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## TILLIE OLSEN

by Abigail Martin



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# *Tillie Olsen*

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*Tillie Olsen*



## Tillie Olsen

Tillie Olsen has lived in San Francisco since the 1930s, but she is not—in the popular sense of the term—a Western writer. True, the settings for her fiction are all in the West, but she does not write of man against the elements on the frontier, of a new society growing up in raw wilderness. There are no cowboys or Indians in her work, nor are there even bitter, disillusioned settlers, borne down by bad luck and cruel weather. The West, as a region, is not important to her, as it is to Caroline Kirkland, Louise Clapp, Willa Cather, and Ruth Suckow.

Nevertheless, she has a place in the Western Writers Series, because in a figurative sense she has always faced west, always placed herself on some kind of frontier. She has been—and is—ardent in the cause of change in the thinking and attitudes of men and women. She wants to see life for everyone freer, more laden with opportunity, with a chance for growth. She is Western in that she looks to the future for a better world.

Olsen is Western not only in attitude, but also in what she writes. Many of her characters are Westerners who live in towns and cities; and from its beginnings as a region, the West has had mostly a population of town and city dwellers. She also writes about miners and sailors; and such workers are as much a part of the West as its cowboys. The “invisible Wests”—women and minorities—gain visibility in Olsen’s work. She has not tried to write another *Riders of the Purple Sage*, nor is she a regionalist in the derogatory sense in

which that term is often used; but to say that she is not Western because she fits into neither of these narrow categories is to deny to Westerners—especially to those who are women, workers, and minorities—an understanding of the full richness of their regional culture. Olsen's work transcends the regional, but it is written from the American West and about the West.

Her own life is itself material for a story very much like one she herself might write. Born in 1912 or 1913 in either Mead or Omaha, Nebraska ("no birth certificate seems to exist," she says), she is the daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants, Samuel and Ida Lerner. The second of six children, she early learned the hard facts of poverty: grinding, relentless work; longing; frustration.

The Lerner family left Czarist Russia after the 1905 rebellion, but even in the United States they never lost sight of proletarian visions. Samuel Lerner worked diligently to support his family: he was farmer, packing-house worker, painter, paperhanger. And always he was politically active, becoming State Secretary of the Nebraska Socialist Party.

In her youth the terrible Great Depression settled over the country, and Olsen had to leave school to help earn a living for the family. Not that she stopped learning. "Public libraries were my colleges," she said later. Also, "My understanding would be narrow if it came only from my own experience, if it hadn't been for books that contributed a comprehension of so many other human lives and human situations. I believe in literature. It is a great honor and pleasure to be part of that medium, to contribute to it. Also I think in this time when we have other media, literature still proves to be the one that most engages the imagination. That is,—good literature. I think you can affect people by books even more than by film, TV, dance, music—or anything else" ("A Visit with Tillie Olsen," University of Vermont, October 1972). In all her harried,

busy life she continued to read, observe, ponder, and after early training herself to be a speed reader, she read widely.

Because of her parents' activities, she met some of the most prominent socialist personalities of the time. Several stayed in the Lerner home when they came to Omaha to lecture. Because as a child she stuttered, she talked little—but listened intently.

So later, as a member of the Young Communist League, she had the knowledge, as well as the enthusiasm, to join with others in trying to solve the labor problems of the thirties. Forty years later, she looked back on the era as “a time of women acting, women working, organizing, effecting changes. And a different Left from that of the sixties—one imbued with different attitudes and consciousness about women . . .” (Sandy Boucher, “Tillie Olsen: The Weight of Things Unsaid,” *Ms.*, September 1974, p. 29).

During the thirties, while helping to organize packing-house workers in Kansas City, she was jailed. Shortly thereafter, she contracted pleurisy, which very nearly became tuberculosis.

At the time of her first baby's birth, she began writing *Yonnondio*, a novel of the Depression, of the poverty and hopelessness it engendered, and of the human reaching out for fulfillment. Part of the manuscript, entitled “The Iron Throat,” appeared in the second issue of *Partisan Review* (1934) and was much praised.

Robert Cantwell writes that after her *Partisan Review* story, the editors of two publishing houses tried to locate her. They were unsuccessful, because she was in jail, charged with vagrancy (translate: “being a Communist”) (“Literary Life in California,” *New Republic*, 22 August 1934, p. 49).

She herself wrote of the experience, which took place during the San Francisco General Strike. “It was Lincoln Steffens who commanded me to write this story. ‘People don't know,’ he informed



me, 'how they arrest you, what they say, what happens in court. Tell them. Write it just as you told me about it.' So here it is." Graphically she describes the brutality, the fanaticism, the ignorance of the policemen and judge. Questions were "ripped at us . . .," words "were lurching out of the head bull's mouth." Her bail was set at \$1,000.00.

"When I refused to answer any questions other than that I was born in Nebraska, he [the judge] suggested they investigate my sanity, only a mental case would talk like that. And he meant it . . . . Absolutely no proof was offered that I was a Communist, no one had ever seen me before, but the mere fact I was at the moment in company with some was enough to convince him" ("Thousand-Dollar Vagrant," *New Republic*, 29 August 1934, pp. 67-69).

Olsen also contributed an essay, "The Strike," and several poems to *Partisan Review*. The poem which was published in the March 1934 issue vividly describes the plight of the sweat-shop laborer, brought to Olsen's attention by an indictment made by Felipe Ibarro, in Texas. Here are the exploited Chicanos:

I want you women up north to know  
how those dainty children's dresses you buy at macy's,  
gimbels, marshall fields,  
are dyed in blood, are stitched in wasting flesh,  
down in San Antonio, "where sunshine  
spends the winter . . ."

The lines following are wrung out of an intense feeling, an almost incredible empathy. The reader winces as the poem describes how "Maria Vasques, spinster, / for fifteen cents a dozen stitches garments for children she has never had . . ."

The bitterness can be tasted:

Ambrosa Espinoza trusts in god,  
'Todos es de dio, everything is from god,'

through the dwindling night, the waxing day, she

bolsters herself up with it—

but the pennies to keep god incarnate, from ambrosa,

and the pennies to keep the priest

in wine, from ambrosa,

Ambrosa clothes god and priest with hand-made

children's dresses.

Her brother lies on an iron cot, all day and watches.

On a mattress of rags he lies,

For twenty-five years he worked for the railroad, then they

laid him off

(racked days, searching for work; rebuffs, suspicious

eyes of policemen.)

goodbye ambrosa, mebbe in dallas I find work;

desperate swing for a freight,

surprised hands, clutching air, and the wheel

goes over a leg,

the railroad cuts off as it cut off twenty-five years

of his life).

She says that he prays and dreams of another world,

as he lies there,

a heaven (which he does not know was brought to earth

in 1917, in Russia, by workers like him) . . .

And for twenty-eight hundred ladies of joy

the grotesque act

the wink—the grimace—the “feelin like it baby?” . . .

Women up north, I want you to know,

I tell you this can't last forever.

I swear it won't.

Note the attention to detail, the delicate interplay of material fact with emotion, the vivid figures of speech. This poem is a good

example of Tillie Olsen's art: emotional, yet polished.

It was followed by another poem the next month. "There Is a Lesson" is based on a news item concerning an Austrian government decree to keep children off the dangerous streets. Scornfully Olsen apostrophizes Dollfuss:

They [the children] might be diddled by the  
bullets of knowledge,

The deadly gas of revolution might enter their lungs,  
in the streets, the hazardous streets.

Some editors finally succeeded in locating Olsen. The first chapter of *Yonnondio* ("The Iron Throat") had so impressed Bennet Cerf and Donald Klopfer of Random House that they offered her a monthly stipend to turn out a finished chapter each month. She sent her baby daughter to relatives and went to Los Angeles to write. But she was unhappy separated from her own kind of people and moved about a good deal. Some times she went to various California towns for three- or four-day periods to help in the organization of farm workers. And soon she gave up her contract, going back to San Francisco.

By the time the Spanish Civil War broke out, she had married Jack Olsen, a union printer, and had started a family. (She has offered no comment on her first marriage, which produced her first child.) Characteristically, in spite of her home duties, she became involved in the protest against the war.

