because he has sold off the hope for a better future for Mazie.



Chapter 5, Part 1, pp. 67-88

Chapter 5, Part 1, pp. 67-88 Summary

The Holbrooks move into a small house in a big city. Since the slaughterhouses are the primary business in town, a horrible smell of rotting meat and death hangs over the entire town, filling everyone's lungs with a stench that makes them nauseous. There is no getting away from the smell, and the children complain that everything smells like vomit. Although the house is nicer than any the Holbrooks have lived in before, with running water and a flush toilet, the house is very small, with trash in the yard, and crowded onto a slum street. Anna tries to scrub the walls of the house clean, and make it a nice place to live, but the walls just get smokier and uglier, and in the face of such poverty and filth, she goes into a deep depression. She can hardly put any effort into taking care of her children or cooking or cleaning, and the house is always a disgusting mess.

Jim cannot find a job at the slaughterhouse, but he does find one digging a sewer line. Once again, he must dig underground all day, but now, instead of breathing coal dust all day, he wades through deep, cold water, in clothes that are soaked. He works very hard, but the boss always demands more work, and threatens to fire the men. Jim hates his job, and hates knowing that he cannot quit, because he has to support his family. Even so, he acknowledges that it is worth it, because he really loves them.

The family goes to visit some old friends, Alex and Else Bedner. They have not seen the couple in many years, and Else is shocked at the changes in Anna, who has aged greatly from the years of childbearing and poverty. The Bedners claim to have troubles, but their house is very luxurious to the Holbrooks. This house is located in another area of town, so that they rarely get a breeze from the slaughterhouse. The Holbrooks can hardly face the thought of going back to the smell. The Bedners complain that they have tried for many years to have children, but they have none. Although they are very friendly, Else hurts Mazie's feelings by commenting on how homely Mazie has become.

Everyone in the family is miserable, each in their own way. Mazie quickly learns to hate her new school, where other children pick on her, and she gets in trouble. Willie gets very rough and wild, influenced by the other children who play in the streets. Little Ben and Jimmie do not really understand what is wrong with the world, but they know that they hate the smell, and they are usually hungry, and no one is ever happy. Baby Bess just gets skinnier and skinnier, never getting adequate nourishment from Anna's milk. Mazie alone is lost in a fantasy world, where it is still June, and they are still on the farm. She goes around in a daze, doing what is asked of her in a trance, totally unaware of reality. Once in a while, she becomes momentarily aware of the life that she now occupies, and the reality is so horrible that she recoils in terror.



Chapter 5, Part 1, pp. 67-88 Analysis

In moving to the slaughterhouse town, it is like the Holbrooks have gone backward. Once again, the air chokes them, and they live in squalor. Once again, Jim must live the life of a mole, rarely seeing the sun, buried underground all day. Once again, there is not enough to eat. Jim and Anna are aware of the way in which they have gone backward, and it makes their daily efforts seem useless. Jim tries his best, but Anna has given up, and does not bother to try to make the house into a better place to be. Once she has scrubbed the walls, only to find that they look even dirtier, she accepts defeat.

The contrast between the Holbrooks and the Bedners is sad. The Bedners firmly feel that their lives would be complete if only they could have some children, but they cannot. The Holbrooks would not be in such bad shape if they did not have so many children to take care of. It is clear that the Holbrooks would all like to trade places with the Bedners. Mrs. Bedner is fat, but all of the Holbrooks have the thinness that comes from living on the brink of starvation.



Chapter 5, Part 2, pp. 88-113

Chapter 5, Part 2, pp. 88-113 Summary

One day, the horror that is her life comes crashing down on Mazie, and she is unable to shut it out. Everywhere she looks, she sees pain, and her mind swims as she tries to make sense of the terrible sensations all around her. She begins to hallucinate, connecting all the bad things she now sees with the terror of being picked up by Sheen McEvoy, and her fear of his burnt-up face. Mazie gives her mother her report card, which is filled with "F's." Anna barely even notices. Mazie does her best to help out and get supper ready for the family.

