

DISPARATE PERSPECTIVES: HISTORICAL CONTEXTS IN THE LITERARY
WORKS OF TILLIE OLSEN

A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty of The University of Akron

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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May, 2009

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Dr. Chura: Thank you for your guidance, patience, and insight during this process.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Tillie Olsen's remarkable literary career is marked as one that generated several powerful and unorthodox texts yet, at the same time, produced too few. Her relatively small yield of literary work stems from Olsen's only being able to work intermittently. She was forced to split her time among her domestic responsibilities as a wife and mother, her wage earning duties as a partial provider for her family, and her personal motivations as a writer and political activist. Her commitment to her family eliminated almost twenty years from an already promising writing career. Had Olsen been able to continue to write during those twenty years, it is doubtless that she would have produced more texts. However, the two decades she was circumstantially unable to write were integral as inspiration to give voices to women and marginalized populations, like her, who have been silenced and subjugated as a result of circumstance. In her fiction, Olsen's personal experience of being silenced becomes the experience of the working class masses, neglected wives and mothers, and poverty stricken families in her fiction. As her individual experience connects to experiences of the proletariat masses and women in general, her apparent collective experience becomes that of an individual.

In the 1930s, Tillie Olsen began her career as Tillie Lerner, a member of the American Communist Party and activist in the working class community. Most notably, Olsen was arrested for her participation during the San Francisco Maritime Strike, known

as “Bloody Thursday,” July 5, 1934. She established herself as an important writer for the Socialist/Communist community when she published two narratives of her 1934 arrest in *The Partisan Review* and *The Nation*. That same year, Olsen would publish “The Iron Throat” in *The Partisan Review*, a short story that would later become the first chapter of her 1974 novel, *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*. She abandoned *Yonnondio* in 1937 to devote herself to domestic duties, marrying Jack Olsen and raising four daughters, and “working numerous low paying jobs to support the family” (Pearlman & Werlock xvi).¹

This, her first period of literary non-production once her writing career began, lasted until 1953 when she wrote the short story, “I Stand Here Ironing;” this began a fruitful period that produced the stories which would later be included in her first significant longer fictional work, *Tell Me a Riddle* (1962).² The years 1953 to 1960 produced the components of *Tell Me a Riddle*, a book comprised of four short stories: “Hey Sailor, what ship?” (1953 & 1955), “I Stand Here Ironing” (1953-1954), “O Yes” (1956-1957), and “Tell Me A Riddle” (1960). The four short stories within the novel took Olsen seven years to complete and another two years to publish as a compilation. The length of time taken between her initial interval of production to her second industrious stage and to produce *Tell Me a Riddle* creates an expectation that Olsen,

¹Biographical information of Tillie Olsen’s life can be considered common knowledge, as it has appeared in numerous sources during my research. See especially Pearlman, Micky & Abby H.P. Werlock. *Tillie Olsen*. Boston: Twayne Publishers. 1991.

² Olsen received numerous awards from 1956 to 1967 including the Wallace Stegner creative writing fellowship from Stanford University, a Ford Foundation grant in literature, the O.Henry Award for best American short story, and a fellowship from Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study.

though generating critically acclaimed work, would not produce vast amounts of material in her career.

After a short lull in her writing production to attend the Radcliffe Institute and work as a literary consultant, Olsen began what was intended to be a novella, “Requa,” in 1968 and published it as a short story in the *Iowa Review* in 1970 as “Requa I.”³ After “Requa I” is published, Olsen embarked on her third episode of literary proliferation. During this period, 1970s politics, especially the Second Wave feminist movement, pervades Olsen’s writing and teaching. Just as her Communist leanings found their way into her 1930s fiction, her feminist leanings are evident in her texts produced from 1968 to 1978. From 1969 to 1971, Olsen compiled names of “forgotten” women writers she taught in her creative writing courses and published the lists of names in the *Women’s Studies Newsletter*.⁴ As a way to encourage people to read and resurrect these forgotten female authors, Olsen published “One Out of Twelve: Women Who Are Writers in Our Century” in 1971. Paying heed to her own advice, Olsen then “resurrected” and edited Rebecca Harding Davis’ novel, *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) and added “A Biographical Interpretation of Rebecca Harding Davis” (1973) as an afterword to the text. At the height of this burst of literary proliferation was the publication of the long unfinished—

³ “Requa I” also appeared in *The Best American Short Stories of 1971*. The short story was first named “Requa I” because Olsen intended to expand it into a novella which would be named “Requa.” The expansion never happened. So, the “I” has been dropped from the title in multiple anthologies and will be referred to “Requa” in this paper hereafter.