It was necessary that she take a job to help support the growing family: in all she had four daughters. The outside work, the mothering, the housekeeping—plus involvement in labor organizations and political campaigns—meant that there was simply no time for creative writing. *Yonnondio* was put aside.

But her desire to write was always present. She seized every moment she could—on the bus, say, ("even when I had to stand"), or

late at night after the children were in bed; during such moments she would think and make notes. She copied passages from books she could not afford to buy and tacked them up on the wall by the sink. Some passages she memorized. By such efforts she kept alive her creative spark.

For a few brief periods she did have leave of absence from her job, though never any leave of absence from her household and family responsibilities. Eventually, she found that she had repressed her desire too long, for when she finally had time for writing, it “dazed” her. Then in 1959 she was recommended for a Ford grant in literature and received it. It “came almost too late,” she says, and, “I am a partially destroyed human who pays the cost of all those years of not writing, of deferring, postponing, of doing others’ work—it’s in my body too (deafened ear from transcribing), etc.”

All those sacrifices made possible a body of work that, though small in quantity, is large in scope. Tillie Olsen displays an artistry that many a writer must envy. *Tell Me a Riddle*, a collection of four stories, came out in 1961; it has been published in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Czechoslovakia. The different stories have appeared in at least fifty anthologies. A fifth story, “Requa I,” appeared in *Best American Stories, 1971*, a volume dedicated to Olsen by the editor, Martha Foley. After the forty-year-old manuscript of *Yonnondio* was found by accident at home, the novel was published in 1974. It was followed by *Silences* in 1978.

Olsen has received many honors, and she has been much in demand for readings, talks, teaching. She has been called “The Writer’s Writer,” and as one much younger woman has said, “her writing is, for me, all that is most living in literature . . . .”

Her last book should be considered first, because in a very dramatic, very poignant way, *Silences* is Tillie Olsen. “The silences I speak of here are unnatural,” she says in the introduction, “the

unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being." And we are reminded over and over again of the basic theme: "where the gifted among women [and men] have remained mute, or have never attained full capacity, it is because of circumstances, inner or outer, which oppose the needs of creation."

*Silences* is a collection of essays, quotations, thoughts, and excerpts, in which the reader hears the voices of many women, among them Virginia Woolf, Rebecca Harding Davis, Hortense Calisher, Charlotte Brontë. Men speak, too—Thomas Hardy, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Gerard Manly Hopkins. And all the voices tell of the obstacles that can bar the way to the fulfillment of art, or to success.

So much potential wasted! Over the long, long years so much creativity stifled! How? Why? Olsen's answer is to be found in the words of dedication at the beginning: "For our silenced people, century after century their beings consumed in the hard, essential work of maintaining human life . . ." The world is full of mute Miltons, she is saying, artists who have not been allowed to realize their potentialities, or to reap any benefits from their talents, because of grim circumstances.

Poverty is one of these circumstances, and it affects both men and women. She quotes Herman Melville, whose life and creativity had to fade out in bitterness: "When a poor devil writes with duns all around him, and looking over the back of his chair, and perching on his pen and dancing in his inkstand—like the Devils about St. Anthony—what can you expect of that poor devil . . . ?" And, "I am so pulled hither and thither by circumstances. The calm, the coolness, the silent grass-growing mood in which a man ought always compose—that, I fear, can seldom be mine. Dollars damn me . . ."

Writers—serious writers—who can live by their art are few. Olsen

reports that in 1971-72 P. E. N. queried its membership, discovering that a third had not earned \$3,000.00 during the year. A half earned less than \$6,000.00, and a third earned \$10,000.00. "Published writers of good books," she observes, "if their books haven't been respectable money-makers, more and more find themselves without a publisher for their latest one. Younger writers (that is, new ones of any age) find that fewer and fewer first books are being published."

Other factors tend to choke off creativity, of course. Illness is one: who knows how much talent has been lost because of sheer physical breakdown? Family responsibilities loom large as obstacles, too. Home, spouse, children—these must come first—for both male and female artist. Needs must be met; they cannot be ignored. She tells us that "more than one woman writer" was freed to develop herself because of deaths in the family. And she points out that Emily Dickinson (lucky to have a sister and hired help) very early freed herself from all social obligations—and so became a major writer.

But perhaps the greatest obstacle of all—and Olsen makes her point very clearly—the great obstacle lies in the fact of *being a woman*. Throughout the centuries of a male-oriented civilization, she tells us, two factors have made it almost impossible for women to attain their maximum excellence and to be recognized as artists. They have not produced, have not achieved as much as men in the world of art, simply because they have been put down, denigrated, sneered at; they have been denied the opportunity to develop. The lecture "One Out of Twelve Writers Who Are Women in Our Century" is an almost passionate denunciation of the typical fate of the gifted female.

"One woman writer of achievement for every twelve men writers so ranked. Is this proof again—in this so much more favorable century—of women's innately inferior capacity for creative

achievement?" she asks. And her answer takes many pages, is studded with many examples, is shot through with pity and anger. Her answer is "No!"

Olsen's knowledge of women writers is wide; she mentions every one of note from Aphra Behn on, quoting from many so that we can experience their despair first-hand. A few of these writers flame up in anger.

For instance, she cites the male attitude, too often accepted by women: "You must choose between a family life, i.e., being a *woman*—and a life of creativity—being an *artist*." Thomas Mann's daughter once cried out at this: "No one asked Beethoven to choose—no one asked my father to choose!" And we hear Charlotte Brontë protesting that "You will, I know, keep measuring me by some standard of what you deem becoming my sex."

Then what of the sneers like Norman Mailer's comment that a "writer must have balls"? What of the universal smiling commendation, "She writes like a man"? These carry the implication that if you do write, lady, you must be "masculine," your most important thoughts expressed through male attitudes, male interpretations. And, most degrading of all, is the advice given to generations of girls: "Never let anyone—especially a man!—know you have a mind of your own."

She includes a superb essay on Rebecca Harding Davis, who may serve as an excellent example of a woman whose creativity was damped down by circumstances. This writer is obscure, to most modern readers not more than a name. Tillie Olsen makes her come alive, shows her significance today: "I owe to her life and work my understanding as writer, as insatiable reader, as feminist-humanist, as woman."

Of the frustration women know, and their sad effects, she says, "We can have literature in this country like we've never had before,

if we change the situation. We still live in a world of sex, class and race and they are terribly determining about how much expansion you can have in life . . . . Every time I appear somewhere women come to me and show me things they've worked on, and it breaks my heart—if only they could have the chance that they never will have. I'd love to see every one of them subsidized" (Kay Holmquist, *Ft. Worth Star-Telegram*, 20 April 1975).

Over the years many voices have been raised in the cause of giving women "a chance." Henry James explored the subject in *The Bostonians* (1886). Here he portrays—with typical Jamesian irony—some phases of the struggle for women's rights. The young male protagonist, answering a woman who asks if he doesn't believe in helping the human race, says, "What strikes me most is that the human race has got to bear its troubles." Whereupon she retorts, "That's what men say to women to make them patient in the position they have made for them." The heroine, eloquent in her plea for the eradication of women's great wrongs, is young and beautiful, and—unfortunately for her cause—completely Victorian in her exquisite femininity. She is ultimately overborne by the hero, a gallant Southerner who, chivalrous though he may be, is a true "macho."

Writers other than novelists have discussed the war of the sexes. Mary R. Beard gives an interesting account of the "other side." In *Women as Force in History*, she observes that many men argue that they, not women, have been the slaves of circumstance, chained to jobs in order to support their families. If they had been free, these men say, they could have accomplished great things. Furthermore, they add bitterly, "unlike aggrieved women, they could find no consolation in the thought that an amendment to the Constitution of the United States would clear away the barriers and bring their utopia into immediate realization" (New York: Macmillan, 1946, pp. 17-18).