Anna gets further and further from reality, and she is very sick not just mentally, but physically too. She passes many hours sitting senseless in a chair, often falling asleep sitting up, and it takes a lot of effort for any of the children to wake her. Even Baby Bess's screaming does not get through. Anna tries to take care of everything, but every time she tries to even stand up, she is on the verge of fainting, and she is in a lot of pain. Little Ben has to take care of himself, and also of Jimmie, who is just a toddler. Ben's finger is throbbing with a huge splinter, but there is no one who pays enough attention to him to help him with it. One night, after a dinner that Jim compares to sewage (cooked by Mazie), Ben shows his father his finger, and Jim is aghast that Anna has not treated the splinter. While Jim scolds her, Anna prepares hot water for Ben's finger, but then she thoughtlessly plunges his finger into the scalding water, and holds it there as he screams. Jim knocks the water out of her hand, and storms out. Anna faints on the floor.

The terrified children try to wake Anna up, but are unable to, and finally a hysterical Ben manages to get a neighbor to come. Ms. Kryckszi, the neighbor, helps wake up Anna and cleans up the kitchen, then rocks Bess to sleep, muttering angrily about the conditions in the house. She leaves them all sleeping. Hours later, Jim comes home very drunk. Mazie listens in terror as Jim rapes Anna in the next room. Mazie tries turning to Will for comfort, but is pushed away. She knows that something is wrong, and goes into the kitchen, to find Anna unconscious on the floor, with blood everywhere. Eventually a doctor comes, and he says that Anna has had a miscarriage, brought on by sex and a fall. He is shocked that Anna has been able to get pregnant when Bess is only four months old. The doctor says that Anna and Bess are both very sick, and need a lot of medicine, medical care, and better food. Jim does not know what to do, since all of these things are absolutely out of reach. He tries his best to comfort his family, gathering Mazie onto his lap, next to the fire.

Chapter 5, Part 2, pp. 88-113 Analysis

When Jim is thinking about his job, he compares it to a god that he must worship. He notices the brash, proud attitude of his coworker Tracy, who decides to quit when



conditions become unreasonable, saying that a man can only stand for so much and still be a man. In Jim's mind, Tracy does not understand about sacrificing to the "God Job" because he does not need to support a family, and he has not yet faced the reality of longterm unemployment. However, Jim sees The Job as a harsh, demanding master, which will continue taking more and more. He does not think he has any choice but to keep his family in this harmful environment, because he has to keep his job.

Various people who see into the daily life of the Holbrooks judge them for the situation that they are in. When the children get Ms. Kryckszi to help out, she does a lot of the housework that Anna should have done, and pays attention to Bess, who has been neglected a lot. She does not sing lullabies to Bess, but old songs from her home country, expressing her anger, either at Anna, for allowing things to get so bad, or at Jim, for not taking better care of his family. The doctor is also judgmental, seeing the family as a group of animals. He thinks to himself that the only things that people like Jim can think about are food, sex, and alcohol. The doctor does not realize that Jim would gladly make things better for his family, and that Jim has trouble thinking about other things, because he is so worried about making enough money to support them.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Anna is in a coma-like state for several days. Else Bedner comes over each day to help out, nursing her, and cleaning house, and taking care of the children. In the evenings, Ms. Kryckszi, the neighbor, comes over and helps out for a few hours too. Else tries to get Mazie and Will to help her, since summer vacation has just started, but they keep running off and playing instead. Since the doctor says that Baby Bess needs formula to drink, so she can gain weight, Anna is not allowed to breastfeed Bess. When she hears Bess crying, her breasts swell up painfully with the milk she can not give the baby, so Bess is taken out into the tiny yard in a basket, so that her crying will not disturb Anna.

When Anna finally wakes, she tries to get up and return to mothering and housekeeping, but her mind is detached from reality. She can barely speak, and has short bursts of energy, in which she tries to make some order of the disgusting hovel that they live in. Else helps Anna go to a public clinic for medical treatment. There are a lot of posters in the clinic, proclaiming that filth spreads disease, and that cleanliness is important to health conditions. After this, Anna is set on the idea of cleaning up her house, so that her children will not get diseases from the dirt. This is a good idea, since the house is filthy, with dirty dishes piled high, no soap, rotten food on the table surrounded by flies, and untended urine stains. Unfortunately, Anna needs to rest after her miscarriage and fever, and has no strength.

One day Else arrives to find Anna trying to do laundry. Else scolds her and tells her to get back to bed, but Anna points out how terrible everything in the house is, so Else agrees to help Anna. Mazie and Will turn up, and Anna chastises Mazie for not helping out with the housework and childcare. Anna wanders into the children's tiny bedroom, and tries to find a clean outfit that she can dress little Jimmie in. Anna is dismayed at how old and beat-up all the clothes are, practically beyond mending. Anna decides that soon she will start taking in laundry, to make extra money. When Jim comes home from work that night, he finds Anna sitting on the back steps, supervising as Will hoes the ground to plant a garden. Although Jim promised that they would have a vegetable garden, he has never gotten around to making it. When Jim sees how close Anna seems to another breakdown, he stops insisting that she go back to bed, and agrees to buy some seeds on his next payday. Anna breaks down and asks him what will become of their children.

Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter is a portrait in despair. Anna wants so much to take care of her children and make a better life for them, but her efforts are not enough. Anna tries to do housework and pay attention to the children, but the poverty and her ill health are combined with her own insanity to defeat her. Her situation is so horrifying to her that



her mind goes, and she cannot focus enough to do anything about her circumstances. On top of this, she does not have the physical strength to take care of her home and family. Hypothetically, Mazie and Will could help her out, but, being children who have also suffered trauma, they run away and take any pleasure they can. Anna has sacrificed everything she is to one pregnancy after another, and she has so little left to give. At one point, Anna notices an old photograph of herself holding Will when he was a baby, both of them smiling into the camera. Rather than looking at the photo and recalling happier times, when she could do a much better job taking care of her children, she grimaces and leaves the room. It is as though, since she knows how that mother and baby are going to turn out, she cannot bear to think of how wrong she was to have high hopes. In the same way, she is gripped with terror, thinking about what will become of her children. She understands now that she cannot make a better life for them. She is tortured by this knowledge.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Whenever Jim is at work, he worries about the situation at home. As bad as conditions of his job get, he puts up with everything because he needs all the money he can get to take care of his family. In the evenings, when he goes home, he never knows what Anna will be like. Some evenings, she insists that he rest after his hard day. Other times, she is resentful that he does not help her more, or she just ignores everything around her, in a daze. The condition of the house gets worse and worse. Mazie and Will run wild, and Anna does not have the strength to control them. Besides, she wants to let them be children. Anna sometimes enters a detached state, where she does not really seem to be there mentally. She never loses her terror of the invisible forces of disease that she read about on the clinic posters.

Anna gets her first laundry customer. When Jim hears about this, he tells her that she should not be taking in laundry, because she is already weak and sick, and neglecting the housework and taking care of the children. Anna answers that it is not an issue of having the strength, or taking care of her other duties, but of having no choice about doing something for extra money. As the days go by, Anna neglects the housework even more, but simply spends all her time in the yard. She moves her washtub outside, and the family eats on the back steps. Anna can not stand to be cooped up in the filthy, airless house.

Since there is so little money for food, the family eats nothing but potatoes and flour, and a little lard. Anna decides that they should go foraging for dandelion greens. Leaving the baby with a neighbor, Anna, Mazie, Ben and Jimmie set out to find dandelions that they can eat. They find very few that are edible, and they wander quite far. Mazie notices that people are staring at them, and she tries to quiet her brothers, and make her mother turn back. Anna seems to be off in another world, a world of happiness and springtime, and she does not hear Mazie. They stop in a pretty field that is the yard of a burned-out house, and spend some happy time sitting in the shade of a tree, picking flowers. Anna seems to have slipped away back to her girlhood and happiness, and Mazie clutches her hand to bring her back to reality.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Although she does not have the strength, Anna recognizes her deep need to do anything she can to care for her family. When they play in the vacant yard of the burned house, it is the last time Anna can indulge in the happiness of youth and hope. She is momentarily carefree in her daydream, but only because she has forgotten all of her problems. Mazie needs Anna to be aware of her problems, so she can do something about them. It is as though Mazie and Anna have traded places. Recently, Mazie was unaware of her surroundings, believing herself to be on the farm. In the vacant lot,

Mazie is tempted to imagine that they are on the farm, but she tells herself that there is no point. Mazie has to face reality because Anna is lost in a fantasy world. When Anna decides to come back to her responsibilities and burdens, she knows that she will never again be able to indulge in dreaming and hoping for the future.



Chapter 8, Part 1, pp. 149-167

Chapter 8, Part 1, pp. 149-167 Summary

As June turns into July, things start to get better. Jim gets hired on at Cudahy's slaughterhouse, so he will be making a few cents more per hour. He is very enthusiastic and optimistic, and tells Anna that she need not take in any more laundry. He buys a whole bunch of fireworks, and the family has a big Independence Day celebration in the yard. The garden starts to produce a little bit of fruits and vegetables, so the family's diet is more varied. Anna regains some of her strength, and manages to do some of the housework again. Jim secretly plans to buy her a second-hand sewing machine.