⁴ From 1969-1974, Olsen was a writer in residence and visiting professor of creative writing for several universities including Amherst College, MIT, and Stanford University. The *Women’s Studies Newsletter* was published by The Feminist Press (founded 1971).

and lost for forty years—novel, *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, in 1974. Four years later, Olsen followed up with her final major work, *Silences* (1978). After she published *Silences*, Olsen focused her career on lecturing, political activism, and teaching as an acclaimed visiting professor.

So from Tillie Olsen's initial foray into the writing world in 1934 to her ultimate major work in 1978, she published three novel length texts, several short stories—most of which would be included in her novels, and a few prominent essays. For such a long and politically charged career, Tillie Olsen produced very little material and became known more for her activism than her writing. So, two questions need to be answered: why should she be considered important as an author? And, why do these few works deserve further notice? The answer lies in the contextual intricacies of her literary texts. Olsen carves a unique position out for herself in her ability to separate, merge, and balance the historical contexts of the 1930s and the 1970s, the two periods of time when she was at her most prolific. Her 1930s proletariat loyalties must be balanced with her 1970s Second Wave Feminist⁵ inclination in all her fiction produced during her last major period of production. Though Olsen's life during her periods of non-production must have certainly influenced her writing, this thesis will focus on how the historical and ideological contexts of the thirties and the seventies intertwine and function in Olsen's literary works from her most prolific periods of production.

⁵ First Wave Feminism dealt with legal injustices between men and women. Second Wave Feminism sought to eliminate social injustices between men and women. Third Wave Feminism examines the differences between women; it includes GLBT, gender, and sex issues.

The first text that will be treated is *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*. This novel, published in 1974, was Olsen's attempt to finish a novel she started writing forty years earlier. In Olsen's editing, she reveals the contemporary historical and ideological context of the 1970s while trying to retain the integrity of the texts she had originally produced in the 1930s. During the course of the novel, the reader is able to detect within the text a shift in ideological focus from a proletariat to a feminist perspective. As this shift becomes apparent, so do the conflicting agendas of the seemingly cooperative ideologies of feminism and collectivism.⁶ Olsen, as an advocate for both philosophies, is able to reconcile the differences thus creating a perspective that merges both contexts and transcends any one ideological or historical context.

The second chapter of this thesis examines Olsen's literary activism in "One Out of Twelve: Women Who Are Writers in Our Century" and the fruit of that labor, "A Biographical Interpretation of Rebecca Harding Davis." Unlike *Yonnondio*, "One Out of Twelve" and Olsen's "A Biographical Interpretation" falls short of balancing the context of its period of production with the historical context of her subject. Like in *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, Olsen's focus shifts from the historical time period of her subject to an 1970s feminist perspective. The influence of feminism and Olsen's personal circumstances pervade several passages in the text when Olsen should be describing Rebecca Harding Davis' life in the 1860s. Because the text is so removed from the historical context of its subject and Olsen's imagination is infused into the historical facts

⁶ Though it would appear from a basic understanding of Communism and feminism that the two ideologies would be similar, there are inconsistencies that separate the two such as mandatory childbirth.

of the piece, “A Biographical Interpretation” becomes essentially a work of historical fiction.

In the third chapter, my analysis of “Requa ” examines the need to balance intrinsic and extrinsic factors in the development of gender and sex identity. In what may be Olsen’s best example of merging disparate contextual elements, “Requa ” explores gender identity as a convergence of several factors, including the reconciliation of biology and social constructs. “Requa,” like *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, is set in the 1930s but is written in Olsen’s last major period of production. The story includes Olsen’s loyalties to her working class roots, but the context of the Second Wave Feminist Movement permeates the text. Again, Olsen is able to merge several contexts and achieves a contextual transcendence of sorts, a proleptic vision of gender constructs that would be described by Third Wave Feminism.

Finally, I have examined Tillie Olsen’s works published from 1970 to 1974 as a whole and, from that scrutiny, have distinguished a signature aspect to Olsen’s work—her merging of disparate elements. Her literature consistently contains seemingly conflicting historical and ideological contexts functioning together as a whole. In order to identify and describe her work in this manner, it is necessary to separate and look at each context as a singular influence in Olsen’s work. Once each milieu is established and analyzed, each context may be analyzed in correlation with the other. Olsen’s early 1970s work plaits ideologies and historical frameworks in a cooperative manner that, for the most part, creates a new ideological or theoretical context by which the text can be read. This new context of combining Second Wave Feminist and proletariat ideologies focuses on a cooperative functionality that transcends the individual philosophies.