That the theme of *Silences* is controversial may be seen in the wide range of criticism, both adverse and favorable. The *Atlantic* rather sneeringly dismisses the book in sixty words as “a discussion with more eloquence than logic.” For has not Olsen blamed literary sterility on “everything except that standard ailment known as writer’s block while quoting the lamentations of a number of writers (mostly men) who suffered no other impediment?” (September 1978, p. 96).

The *Library Journal’s* reaction is mixed: “These pieces are undigested, fragmented, provocative, and passionately felt” (Sally Mitchell, August 1978, p. 1512). *The Nation* also gives cautious half-praise: “As a lament for lost art and for the struggles of artists, *Silences* is powerful, but as an argument it is weak,” and it goes on to say that while art may be delicate and in need of “nourishment,” “there is something extreme, almost silly, in a position that demands special justice and special conditions for it.” The reviewer admits, however, that though *Silences* may be extreme in tone, it does contain “occasional riches” and she recalls having heard Olsen speak, of being moved by the “passionate concern for women and for changing the conditions that hindered them” (Joan Peters, 23 September 1978, pp. 281-82).

But Margaret Atwood’s review, appearing on page one of the *New York Times Book Review*, hails Olsen as a “unique voice,” an artist known and admired on the basis of a very small body of work, but known and admired because of the obstacles overcome to produce that work. *Silences* is “powerful,” its breathless style is “reminiscent of a biblical messenger sole survivor of a relentless and obliterating catastrophe, a witness: (I only am escaped alone to tell thee)” (30 July 1978, pp. 1 and 22).

The traces of irritation one senses in many of the reviews may be attributed to what seems a certain self-pitying note that is sounded

over and over again. And questions may be raised: if "circumstances" are to be blamed for one's failure or "silences," then is one free to take credit for any *successes* achieved? Or do "circumstances" enter there, too? In addition one suspects a bit of exaggeration here and there: for instance, the statement that so eminent an American writer as Willa Cather is "comparatively unread, untaught."

Though *Silences* is bound to have great impact on the thoughtful reader, its message of broken hopes and frustration is more tellingly presented in Olsen's fiction. The first novel is *Yonnonidio*. It takes its title from a poem by Walt Whitman which says in part,

No picture, poem, statement, passing them to the future:  
Yonnonidio! Yonnonidio! Unlimn'd they disappear . . .

"A lament for the aborigines," he says, "the word itself a dirge." For Olsen, it is almost prophetic, "the emblem of her aesthetic," as one reviewer says: "It is her plea and her pledge: that the unobserved should be perceived, that the fleeting should be fixed, that the inarticulate should come to writing" (Ellen Cronan Rose, *The Hollins Critic*, 1975).

A portion of the first chapter, entitled "The Iron Throat," appeared, as noted above, in the Spring 1934 issue of *Partisan Review*. Later the manuscript was put aside and forgotten. When, years later, it came to light, Olsen read it carefully. And then, she says, the young girl and the mature woman put together what is now the novel. Not a word was added or changed, and the story remains unfinished, because Olsen realized that from the very nature of things, youth and inexperience cannot really collaborate with middle age and the viewpoint of middle age. The whole tone of the novel would have been spoiled, would have jangled into confusion if she had started to revise, to interpolate.

As it is, *Yonnonidio* stands as a memorial to the decade of the

thirties, well deserving to be put beside John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) as testimony to the suffering and the dreams and the disasters of the time. Vividly it shows the suffering endured by many, many people during the terrible Great Depression, which was accompanied by the Great Drought. It shows, too, what kind of people they became once their hopes were lost. For those too young to remember, here is a capsule containing the essence of the thirties: poverty, dreams ending in despair, brutalization of the human spirit. No one who sincerely wishes to understand the plight of the country at that time should ignore *Yonnonidio*. As Ellen Cronan Rose put it in her review: "*Yonnonidio* is not a protest, but a *perception*" (italics added).

It is an uncomplicated narrative, the story of Anna and Jim Holbrook and their children. Much is seen through the eyes of the oldest of these children, Mazie, aged six and a half when the story opens in a Wyoming mining town. Times are terribly hard, wages minimal. Over everything hovers the almost frantic fear of a mine disaster; if the whistle blows, a frenetic hysteria takes over the village: "the iron throat" is announcing an accident in the mine.

For the men the work, besides being dangerous, is long, hard, filthy, incredibly fatiguing. For the women, housekeeping and baby-tending are made almost unendurable by the poverty and living conditions, not to mention the terror of becoming pregnant every time their husbands force brutal sex upon them.

Anna Holbrook must wash without soap, must line the children's shoes with paper, must fix meals with nothing but fatback and cornmeal, must make coats from an old quilt. In their anxiety and fear, the young parents find themselves becoming rough and hard and cruel—to each other, to the children. Yet in the midst of all the pain and toil, Anna has her dreams:

"An edjication is what you kids are going to get," she tells Mazie,

answering a question. "It means your hands stay white and you read books and work in an office. Now get the kids and scat. But don't go too far, or I'll knock your block off."

A glimmer of hope comes: perhaps a new life can be found in the country. So the family, eager, full of unaccustomed good spirits, sets off in a jolting wagon for South Dakota. Life there is not easy, of course, but it seems almost like Paradise after the mining town. The work is grueling, but the air is sweet, the sunshine nourishing. Mazie's sensitive nature blooms, responding to the fields and woods about her, the school, the friendship of kindly neighbors. There is even some gaiety: a barn dance, when Anna and Jim seem young again, and carefree.

But the attempt at farming is a failure. For all his back-breaking labor, Jim simply cannot make a go of it. Drought and depression prices combine to crush him. And Anna has an exceptionally hard time at the birth of their fourth child.

So the Holbrooks move on to a city, Omaha, where Jim gets a job in a sewer and then later in a packing house. The neighborhood where the family must live is like something out of Dante: a place of filth, of stench, of disorder. The children's playground is the dump.

Again Anna is very sick, with a miscarriage this time. Again Jim, because of his own suffering, becomes mean and brutal, with periods of remorse. Who could be unmoved by the description of the terrible night when he forces intercourse on the sick and exhausted Anna, who weakly pleads for forbearance? "Can't I screw my own wife . . . ? Hold still."

The merciless heat of a Midwestern summer pours down day after day on the dirt and the smell and the agony. All the people about them, as well as the Holbrooks themselves, are caught in hard, nauseating jobs, with no chance of relief. Nature seems to conspire with society to torture them and to cap the torture with the worst

suffering of all—a loss of hope. Here *Yonnondio* stops, stops abruptly, with an added note that it had not been the young author's intention to end it in this way. She had planned to extend the story to show how their early life affected young Mazie and her brother in their adult lives and how they became involved with movements to right the wrongs of workers.

The injustices and cruelties of life under any system show up most vividly in the ways they affect children. *Yonnondio* provides an excellent example. Anna's and Jim's children suffer emotionally as well as physically. The unpredictable black moods and cursing rages of the father, the dreary scoldings of the mother, sap their lives of joy and innocence. Yet, as Erika Duncan says, the reader's hatred is directed, not toward the adults, but toward "the system that crushes and contorts all life" ("Coming of Age in the Thirties: A Portrait of Tillie Olsen," *Book Forum*, 6 [1982], 219).

As a moving account of a family during the depression years, *Yonnondio* may be compared for effectiveness with *The Grapes of Wrath*, for both tell of the terrible poverty of the "little people." Steinbeck's Joad family has an old car and precious little else; the Holbrooks leave the mining town with a horse and wagon—and little else.

But another parallel is obvious: each family has moments of *hope*. The Joads, after all, *move on* in their old car; the Holbrooks turn the horse's head toward the rich farmland of the Midwest. That the latter finally end up in a filthy city with their future dark does not mean they shall always remain without desire, without expectations of something better. Olsen has made them real, as Steinbeck has made his Joads real. And human beings do not despair forever.

To find a parallel for the descriptions of life among the meat-packers, one must go to Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1905). The appalling working conditions, the nauseating dirt, the general air of

despair, make up an atmosphere of horror which pervades Sinclair's novel, and which is duplicated in Olsen's. Both novelists show how the never-ending suffering of the employees serves to de-humanize and debase. And Olsen's talent for describing sights, sounds—and especially *smells*—is fully as effective as Sinclair's. For example:

Human smells, crotch and underarm sweat, the smell of cooking or of burning, all are drowned under, merged into the vast unmoving stench.