Anna takes the children to the public library, excited about sharing with them the world that books make available. However, since they have already been told by their teachers that they are stupid, they have little interest in the books, and would rather go to the movies. Mazie and Will play all over the city streets and in the dump. Sometimes they steal ice from the ice trucks, but when Mazie is doing it, all the boys make fun of her and say that they can see her underwear. Mazie has a friend named Ginella, who stages elaborate dramas in the dump, on her territory. Ginella only allows Mazie to join her when Mazie brings some old item that can be used as a costume piece. Ginella acts out movies she has seen, most of which are new to Mazie, who can rarely afford to go to a show.

As the heat of August descends upon the town, things are not so good. In addition to being a disgusting, loud place of fast, back-breaking work, the slaughterhouse is hellishly hot, and Jim must work in a room that is 112 degrees Fahrenheit. Ben develops asthma, and in the hot summer nights, he cannot breathe. It gets so hot that Will and Mazie go outside to sleep in the yard, but they get covered with mosquito bites.

Chapter 8, Part 1, pp. 149-167 Analysis

Jim's new job is such an important step up for the family. The slaughterhouse job is the reason that they moved to this terrible town, and now there will be more money. Jim wants to lavish money on his family, to make up for the things they have had to put up with. However, his job turns out to be hell. The only way he can give his family the chance to really be people is to sell off his own humanity to his employer, becoming a part of a machine for eight hours a day. What seemed like such a life-changing step up has not led somewhere good. When the family is enjoying their Fourth of July celebration, Mazie contemplates their happiness, and wonders what bad thing is about to happen next. At a young age, she has already learned that life is filled with catastrophes, and blessings often do not last.



Chapter 8, Part 2, pp. 167-191

Chapter 8, Part 2, pp. 167-191 Summary

Mazie wakes up in the oppressive heat, feeling sick. Anna wants her to help out with the canning in the kitchen. Mazie gets permission to go play for a while, and she goes to the dump to see if she can find any new treasures. She tries to play with Ginella and her friends, but they call her "Miss Ugly" and tell her to go away. Soon Mazie encounters Erina, a girl who is deformed and epileptic. Erina wants to hang out with Mazie, but Mazie finds it hard to look at Erina's bruises and wounds. She realizes that Erina also feels like "Miss Ugly." Mazie wanders home, half-fainting from heat stroke. Meanwhile, Ginella wishes she could really live the glamorous life she imagines for herself. In reality, she has to go wash dishes in her aunt's restaurant, and she is ashamed of her cracked, red hands. Erina wishes that she could go home, but she is afraid of the beating that she knows is waiting for her, since she is her family's scapegoat.

All afternoon, the oldest four Holbrook children sleep on the floor of the kitchen, as Anna finishes up the canning. In between her boiling and canning, she tends to asthmatic Ben, and Baby Bess, who has a heat rash. Sometimes, she has to can with one hand, as she holds a fussing baby with the other. Going out into the yard, Anna is sad to see her little garden dying in the heat, and she feels bad about not taking better care of it. There is not much water for the garden, and Anna knows that all over the country, farmers are going to have a scarce harvest.

Jim suffers through a hellish day at work, with several people passing out in the heat, including a pregnant woman. The conditions at the slaughterhouse are very dangerous, and the workers laugh mockingly at the "SAFETY" signs posted everywhere. Any workers who faint or have a heart attack are yelled at and fined for their laziness. When Jim gets home, he pours buckets of water on himself, unable to speak. In the evening light, Baby Bess bangs a jar lid on the table, and she is delighted to have learned that she can make a difference in the world. Her new baby discovery seems to proclaim new hope into the world.

Chapter 8, Part 2, pp. 167-191 Analysis

In this section, many of the characters seem torn between hope and hopelessness. They have finally found something that could be considered a reward for hard work, but their pitiful gleanings will only make them happy for a short period of time. Jim's new job, which brought such hope, turns out to be harmful, and the pregnant woman represents the way the industry destroys new things which are being created. In the same way, the garden that Anna was so hopeful for, is dying for lack of water. Even though Bess is overjoyed to have found some way to interact with the world, banging a lid on a table will not always make her happy. She will learn soon that life often snatches

away hope. Jim and Anna keep going each day, because they have no alternative. The life of such a poor family is a never-ending cycle.