That stench is a reminder—a proclamation—*I rule here*. It speaks for the packing houses, heart of all that moves in these streets; gigantic heart . . . lifeblood, nourishing the taverns and brothels and rheumy-eyed stores, bulging out the soiled and exhausted houses, and multiplying into these children playing so mirthlessly in their street yards where flower only lampposts.

Indeed, one reviewer links the three novels: "This depression-times story has its parallels in *Grapes of Wrath* and even more in *The Jungle*. The latter two are realistic and depressing; *Yonnondio* is even more so, because it dwells so completely [sic] on emotion" (*Best Sellers*, 15 May 1974, pp. 97-98).

Among Western writers both Willa Cather and Ruth Suckow have written of poverty and frustration—but neither has approached the almost savage portrayal of ugliness and despair so apparent in *Yonnondio*. Neither Cather nor Suckow ever wrote anything propounding proletarian views, nor could they be called exactly "feminists." Yet one senses in them something faintly similar to the emotions Olsen shows with such intensity: the silent striving of women who are willing to expend their strength for their families. One thinks of the wife in Cather's "Neighbor Rosicky," of Cora in Suckow's novel of that name. The former literally lives for those she loves, and in a home environment works for them. The

latter makes her way up in the business world in order to help her family—and satisfy some fierce ambition of her own.

In general the reviews praise the power and energy of *Yonnondio*, the manner in which it evokes the very spirit of the time. And they see in it the seeds of radicalism: “Had this book been published in that decade [the thirties],” says Annie Gottlieb, “it would have been a rallying cry, a movement of that same wave that crested in the labor unions” (*New York Times Book Review*, 31 March 1974, p. 5).

And W. T. Lhamon, Jr., in *The Library Journal*, says, “Writing between 1932 and 1936, Olsen juiced the novel with proletarian sympathy, but interestingly with a submerged feminism.” He goes on to say that “*Yonnondio* shares the perverse romanticism of the poor that too often marked fiction in the 1930s. But Olsen’s experiments in prose and with commitment to women redeem the novel” (15 April 1974, pp. 1150-51).

Even more enthusiastic, Jack Salzman declares that *Yonnondio* “Clearly must take its place as the best novel to come out of the so-called proletarian movement of the '30's.” He adds, however, that Olsen’s “richness of style, her depth of characterization, and her enormous compassion make *Yonnondio* a work which must not—cannot—be restricted by any particular time or place” (*New York Post*, 19 April 1974).

Excellent as *Yonnondio* is, and forceful, Olsen’s reputation is not based on it alone. Much more important is *Tell Me a Riddle* (1976). The four stories in this slender volume have been anthologized at least fifty times, and any reader can understand why. For here, in four different ways, Olsen has summarized just what human life is all about. With passion and energy, and with great understanding, she shows us not only what suffering fools we mortals be, but also how bright our dreams and how powerful our capacity to love. And, as in *Silences*, she tells us how much is wasted in the lives of men and

women.

There is no set "plot" in any of the four stories—no careful building of incident to an explosive denouement. Each simply tells of lives caught in frustration and pain—caught, but not, in the end, overcome. She shows that humanity can never be stifled. Dreams remain, and remnants of beauty—even hope.

Gene Baro has said that "These stories are not to be paraphrased; they are to be read, experienced, pondered . . ." (*New York Tribune Books*, 17 December 1961, p. 8). Although Baro may be right, mere description will at least indicate Olsen's ability to deal passionately and understandingly with widely different human beings and their suffering—and with the "riddle" of life.

The first story, "I Stand Here Ironing" is simple but effective. Though Olsen disclaims the "autobiographical" label for her work, she does admit that this story "is somewhat close to my own life."

A busy mother, doing her ironing in the evening, goes over the life of her nineteen-year-old daughter; the counselor at school is worried about this girl, and the mother tries to see just why. Emily is so mercurial, so emotional—and at the same time, inscrutable. She was a child of youth and poverty; her nineteen-year-old mother had had to go to work, and Emily as a baby and small child was cared for by neighbors or "nurseries."

Thin, dark, homely, shy, she early learned what loneliness was and what being "different" was. After a while came a stepfather and half-brothers and sister, all noisy and normal—but Emily, though not neglected, was still alone.

And then came the discovery of her gift for comedy, for mimicry. She won first prizes in competitions and was invited to make appearances before school and community groups. Success seems hers.

Yet Emily will never really reach the pinnacle she should reach,



lovely and seemingly assured as she is now. Something inside her is withdrawn, eternally remote and alone. "My wisdom came too late," thinks her mother. "She has much to her and probably little will come of it. She is a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear." But, steadily ironing, the mother feels a shy hope. "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*" (italics added). And the important thing is, after all, not to *feel* caught, inert. As the mother pleads in the concluding sentence, "Only help her to know . . . that she is more than this dress, helpless before the iron . . ."

Linda Heinlein Kirschner says that "I Stand Here Ironing" is particularly appealing to high school students because it presents the problem of a child's relationship to a mother and "is a compassionate story . . . a story that speaks of love, frustration, rejection, and ultimately, acceptance." Kirschner goes on to say that the relationships of Oedipus and Antigone, Gertrude and Hamlet, Hester and Pearl "are classic parent-child roles studied in many classrooms . . . and this story of Tillie Olsen's may be added to the group" (*The English Journal*, January 1976, pp. 58-59). Having such a universal theme, "I Stand Here Ironing" is a classic in the genre of the short story.

The tone of "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" is totally different from that of "I Stand Here Ironing." This second story in *Tell Me a Riddle* concerns a drunken sailor coming to visit old friends in port. It moves so swiftly that after the first page or so the reader sees the whole pitiful situation quite clearly. Whitey, once a competent seaman, has degenerated shockingly, yet he clings to his old buddy Lennie, to Lennie's wife Helen, and to their family of young daughters. These people, themselves beset by poverty, are all he can call his family, and his first thought is to get to them when he reaches San Francisco. He must buy presents, help about the house,

see that there is steak on the table for once.

But first he must find himself in the bliss of alcohol. Time after time his visits have followed this pattern: a drunken Whitey staggers to the door laden with parcels; the delighted greetings overwhelm him; the efforts of Lennie and Helen to help him always fail. The children love him for his fun and affection and for the way he can enter into their world. "Kiss the dolly you gave me," says little Allie. "She's your grandchild now. You kiss her, too, Daddy. I bet she was the biggest dolly in the store . . ." It is the only place where he knows love.

On this last trip, the oldest girl, fourteen-year-old Jeannie, shows her contempt. Loftily she tells him that "the only reason you give presents [is] to buy people to be nice to you and to yak about the presents when you're drunk. Here's your earrings . . ."

She has no comprehension of the love for her, the pride in her, that he has sustained all these years. She sees him in the hard light of reality—a drunken ruin of a man. Her inexperience makes her blind to his pitiful reaching out.

"Why don't you and Daddy kick him out of the house?" she asks her mother. "He doesn't belong here."

And the answer is: "Of course he belongs here, he's a part of us, like family . . . Jeannie, this is the only house in the world he can come into and be around people without having to pay . . ."

Here, then, is a picture of a life wasted, of potentialities not realized (even as those of Emily in "I Stand Here Ironing" may not be realized). And yet, as in that first story, "there is still enough left to live by."

For Whitey's life has really not been lost: "To Lennie he remained a tie to adventure and a world in which men had not eaten each other . . . To Helen he was the compound of much help given, much support: the ear to hear, the hand that understands how much a

scrubbed floor, or a washed dish, or a child taken care of for a while, can mean." They have tried to help him, but he is beyond help. They realize that. All they can do is give him love—a boundless, un-asking love which enriches their lives.

Looked at one way, "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" is a cheerless story; but examined in a different light its beauty of almost perfect devotion shows forth. Lennie and Helen and Whitey rise above surface things. Life lived in this way, says Olsen, can never be called a failure. Poverty and trouble exist, but they cannot touch the core of love deep within these people.

"O Yes" tells more about relationships. Carol is white; Parialelee is black. They have been "best friends" from their earliest years, and Carol's mother and Parialelee's have always been friendly.

But then comes the strange Sunday when Carol and her mother attend the church service at which Parialelee is to be baptized. Sitting with Parialelee's family, Carol is caught up and then overwhelmed by the emotionalism of the congregation. The singing, the shouting, the speaking—all these show her a great gulf between her and her friend. "The voices in great humming waves, slow, slow (when did it become the humming?) everyone swaying with it, too, moving like in slow waves and singing . . . when Carol opens her eyes she closes them again, quick, but still can see . . ."

She faints, and later Parialelee's mother tries to explain to her that "Not everybody feels religion the same way. Some it's in their mouth, but some it's like a hope in their blood, their bones . . ."

Parry and Carol still play together, but the difference is there between them. And Carol's older sister vehemently explains to her parents that now that the girls are in Junior High the difference will deepen, will separate them forever. For in Junior High you must do as everyone does, even to the amount of homework, even to the way you laugh. The company you keep is important. Then, witheringly,

she contrasts their school with that in a well-to-do neighborhood, “where it’s the deal to be buddies, in school anyway, three coloured kids and their father’s a doctor or judge or something big wheel and one always gets elected President or head song girl or something to prove oh how we’re democratic.”

There is nothing to be done. The old happy days of carefree intimacy are over. Each girl is entering her own world. As the sister says, Pariale will soon drop out. Who could bear the teacher who says, “Does your mother work for Carol’s mother? Oh, you’re neighbors! . . .”

Racked by the shame of the situation and by her own sense of betrayal, Carol is also haunted by her memory of the church service: the vibrant emotion, the letting-go. “Mother, I want to forget about it all, and not care . . . . Why can’t I forget? Oh why is it like it is and why do I have to care?”

Yes, why? Here is the crux of this remarkably vivid story. Why do we have to enter into the lives of others, when we know that the expedient course is to pursue our own, in an orderly path? Why are we overcome with empathy only to be wrenched with the pain of betrayal?

During the important occasion of the church service, when Pariale is baptized, Carol experiences her own baptism—“into the seas of humankind . . . . Better immersion than to live untouched.”

“O Yes” obviously is not a “happy” story, but it is, after all, comforting in a strange way. One is truly alive, it says, one is part of humanity, only after one has learned about others, has *felt* with others. Without learning, without feeling, one is firmly shut out from the Parialees of our society. Pariah the black girl may be, but she will find her way. Carol—and all of us—must seek ours.

The title story of *Tell Me a Riddle* is the longest of the four—really a novella—and though almost painful to read, it has a peculiar

strength and beauty. Eva and David are Russian immigrants who have known persecution and brutality in their homeland, and in America have lived through years of poverty and hard work. They are elderly now; their children are grown up, married, on their own. Why can't life be easy, pleasant, restful?

But it is not. Eva wants only peace and independence. She wants to taste fully the freedom of not being responsible for babies, of not having to worry about the pain and the triumphs of others—even those of her own children. She wants to putter about her house undisturbed, with her deafness and bad eyesight giving her an odd kind of shelter.

David, on the other hand, craves his own kind of freedom: freedom from petty household chores, from bills and taxes. He wants the society of others of his generation, the pleasure of being in a group. For him it would be ideal to live in a place like The Haven.

The ugly quarrel between them goes on and on: we can sell the house and go into The Haven, where everything will be done for us, where we'll have company. No, we shall *not* sell the house and go to a home for senior citizens! Their argument causes growing resentment and bitterness. Unable to resolve the conflict between their parents, the children despair.

So far it is a seemingly simple story of the male-female battle. She: I want to enjoy my own home without the drawbacks of maternity, worry, pressure. And he: I want pleasure, relaxation, friendships.

But Eva falls sick, and as cancer steadily erodes her body, we are allowed to see into her memories. We see the prison, the clubbings, the hunger, the terror of her girlhood in Russia. One critic remarks that "the dying woman becomes the dying optimism of the socialist movement which infected her native Russia and the world at the turn of the century" (*N. Listener*, 14 August 1964). The past returns

to David, too. How small and insignificant the quarrel is before the larger, shining truth: from misery and danger we escaped.

David thinks of "the grandchildren whose childhoods were childish, who had never hungered, who lived unravished by disease in warm houses of many rooms, had all the school for which they cared, could walk on any street, stood a head taller than their grandparents, towered above—beautiful skins, straight backs, clear straight-forward eyes. 'Yes, you in Olshana,' he said to the two of sixty years ago, 'they would be nobility to you.'"

But in the last agonizing days of her life, Eva escapes. Back—beyond the work and the worry and the terrible suffering—back to her little girlhood before they all began: she dances in the village, and the flutes play at a wedding.

Riddle? The grandchildren had often, playfully, asked her for one. And she knows none to "tell" them. All she knows is the vast, inexplicable riddle of human life—human life that can know such terror, such bitterness, such weariness—and at the same time such nobility. Human life from which nothing can crush the sweetness of early joy and early dreams.

This strange and poignant story that has as its background a marriage less than ideal offers a contrast to Willa Cather's "Neighbor Rosicky," in which an elderly couple faces the imminent death of the husband. The harmony between Rosicky and his wife is unmarred: "They agreed, without discussion, as to what was most important and what was secondary. They didn't often exchange opinions . . . it was as if they had thought the same thought together." When Rosicky tells his wife about his visit to the doctor, she sits "watching him intently, trying to find any change in his face. It is hard to see anyone who has become like your own body to you." Only at the very end of their lives, after much friction, do Olsen's Eva and David attain such oneness. Ultimately, however,

both Cather and Olsen show that love requires a transcendence of self.

"Tell Me a Riddle," chosen to be included in *Best American Short Stories (1961)*, won first prize in Prize Stories, 1961, The O Henry Awards; and "I Stand Here Ironing" appeared in *The Best American Short Stories of 1957*.

Reviews of the collection are, for the most part, laudatory. They emphasize the depth of feeling Olsen has for her characters, and her profound understanding of them. Though one critic feels that they "lack the definition which will help them to get past a fairly well established reader reluctant to the genre," (*Kirkus*, 15 August 1961, p. 745), another praises the writing "which is individualized but not eccentric, experimental but not obscure . . ." Some of the stories "are perfectly realized works of art" (R. M. Elman, *Commonweal*, 8 December 1961, p. 295). *The Nation* says, "Though the subject matter may be autobiographical, the author is everywhere and nowhere; this is indeed writing that consumes all impediments; incandescent, it glows and it burns" (10 April 1972, p. 474).

Fired with enthusiasm for "Tell Me a Riddle," three young women—Susan O'Connell, Rachel Lyon, and Mindy Affrime—with difficulty obtained Olsen's consent to make the story into a movie. They then set about gathering the money for production and arranged to have the screenplay written by Joyce Eliason, novelist and playwright. Early in 1980 the filming was completed.

Alan Berger, reviewing the film, says it is "an honest intelligent attempt to do justice to one of the few durable works of American literature written in the last quarter century . . ." And of the novella itself he observes that it will endure "because the writer's precise anguished prose and incantatory rhythms represent, with unerring fidelity, the inwardness of a woman's soul . . ." If the movie does not quite capture this, the reason probably is that it

“simply could not” (*Boston Herald American*, 7 February 1981).

The two principal roles are taken by the late Melvyn Douglas and Lila Dedrova, while Brooke Adams plays Jeannie, the old couple’s granddaughter. (The producers wanted to enlarge the character of Jeannie, and so moved the time of the action from the fifties to the present.) Lee Grant, stage, screen, and TV actress, directed.

“We wanted to open up the possibilities for the audience to identify with the characters,” Mindy Effrime explains. “The most important thing at the end is to give people life and youth, to see the older woman giving energy to her granddaughter. Tillie had written several chapters about Jeannie which weren’t included in the book. She was a character who couldn’t develop in 1959 the way she does now, but the most important thing we wanted to preserve was the grandmother’s spirit and the integrity of the story” (*Datebook, San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 January 1980, p. 21).