Characters

Mazie Holbrook appears in Every Chapter

Mazie is the main character, and the oldest of the Holbrook children. She is six years old at the beginning of the book, and eight at the end. When she is six, Mazie thinks of herself as very capable and knowledgeable about the world. In reality, she is quite ignorant, knowing nothing of life outside of a tiny mining town. Nonetheless, she has already learned about working hard, since she often helps her mother take care of the other children. As she starts to understand what a frightening place the world is, she asks her parents why bad things happen to them. Mazie is curious about the world around her, and proud when she learns to read at the country school. Later, after the family has moved to the slaughterhouse town, Mazie withdraws into herself, living in a fantasy world on a farm. Lost in an urban education system, she quickly falls behind at school, and her teachers tell her how stupid she is. Mazie begins to feel that she is ugly and shameful, and she wishes she could hide her ugly, ragged clothing. As she comes to terms with the rough social dynamics of city children, Mazie no longer helps out at home, as she is horrified by the situation there.

Anna Holbrook appears in Every Chapter

Anna is married to Jim, and she keeps getting pregnant. Anna was raised without much education, and married Jim young. She desperately wants a better life for her children, and wants them all to get an education. Anna tries so hard to take care of her children, but she has so little energy left that she does a bad job. When Jim beats her, she absent-mindedly beats the children. Sometimes, Anna has trouble paying any attention to what is going on around her, and she neglects her children terribly, unable to summon the mental or physical energy to take care of them. After so much poverty and stress, she is half crazy. Anna is tortured by the horrifying details of her squalid life, and when she looks around at her disgusting house, or at her children begging for medical care or food, she does not know how to begin solving her problems. After seeing posters at a health clinic, she becomes terrified of germs, sure that her children are going to get diseases, and it will be her fault for not cleaning. Anna so desperately wants her children to be happy, but she has no idea how to create a good life for them.

Jim Holbrook appears in Every Chapter

Jim is Anna's husband, and Mazie's father. He works various back-breaking, dangerous jobs to support his huge family, but he never seems to get ahead.



Will Holbrook appears in Every Chapter

Willie is Mazie's little brother, about two years younger than she is. In the slaughterhouse town, Willie becomes uncontrollable, running wild with his friends and being mean to his siblings.

Ben Holbrook appears in Every Chapter

Ben is the third Holbrook child, who gets neglected a lot, often cared for by Mazie. Ben has severe asthma.

Jimmie Holbrook appears in Every Chapter

In the earlier chapters, Jimmie is simply known as "the baby." Later, he turns out to have a beautiful, pure singing voice.

Bess Holbrook appears in Chapters 4-8

Baby Bess is delivered at home, with Mazie's terrified help. She is a very sick baby, because Anna is too sick and weak to take care of her properly, and Anna's milk is not nutritious enough.

Bess Caldwell appears in Chapter 4

Bess is the Holbrooks' neighbor when they live on their tenant farm. She helps out with the delivery of Baby Bess.

Old Man Caldwell appears in Chapter 4

Elias Caldwell is Bess Caldwell's father, and Mazie's stargazing companion. He teaches Mazie about astronomy, and when he dies, he tells Bess to give Mazie some of his books.

Sheen McEvoy appears in Chapter 1

Sheen McEvoy is a man who had his face blown off in a mining accident. The accident also makes him crazy, and he tries to kill Mazie before he falls to his death.



Ms. Kryckszi appears in Chapters 5-8

Ms. Kryckszi is the Holbrooks' neighbor in the slaughterhouse town. She helps out when Anna is too sick to care for her children.

Else Bedner appears in Chapters 5-8

Else is an old friend of Jim and Anna's. She desperately wants children, but is unable to have any. As a result, she has a lot more money than the Holbrooks.

Erina appears in Chapter 8

Erina is an epileptic, crippled, deformed girl whose family beats her. Mazie hates to look at Erina, but Mazie is kind to her.

Ginella appears in Chapter 8

Ginella is a twelve-year-old girl who puts on dramatic games in the dump. She only plays with girls who bring her costume pieces.



Objects/Places

Rascoe, Wyoming appears in Chapters 1-2

Rascoe is a small mining town where the Holbrooks live before they set out to become farmers. The conditions in the mine are very dangerous.

Zell, South Dakota appears in Chapters 3-4

Zell is a farming town that the Holbrooks settle near. It is good farm country, with good people.

The Farm appears in Chapters 3-8

Although the family only lives on the farm for a single year, it is the place where they are happy. Later, Mazie convinces herself that they never left, because she does not want to face reality.