Certainly the drama is there. Jeannie, young and vibrant, nursing her grandmother through the last days of dreadful sickness, hears the old woman’s memories come tumbling out in broken phrases of delirium. She hears of the privations, the agonies of youth in old Russia, the slave trains, the beatings, the terror. And she hears, too, of youthful joy. So at the end she comforts her grandfather:

Granddaddy, Granddaddy, don’t cry. She is not there, she promised me. On the last day, she said she would go back to when she first heard music, a little girl on the road of the village where she was born. She promised me. It is a wedding and they dance, while the flutes so joyous and vibrant tremble in the air. Leave her there, Granddaddy, it is all right. She promised me. Come back, come back and help her poor body to die.

Then he remembers Eva’s words, words muttered in illness, in the



frailty of last days when only the truth would do: "Humankind . . . one has to believe . . ." "Tell Me a Riddle" is life itself encapsulated.

"Requa I," the last story to be considered here, was published first in *The Iowa Review* and appears in *The Best American Short Stories for 1971*, the third of Olsen's stories to be chosen for the series. The collection itself is dedicated to her, and the preface refers to her as "one of the finest of American story writers." She "has been one of those authors experimenting with typographical appearance and spacing."

Certainly in "Requa I" she does so experiment: at times one feels that she is almost desperately determined that the reader is going to experience—literally—the grief and turmoil of the young protagonist, that he is going to enter into his very being. At times she seems to wrench the language, to knead it, mold it, stretch it this way and that. She makes it her own.

And she is tremendously effective. For the reader lives with and in Stevie, the thirteen-year-old whose mother has died. The child's shock and grief are terrible, and incomprehensible to his uncle, who must look after him. The man is rough, but he does not mean to be unkind: he is simply not able to understand, except very dimly, the emotional turmoil of the boy's life. For a while Stevie is physically incapable of going on with living; eating, talking, moving about are almost impossible. And at the idea of school he balks: he will never go again.

Instead he begs to be allowed to help in the junkyard where his uncle works. Even here he gives way to his grief, but gradually, very gradually, he begins to come alive again. He begins to sense that life can go on—and more—can even be good.

And so Olsen gives the reader, brilliantly, a clear-cut analogy: "Disorder twining with order," she says, "the discarded, the broken,

the torn from the whole; weathereaten, weather beaten; mouldering, or waiting for use—need. *Broken existences that yet continue.*” Again Olsen has shown a spark of hope and joy shining through suffering and degradation.

When it comes to style, Olsen is distinctive, vivid, arresting. The stories she has to tell are those of the very fundamentals of life, and she tells them with vigor and with passion. Her fiction is, as one reviewer has said, “very internal.” One does not read it lightly. As another critic has remarked, “she writes with the grace of Katherine Anne Porter, but has rather more to say” (*N. Listener*, 14 August 1964).

Even as a very young woman she could write: “Anna Holbrook broke the posture of sleep. Thoughts, like worms, crept within her.” Or consider this passage, which shows a boy who knows he must take a man’s place in the mines, knows that the mines are all life will ever offer him: “Andy Kvaternick stumbles through the night. The late September wind fills the night with lost and crying voices and downs all but the largest stars. Chop, chop goes the black sea of his mind. How wild and stormy inside, how shipwrecked thoughts plunge and whirl. Andy lifts his face to the stars and breathes frantic, like an almost drowned man.”

Sharp images crowd her pages. “Skies are all seasons in one day.” Or, “There, where the blue water greens the edging forest, the climbing trees blue the sky . . . , he lays himself down.”

In “Tell Me a Riddle” Eva says goodbye to a group of grandchildren: “They look back at her with the eyes of others before them: Richard with her own blue blaze; Ann with the nordic eyes of Tim; Marty’s dreaming brown of a great grandmother he will never know; Dody with the laughing eyes of him who had been her springtime love . . . .” Such a passage illustrates how Olsen, as Robert Coles says, can “turn into a haunting, brooding poet” (*The*

*Neu Republic*, 6 December 1975, pp. 29-30). Judith W. Steinburgh observes that Olsen's "stories even before we heard her read them are much closer to poetry than prose as we are used to it" (*Patriot Ledger*, Quincy, Massachusetts).

Comparing her style with that of Willa Cather or Ruth Suckow, both of whom write prose that at times comes close to poetry, one observes that Olsen has an intensity of expression quite lacking in the smooth flowing rhythms of Cather or the dreamy, meditative accents of Suckow.

The difference can be seen in their nature descriptions. In *Yonnonidio* Olsen says, "One November day the sky was packed so thick with clouds, heavy, gray . . . it had the look of an eyelid shut in death. Leaves dashed against the houses, giving a dry nervous undertone to everything, and the maniac wind shrieked and shrieked." Cather describes a small rural cemetery at night: "The new-cut hay perfumed all the night air. The moonlight silvered the long, billowy grass that grew over the graves and hid the fence; the few little evergreens stood out black in it, like shadows in a pool. The sky was very blue and soft . . ." (*Obscure Destinies*, 1932). And Suckow tells of a boy in Yellowstone Park: "The trees and the mountains and the great stretches of wilderness belonged to him; the raw forest mornings . . . when he saw the sun a copper-rose behind the black trees; the lonely rushing sound of the river through the darkness . . ." (*The Bonney Family*, 1928).

Speaking of style, R. M. Elman observes in the midst of his praise for *Tell Me a Riddle* that its faults are "faults of enthusiasm . . . . Occasionally the prose will get out of hand . . ." (Elman, p. 205). True though it may be, his remark lights up the core of Tillie Olsen's whole art, that which dominates her every sentence: passion.

For this woman *cares*, cares deeply, and has from her youth, for all who are oppressed, for all who, somehow, are kept from living as

richly, as beautifully, as productively, as they could. From her early years as a political activist, as a "protester," she has sought to help those who cannot help themselves. No wonder her achingly sensual prose occasionally "gets out of hand." It is the voice of a profound concern that carries all before it.

Her concern shows in her philosophy of language. Language, for her, is a shining tool—almost, one might say, a weapon by which hearers and readers may be moved, convinced. And she is firm that it must be exact. "I'm tormented by things having to do with writing itself," she says, "including the language we use and whether it is indeed poisoned language, male language" (Christina Van Horn, "Writer Tillie Olsen: Upbeat on Woman's Future," *Boston Sunday Globe*, 31 May 1981, p. A6). She explains what she thinks is proper usage: "Man, he, mankind—*only* if meaning exclusively male. (Ascent of Humanity, not 'Ascent of Man') The individual (not he), the human being (not man); humankind (not mankind)—if that is what is meant. To write naturally: the poet, she; the writer, she—if the reference is to self, if that is what is meant" (*Silences*, p. 240).

Such sentiments may be persuasive, but one can readily see that her strong convictions, coupled with her obvious talent with words, can lead to excesses. An objective critic can find lapses in logic here and there in her writing—and may even detect occasionally a kind of feminine whine.

Consider the long poem partially quoted earlier—"I Want You Women up North to Know." The plight of the exploited Chicanos is set forth in what is almost a scream of pleading. The facts are correct: any impartial reader knows this and is revolted by the insensitive treatment accorded the sweat-shop workers. Any reader with a grain of compassion is appalled at the misfortunes of Ambrosa's brother, whose leg is cut off when he tries to hop a freight

car.

But what is missing in this poem is a sense of proportion: the Chicanos had obviously come to San Antonio because, wretched as their lot was there, it would be even worse in Mexico. The railroad, says Olsen, had cut twenty-five years from Ambrosa's brother's life, and then it had cut off his leg. Translated, this means it had *hired* him—paid him wages (even if low)—for twenty-five years; and he had lost his leg doing a very dangerous—and illegal—thing.

No reasonable person condones those who exploit sweat-shop labor; no sensitive reader withholds sympathy for desperate men like Ambrosa's brother. But Olsen does the oppressed no good service when she shows only the seamy side of life for the American working class and when she alludes to the workers' "heaven" brought about in 1917 in Russia.

Dreadful as they are, injustices persist through the ages. Fifty years after her passionate espousal of Communism and her denunciation of the existing order, Olsen is energetic in describing the plight of the "downtrodden" female sex. Here, too, her zeal occasionally leads her to give an incomplete picture.

For instance, speaking to a group of women writers, she says, "Strong emotion. Emotion is something we all have to contribute to literature: emotion deep in us, seldom or never articulated. Scorned, put down . . . . Even supposedly common experiences, how deeply we have lived them. I often quote Blake's 'For a tear is an intellectual thing.'" And she speaks of the fact that through the ages men have had the freedom to express anger "even to the extent of expressing it in violent rage . . . If a man feels desire or attraction, he can act on it directly; think of this powerful emotion permitted, almost completely denied to women . . ." (*Trellis*, Summer 1979).

Statements like this lack validity. Ask any man or woman whether or not women "express" emotion. Ask any man or woman

whether or not women, feeling “desire or attraction,” are denied the power to act on it (whether directly or no).

Many women writing today might have cause to applaud this writer who says over and over again that there are many obstacles to becoming a writer, many bars to success—but none so formidable as the obstacle of sex. In her Introduction to *Yonnondio*, Cora Kaplan observes that “The absence of familiar discussions of love and passion in the text is deliberate, not the result of puritanism—rather a desire for us to see women’s lives and needs outside, beyond, sexual desire.”

Women, then, are human beings with special problems. One is that of marriage, with all it entails of devotion to others, of making a home. An especially important one is bearing children, caring for them day by day. And often there is the problem of caring for aged parents, one which has been a peculiarly feminine problem over the ages.

In order to write one must have time, peace of mind, uninterrupted quiet. Yet what wife, what mother, what devoted daughter, can achieve these? Herself the mother of four, Olsen understands the racking frustration, the almost unbearable stifling of the longing to create, the stolen moments when one can take notes.

These all constitute circumstances in which writing is almost impossible, and yet the terrible question remains: are they not part of being a woman? For some women, childless and successful, sooner or later agonize over their childlessness, feel that in some important respect they are unfulfilled. Olsen herself seems to have a conflict here: she mentions the brilliant writer H. H. Richardson who, when asked why she did not have children, answered, “There are enough women to do the childbearing and childrearing. I know of none who can write my books.” Olsen’s reaction, on hearing this, was, “Yes, and I know of none who can bear and rear my children,

either." And then she goes on to say sadly, "But literary history is on her side. Almost no mothers—almost no part-time, part-self persons—have created enduring literatures" (*Silences*, p. 19).

Akin to motherhood as an obstacle in becoming a creative artist is the fact that women from time immemorial have been conditioned to "spare" their men, to give their men the quiet, the uninterrupted peace, the creature comfort, that will be conducive to their activities. The woman has had to be always "the angel in the house." Virginia Woolf, in great exasperation and pain, finally killed the angel in her—for it kept getting between herself and her pen.

Fully as deadly as the mother and angel problems has been the attitude of men: the censorship of sex. For untold generations the highest compliment that could be paid a girl was that she "thinks like a man."

When women did essay writing they were met with opposition and sneers. "Damned mob of scribbling women," was Hawthorne's comment. The Brontë sisters first published under masculine pseudonyms. Oddly, Thackeray and Henry James, both noted for their superb portraits of women and their knowledge of feminine psychology, had a curious insensitivity toward "female writers." The former, after he had met Charlotte Brontë, felt sorry for her, so small and plain, and so obviously hoping some nice man would happen along to care for her. And Henry James refused to read Willa Cather's *The Troll Garden*, even when requested to do so by a male writer.

Two authors with whom Olsen feels affinity are Rebecca Harding Davis and Virginia Woolf. When she was fifteen, Olsen found three dilapidated copies of the *Atlantic Monthly* in a junkshop and bought them for ten cents apiece. The April 1861 issue contained Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*. It seemed to speak to the young, idealistic girl: here was an artist who took a despised class as her subject—the

workers. It dawned on Olsen that she, coming from that class herself, could also write of them, of the bewildered, exploited ones who seldom appeared in "literature."

At the time *Life in the Iron Mills* appeared, the *Atlantic* did not publish the names of contributors, so it was not until years later that Olsen learned who had written the novella that had moved her so. Once she knew of Rebecca Harding Davis, she read all she could find about her and discovered that this woman epitomized the very thesis she herself wished to dramatize: that of a life that could not attain its full potentiality because it was female, deprived of the education, the freedom, the opportunities of males. Rebecca Harding Davis had a bright, inquiring mind and an eloquent pen. But her youth as a "nice girl" was restricted, and her adulthood was taken up by the cares and responsibilities of marriage and motherhood, until her health failed.

The great mass of what she produced as the years went on—when she could find time to write—was often inferior, though it contained much that was excellent. But the life-spark had somehow been diminished, and when she died, at age seventy-nine, the heading of her obituary referred to her as "The Mother of Richard Harding Davis."

Olsen wrote a long, fascinating essay about Davis as an "afterword" to the 1972 Feminist Press reprint of *Life in the Iron Mills*. Before that edition she had had to teach the novella from xerox copies of the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Of Davis she says, "There is an untraced indebtedness to her in the rise of realism. She maintained that fiction which incorporates social and economic problems directly and in terms of their effects on human beings" (*Silences*, p. 115).

Olsen has remarkable affinity with Virginia Woolf. Her way of looking at people and events with great clarity of vision—describing



them—is much like Woolf's. The fiction of the two shows a decided similarity in spite of their differences in background. Each has the faculty of putting herself into a character, of actually looking at the world through that character's eyes. Consider Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway: "Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same; can't be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life." Put this passage beside any of Olsen's which has been quoted to see a likeness of *feeling*, of emotion.

More importantly, Olsen also shares Virginia Woolf's philosophy concerning a world that is male-oriented. Olsen repeatedly and approvingly cites statements, convictions, that show just how deeply Woolf felt about the position of women. Take this withering observation concerning George Eliot and her work: "In fiction, where so much of personality is revealed, the absence of charm is a great lack; and her critics, who have been, of course, mostly of the opposite sex, have resented, half consciously, perhaps, her deficiency in a quality which is held to be supremely desirable in women" (*Collected Essays*, Vol I, p. 197).

In spite of unjust sexism, Olsen herself believes that there is much that can—and will—finally break out of the "silences." More than one careful reader has been impressed with the hope that gleams through the stern or sober or seemingly despairing messages of her writing. For, as Erika Duncan observes, Tillie Olsen has a "conviction that within each human being lies a potential that no amount of oppression or suppression can completely kill . . ." ("A Portrait of Tillie Olsen," *Symposium*, p. 208). Mary K. DeShazer remarks that Olsen is "ultimately hopeful . . . with

optimistic vision" ("In the Wind Singing": The Language of Tillie Olsen's "Tell Me a Riddle," *Symposium*, p. 30).

Writing of the stories in *Tell Me a Riddle*, Vicki L. Sommer notes that though each is permeated with tragedy, "there are also glimmers of hope, freedom, and possibility" ("The Writings of Tillie Olsen: A Social Work Perspective," *Symposium*, p. 75).

Olsen herself verifies these opinions: "Everything in my life, my background, my childhood, my 'colleges,' my life as a writer," she once said, "verified the presence of great capacities in human beings . . ." (*Trellis*, Summer 1979).

In "De-Riddling Tillie Olsen's Writing," Selma Burkom and Margaret Williams brilliantly encapsulate Olsen's career. This writer, they say, "is importantly connected with both women's and proletarian literature: to read her entire canon is to recognize that she is neither sexist nor leftist, but a passionately committed humanist" (*San Jose Studies*, 1976, p. 66). From her caring and her desire to create literature that will make others care she has produced art. As Robert Coles observed, "Everything Tillie Olsen has written has become almost immediately a classic."