The Slaughterhouse Town appears in Chapters 5-8

The slaughterhouse town, or "packingtown," as it is called, is a disgusting place totally dominated by the stinking slaughterhouses. The Holbrooks desperately try to get away from the smell.

The Dump appears in Chapter 8

The children of the slaughterhouse town have nowhere to play except the streets and the city dump. They scavenge whatever they can sell or play with from the trash.

The Stars appears in Chapter 4

Mazie's first exposure to education is when Old Man Caldwell explains to her what stars really are. She loves to think about them, and in the slaughterhouse town, she strains to see the stars through the choking sky.

The Country School appears in Chapter 4

Mazie and Will are excited about learning, and they learn to read at the country school. They are quickly promoted.



The City School appears in Chapters 5-7

Mazie feels lost at the city school, where children are mean to her, and she gets in trouble. Her teachers tell her she is stupid, and sure enough, she flunks second grade.

Cudahy's Slaughterhouse appears in Chapter 8

Jim finally is able to get hired on at Cudahy's slaughterhouse, where working conditions are deplorable. The "SAFETY" signs all over the plant are a mockery, since working there would make anyone sick.

The Mine appears in Chapters 1-3

Jim calls the mine where he works "the bowels of the earth." He hates crawling under the ground, in the darkness, and there is a very real danger of death.

The Health Clinic appears in Chapter 6

After Anna's miscarriage, she takes Baby Bess to a public health clinic. There are many signs proclaiming that filth breeds disease, which horrifies Anna when she realizes how dirty her own house is.



Themes

Poverty

Poverty is not just the theme of "Yonnonidio." The book is practically written on pages of poverty, bound with need and want, and written in the language of poverty. The Holbrooks are so poor that it influences everything in their lives, and they can never forget it. Jim has to work long hours, not just at jobs that he hates, but at jobs that are likely to kill him. Even though Anna is occupied full-time just trying to take care of the house and children, she finds it necessary to take in laundry, or do extra cleaning for wealthier people, just to have enough money to keep some food on the table. The family's diet tends to contain two food items at any given time. Anna and the children are often sick, but there is no money for medicine. The family is trapped in a cycle of poverty: they do not have the resources to seek out better opportunities, and they must use whatever they have available now, rather than save anything for the future. They are tormented by the thought that there might be a better life for them, if only they can spend even less money. When they decide that they have no future but death in the mining town, it is a colossal task to try to save the money necessary to move, since they are already penniless. Anna must find a way to "Somehow to skimp off of everything that had long ago been skimmed on, somehow to find more necessities the body can do easiest without," (Chapter 2, p. 23). Unfortunately, since the Holbrooks cannot afford birth control (even if it were easily available in the 1920s), they just keep having children, which costs more and more money. There seems to be no way out.

Motherhood and Sacrifice

Anna's life is consumed by her motherhood. One pregnancy follows another, so close together that a doctor is horrified, and by the age of six, Mazie knows how to diaper her siblings. When Anna is younger, with only two babies, she looks happily into the future. Once she has five children, she can hardly look into the present. Once Anna becomes a mother, she is constantly motivated to take care of her brood, even though this task gets harder and harder as the years go by. Anna is tortured by her desire to provide a good life for her children, and yet not even being able to feed them properly. She gives and gives all she can, so that there is nothing left for herself, but it is not enough. When Anna's milk turns out not to be nutritious enough for her baby, it is a concrete representation of this. Motherhood is shown as a terrifying force that may claim life, as Mazie tries to forget the night that she helped deliver Baby Bess, and later when Mazie finds Anna having a miscarriage in the kitchen. Afterward, when Anna keeps trying to come out of her coma, the task seems impossible because of the family's poverty. "It was that she felt so worn, so helpless; that it loomed gigantic beyond her, impossible ever to achieve, beyond any effort or doing of hers: that task of making a better life for her children to which her being was bound," (Chapter 6, p. 127). Since she is a mother, Anna wrings herself out, and then wrings some more, finding strength to give more, simply because she has to. Although she is so tired she can barely stand, Anna says to



herself, "You know if you set down you'll never make yourself get up again," (Chapter 8, Part 2, p. 186). It has been so long since Anna has attended to her own needs, that it does not even occur to her anymore.