Some readers, it is true, have sensed a touch of querulousness in her arguments. Sally Vincent, a British woman journalist apparently not wholly sympathetic with Olsen, says of her interview: "Tillie Olsen wailed aloud for the lost cosmology for women; for what she calls 'the unlim'd.' The unrecorded, unmonumented, unsung, unscribed, unilluminated, trounced, stifled, abrogated, graffitied women, silenced by the selectivity of history. How London makes her weep! The people we place on our pedestals all over the city. The warmongers, the politicians, the powerful, and all of them men . . ." ("Tillie, Not So Unsung," *The (London) Observer*, 5 October 1980, p. 34).

But one need not agree totally with Olsen to admire her. As Annie

Gottlieb says, she is “a catalyst for many younger writers both as an example and as a source of personal encouragement” (*Mother Jones*, November 1976). This fact shows in the tributes paid her by writers like Adrienne Rich, Ellen Moers, Jane Lazarre, Susan Griffiths. Yet, as Bell Gale Chevigny observes, “she disdains her role of culture-bearer, of preserving man’s culture, and salvages instead the work, the thought, the dream nearly buried beneath it because it belongs to the poor and forgotten—especially women. All her work . . . springs from this simple goal of reclamation” (*The Village Voice*, 23 May 1974). Thomasina Shanahan pays Olsen a glowing tribute: “The habit of giving is strong in her and it is, of course, a part of her great charm as a human being. There is in her as well an assumption that we women who write are all doing the same kind of work and that the work is important—thus the sharing, the openness” (“Tillie Olsen: In Mutuality,” *Heliotrope*, May-June 1977).

Wherever she has spoken, read, answered questions, she has moved and inspired her audience. She is “ever upbeat, ever hopeful and radiating energy and excitement at being alive,” says Christina Van Horn. Struggling to express themselves, torn by the conflict between the desire to create and the desire to nurture their families, women find in her personality and in her words answers that both comfort and challenge. Being a woman—and perhaps also poor, and perhaps also of a minority group—can actually, in the end, feed one’s art, can give depth and richness to one’s imagination. Never give up, Olsen says: never feel guilt at what you cannot accomplish. *Do what you are able to do*—and hold up your head in pride, counting yourself a true writer! A “survivor” herself, Tillie Olsen urges other women to survive.

## Selected Bibliography

### Tillie Olsen's Writings

#### *Fiction*

*Tell Me a Riddle*. New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1961. Delta, 1971. Laurel, 1975. Delacorte, 1979. (hardcover)

The four pieces in this collection have been anthologized fifty-eight times so far, including in *Fifty Years of the American Story, 1919-1970*, Wm. Abrahams, ed.; *Fifty Best American Short Stories, 1915-1965*, Martha Foley, ed.; *The Norton Introduction to Literature; The Modern Tradition*, Daniel Howard, ed.; and *Elements of Literature*, Robert Scholes, ed., Oxford. Foreign publications include England (Faber & Faber, hardcover; Virago, paperback), Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Czechoslovakia. "Tell Me a Riddle," made into a play, has been performed on numerous college campuses and in other stage productions, one of which, by the Caravan Theatre, was termed by the *Boston Globe* one of the ten best productions of 1978. In 1980 it was made into a motion picture. Two of the stories in the volume *Tell Me a Riddle* have also been staged: "I Stand Here Ironing," and "O Yes."

*Yonnonidio: From the Thirties*. New York: Delacorte, 1974. (hardcover) Delta. (paperback) Laurel. (paperback)

Foreign publications include England (Faber & Faber, hardcover; Virago, paperback), Germany (Luchterhund), U.S.S.R., and Sweden. *Yonnonidio* has also been staged (in part).

*Silences*. New York: Delacorte, 1978. (hardcover) Delta. (paperback)

Its title essay, originally a talk given at the Radcliffe Institute in 1962, and reprinted in *Harper's* in 1975, has been xeroxed in thousands of copies and was (as it still is) widely used in literature and writing courses and in women's studies.

"Requa-I," part one of a novella, appeared in *Best American Stories*, 1971, Martha

Foley, ed. *Granta*, the Cambridge University literary magazine, featured it in the 1979 issue on American writers.

"Silences—When Writers Don't Write." *Harpers Magazine*, October 1965, pp. 153-61.

### Poetry

"I Want You Women up North to Know" (based on a letter by Felipe Ibarro in *New Masses*, 9 January 1934). *The Partisan Review*, March 1934, p. 4. Quoted by permission of the author.

"There Is a Lesson." *The Partisan Review*, April 1934, p. 4.

"The Strike." *The Partisan Review*, August 1934, pp. 3-9.

"The Iron Throat." *Partisan Review*, April-May 1934, pp. 3-9.

"Tell Me a Riddle." *New World Writing 16*. Stewart Richardson and Corlies M. Smith, eds. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960. Pp. 11-57.

"Help Her to Believe." *Pacific Spectator*, 10 (Winter 1956), pp. 55-63.

"Hey Sailor, What Ship?" *New Campus Writing 2*. Nolan Miller, ed. New York: Putnam's, 1957. Pp. 199-213.

"Baptism" (original title of "O Yes"). *Prairie Schooner*, 31 (Spring 1957), 70-80.

### Papers

Portions of the manuscript version of *Yonnonidio* are in the Berg Collection of English and American Literature in the New York Public Library.

### Readings and Talks

Olsen has read or spoken, among other places, at the New York Poetry Center, Johns Hopkins, Smith, Yale, New Hampshire, Amherst, Harvard, Rutgers, Dartmouth, Columbia, M. I. T., Sarah Lawrence, Carleton; the Universities of Texas, Indiana, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Massachusetts; S. U. N. Y. at Old Westbury, Binghamton, Brockport; Stanford, Boise State, Bennington, St. Olaf, Maryland; and she has recorded for the Lamont Poetry Room Collection (Widener Library, Harvard) and for Pacifica.

She was a featured or keynote speaker at the University of Delaware's symposium on the Nineteen Thirties, 1979; Reed College's Colloquia on Women, Writing and Language, 1979; the Amherst College Copland Colloquia on the Family, 1977; the Columbus, Ohio, conference on the Future of Mothering, 1978; the M. L. A. Forum on Women Writers in the Twentieth Century, 1971; and the Boston Public Library's series on the Writer in America, 1979. In 1979 she was also a Radcliffe Centennial Visitor. See the excerpts from a talk by Tillie Olsen in *Trellis*, 3 (Summer 1979).

In 1981 she was a speaker at the Wellesley (College) Center for Research on Women,

meeting with project members who are studying nineteenth-century literature by American female authors. She also attended an international symposium at Wellesley College—subject, "Women and Writing."

### *Fellowships, Grants, and Other Honors*

- 1956 — Stanford University Creative Writing Center Fellowship  
1959 — Ford Foundation Grant in Literature  
1961 — O. Henry Award for "Tell Me a Riddle" as Best Story of the Year  
1962-64 — Fellow, Radcliffe Institute  
1967 — National Endowment for the Arts, Grant in Literature  
1969-70 — Professor, Writer-in-Residence, Amherst College  
1972 — Visiting Lecturer, Stanford University (Graduate Writing Seminar, and the University's first course on women and literature)  
1973-74 — Writer-in-Residence, M. I. T.  
1974 — Distinguished Visiting Professor, University of Massachusetts; Boston Board of Regents Visiting Lecturer; University of California, San Diego  
1975 — American Academy and National Institute of Arts and Letters Award for distinguished contribution to American Literature  
1975-76 — John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship  
1979 — Honorary Degree, Doctor of Arts and Letters, University of Nebraska  
1980 — Outstanding Woman Author Award at the Nebraska State Convention of Business and Professional Women  
1980 — British stamp issued in her honor along with those issued honoring the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Gaskell, "as the woman writer best exemplifying in our time the ideals and literary excellence" of the four above-named. As one article puts it, "These women forged significant changes in social attitudes toward women and workers in general, for which they are being commemorated."  
1980 — Unitarian-Universalist Women's Federation (Annual) Ministry to Women Award  
1980 — International Visiting Scholar to four Norwegian Universities (Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, Tromsø); William James Synoptic Lecturer, Grand Valley College, Michigan; Radcliffe Centennial Visitor and Lecturer

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