Hopelessness

The Holbrooks keep striving, trying to create a better life for themselves, always hoping that the future will be better. Jim works terrible, dangerous jobs so that he might make a little bit more, because the children are an investment in the future. Anna desperately wants her children to have a better life than she and Jim do, insisting that they should get an "edjication," and allowing them to go play when she really needs their help at home. Even when terrible things befall the family, they still look to the future, planting a vegetable garden. Unfortunately, it seems that all of their hope is for naught, since nothing turns out the way they hope. When a neighbor gives Mazie a set of classic books, "Mazie never got the books—Jim sold them for half a dollar when he got to town, though Anna cursed him for it," (Chapter 4, p. 55). Jim is more concerned with the immediate use of half a dollar, than the education Mazie needs. Although Mazie gets a good start at the country school, a year later she is flunking out. The vegetable garden, started in high hopes, dries up in August, with the ground cracking around it.

Perhaps the most literal examples of future hope being destroyed, are those of young things being born. While Anna is pregnant, a hen lays a clutch of winter eggs, which is an example of planning for the future at precisely the wrong time. Although the family incubates the baby chicks in the oven, they forget about the birds until after the chicks have baked alive. This is a bad omen, since Anna is pregnant. Later, after that baby is born, Anna has a miscarriage before anyone even knows she is pregnant again. As a final, sad image of pregnancy, there is a pregnant woman working in the deplorable conditions of the slaughterhouse. When a pipe bursts and scalds the workers with burning hot steam, the woman faints and has to be carried out. In the explosion, a sign reading "SAFETY" gets stuck to the woman's belly, ironically.



Style

Point of View

The point of view shifts quite a bit throughout the book. The story is seen through the eyes of various characters, including Mazie, Anna, and Jim. The narration is usually third-person, but often first- or second-person, and sometimes it shifts without warning, so that it does not seem like the perceptions of just one character or narrator. When it is first-person, the character telling the story does not appear to be aware of a narrative flow, but is just living their daily life. When it is second-person, the narrator either treats the reader like just another poor character in the story, or speaks in a stilted manner to the reader, calling attention to the reader's distance from the pain and poverty of the story. Most of the time, the point of view seems to be that of someone who has grown up in the Holbrooks' situation, still living with day-to-day poverty. Sometimes, however, it shifts to the viewpoint of an educated, cultured author, who is outside the story, and who pretends to be unmoved by the sad events. Part of the theme of the book seems to be how Mazie has a very limited point of view, because she is so young. Mazie really wants to learn about the world, but most of what she learns is so painful that she withdraws into herself, and tries not to see (or smell) anything around her.

Setting

The first part of the book takes place in a tiny mining town called Rascoe, Wyoming. The whole town is dominated by the mine, and everywhere the air smells of coal dust. The miners and their families live in shacks, and only the superintendent's family has a bathroom. The mine itself is a terrible place, darker than night, and too cramped to stand up in. Anytime there is an accident in the mine, the whistle shrieks, and so everyone in the town is always on edge, waiting to hear the whistle. The only entertainment available is the bar, where the miners get drunk on payday.

The Holbrooks move to a farm, which is paradise as far as they are concerned. The air is sweet, and there are trees, and the children can finally run and play without being surrounded by filth. They make a lot of friends in the community of Zell, South Dakota, but the system of tenant farming only functions to impoverish the family more. Later, Mazie constantly imagines that she is back at the farm, which is the only place where she has ever known happiness.

Finally, the Holbrooks move to a town dominated by a slaughterhouse, the main business in town. The smell of the slaughterhouse is inescapable, and its nauseating stench makes it hard to even breathe. Everything about this town is unpleasant, from the traffic noises, to the trash everywhere, to the ugly attitudes of the children running wild.



Although the title of the book is "Yonnonidio: From the Thirties," this means that it was written in the 1930s. It takes place in the 1920s, although much of the subject matter became commonplace for many people during the Great Depression (in the 1930s).

Language and Meaning

The title "Yonnonidio" is a reference to a poem by Walt Whitman. "Yonnonidio" means a lament for the lost. In the poem "Yonnonidio," Whitman refers to the aborigines, who are lost, but Tillie Olsen uses the word to describe the despair and hopelessness of the Holbrook family. What is lost are the hopes and dreams of prosperity. The title also refers to the fact that this is an unfinished novel. Olsen started writing the book in the 1930s, but never finished it. Many years later, in the 1970s, she happened to find some of her rough drafts, scattered among her old papers, and decided to publish what she had started. Some portions were never found, so no one knows what ending Olsen intended for the Holbrooks. In this way, the novel itself is something that has been lost, and will never be recovered.

The language of the book is usually the uncultured, uneducated dialect of very poor rural folks. Whenever a character is speaking or thinking, the words are ungrammatical, unpunctuated, and poorly spelled, in order to reflect the way they talk. Once in a while, Olsen steps outside the action, and addresses the reader directly. In these instances, the language is artful and poetic, obviously the writing of someone who is educated. This heightens the contrast between the way the reader probably talks, and the way the characters talk.

Structure

As a result of the way "Yonnonidio" was written, it has an unusual structure. The final book was assembled from many scattered rough drafts, and some parts are missing, so it does not flow like a novel from logical beginning to logical end. The parts are basically arranged in order, but tend to be related more by theme than by plot. The first three chapters introduce the reader to the Holbrook family, primarily from Mazie's point of view. In the first two chapters, the family decides that they have no future in the mining town, and prepare to leave. Chapter 3 follows the family through their transition, with them arriving at the farm at the end. Chapter 4 takes place at the farm, and this is the happiest time by far. In Chapters 5 through 8, the family is still chipping away at existence, and they have moved to the slaughterhouse town. In Chapter 7, the children and Anna snatch a few happy moments, in which they imagine that they still live in the country. In Chapter 8, things seem to be looking up, with Jim getting a better job, and the garden growing, but the characters understand that things are just going to go bad again.



Quotes

"And she talks about the coal. Says it oughta be red, and let people see how they get it with blood." (Chapter 1, p. 2)

The coal dust lies too far inside; it will lie there forever, like a hand squeezing your heart, choking at your throat. (Chapter 1, p. 6)

The rats shall be your birds, and the rocks plopping in the water your music. (Chapter 1, p. 7)

The ice is melting in the iceboxes faster and faster, the melting that is the women's despair. (Chapter 8, Part 1, p. 163)

Sorrow is tongueless. Apprehension tore it out long ago. (Chapter 2, p. 30)

"Ya oughta get a mule, I reckon. They're not so stubborn." (Chapter 3, p. 34)

Voices, rising and twining, beauty curving on rainbows of quiet sound, filled their hearts heavy, welled happy tears to Mazie's eyes. (Chapter 3, p. 39)

When there are gay little girls sitting high and proud in the buggies, ribbons in their hair blowing a long streamer in the wind, shame and envy shudder over her, and she draws herself together to make herself nothing, to lose herself in the faded gray dress on her body. (Chapter 4, p. 42)

She laughs, but a kernel of worry hides under the laughter. (Chapter 4, p. 43)

"My education began after I got out of college." (Chapter 4, p. 48)

On the high window sill in the kitchen, along with a fragment of prism, is an indigo-blue ink bottle soaked and scrubbed a dozen times to get the glass clear—beautiful to Anna for the light shining through. (Chapter 8, Part 1, p. 156)

A fog of stink smothers down over it all—so solid, so impenetrable, no other smell lives beside it. (Chapter 5, Part 1, p. 67)

They sang and sang, and a longing, a want undefined, for something lost, for something never known, troubled them all. (Chapter 5, Part 1, pp. 75-76)

. . . not yet knowing a job was a straw and every man (having nothing to sell but his labor power) was the drowning man who had no choice but to hang onto it for notsodear life. (Chapter 5, Part 2, p. 89)

. . . (you didn't know hell would be this bad, did you?) (Chapter 5, Part 2, p. 91)

Heavy to take up again, being poor and a mother. (Chapter 6, p. 120)



And now your father lies beside her, stroking and kissing her hair, silently making old vows again, vows that life will never let him keep. (Chapter 6, p. 130)

A fragile old remembered comfort streamed from the stroking fingers into Mazie, gathered to some shy bliss that shone despairingly over suppurating hurt and want and fear and shamings—the harm of years. (Chapter 7, p. 145)



Topics for Discussion

Do you think the Holbrooks are trapped? How could they change their circumstances for the better?

The Holbrooks live in several different places in the book. Which do you think is the best? Which is worst?

What is really wrong with Anna Holbrook? How could her family help her in her illness?

How might the Holbrooks' lives be different if they had access to birth control?

What are some of the sacrifices that Jim and Anna make for their children? In what ways do they neglect or abuse their children?

Else is unable to have children, while Anna keeps getting pregnant. Why do the two women envy one another? Who do you think has a better life?

This novel is unfinished, so the ending is not final. How do you think it should end?

How do the different Holbrook children react to the obstacles life puts in their way? What effect does this have on their lives?

How is Jim's slaughterhouse job similar to his mining job? How are they different?