In the Academy today, Olsen has received and continues to receive acclaim for her literary activism and contributions to feminist literature. However, though she has been recognized as an author, it fails to match the respect she garners as a political and literary figure. Tillie Olsen certainly deserves veneration for her activism and personal struggle, but her politics or personal story seems to have overshadowed the quality and complexity of her literary work. Because of the historical and ideological intricacies found in Olsen's texts and her methods of merging these seemingly disparate elements, Olsen deserves more attention as a part of the academic literary canon. Not only do her texts warrant more attention, but her literary contribution also merits esteem and study because of its innovative, multi-faceted approach to uniting disparate contextual elements.

CHAPTER II

FEMINISM AND MARXISM IN TILLIE OLSEN'S *YONNONDIO: FROM THE THIRTIES*

Tillie Olsen's work *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* exhibits a complex mix of feminist modernism and proletarian realism. The ideological intricacies of the novel are exhibited by the its historical contexts of 1930s Depression era Marxism, the time in which the novel was begun, and 1960s to 70s Second Wave Feminism, the era in which the book was edited and published. The 1974 publication date of the novel is significant in order to help establish meaning in gender relations and gender equality in the latter part of *Yonnondio* because the reader can identify Olsen's ideological link to the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 70s. Though Olsen maintains she did not change the original text of *Yonnondio*, the editing process during which she decided to keep or omit material subverts her ambition to not alter the meaning of her original 1934 text (Pratt vi). Resulting from editing choices, Olsen's depiction of renewed feminine strength through Anna, Mazie, and Bess indicates a clear shift from masculine domination and feminine dependency in the beginning of the novel to a sentiment of feminine empowerment and self sufficiency by its end.

Throughout *Yonnondio*, Olsen adheres to Mike Gold's "Proletarian Realism" (1954, *The Mike Gold Reader*) dogma while invoking a modernist perception of feminine

concerns.⁷ Though Olsen's work demonstrates Gold's requirement of "dealing with real conflicts" of working class men and women and has a pointed "social theme" of a working class revolution (Gold 206-7), she breaks with Gold's proletarian realist doctrine by featuring individual women's needs and concerns as part of her novel. It is in this paradox of promoting the masculine working class movement and the inclusion of feminist ideals that *Yonnondio*'s power struggle emerges. Is Olsen's novel a proletarian realist novel or a modern feminist novel? Both? *Yonnondio* is an originally proletarian realist novel that uses the later influence of Second Wave Feminist theory as a means of showing how the working class revolution could not be complete without Marxism attending to the specific needs of women. The distance from Gold's approach becomes more apparent as Olsen editing choices reveal her increased leanings

For *Yonnondio*, there are two periods of production and one contemporary historical setting, and Olsen's original 1930s physical and ideological setting is pervaded by the influence of the later publication period. A typed, loose paper note, found in the "*Yonnondio* makings" folder of the Tillie Olsen archives at Stanford University, explicitly states, "I have changed nothing, [crossed out: "except tenses"] but in a sense I have cheated. I have had to use my [added: "mature"] writer's judgment and skill [crossed out: "of these last years"] [added: "as a writer"] to select which words, which sentences, which version; to do the weaving and cutting in the last chapters" (Olsen, *Yonnondio* makings). Olsen effectively admits in this note, likely an early fragment of

⁷ Mike Gold was a prominent literary theorist and political figure who dealt specifically with the concerns of the working class masses. His article, "Proletariat Realism," provided an ideological set of rules by which a text conforming to "proletariat realism" should adhere.

what would become the author's "A Note about this Book" that appears adjacent to the text of the published *Yonnondio*, that she has been influenced by "these last years." The years to which Olsen would be referring could be anytime between 1964 and 1974, the time the manuscript was discovered⁸ to the year of publication. During these years, Olsen would have been at the epicenter of the Second Wave Feminist Movement and participating in a creative writers' seminar at Radcliffe College, teaching creative writing at Amherst College, or compiling lists of "forgotten" women authors.⁹ As the influence of the Feminist Movement begins to more fully pervade the text, Olsen's depiction of renewed feminine strength through Anna, Mazie, and Bess indicates a clear shift from masculine domination and feminine dependency in the beginning of the novel to a sentiment of feminine empowerment and self sufficiency.

To be able to determine Olsen's inclusion of Second Wave Feminism in *Yonnondio*, the reader must be able to read the novel in at least two different contexts: The 1930s and the late 1960s to the early 1970s. However, the most obvious context, that in which the original manuscript was drafted (the early 1930s), has limited some critics' interpretations of the novel. Constance Coiner, in her 1996 book, *Better Red*, states:

⁸ Olsen's husband, Jack Olsen, unearthed the makings of *Yonnondio* when going through boxes of personal belongings in the Olsen family home in 1972 (Pratt v).

⁹ Radcliffe College and Amherst College are part of the "seven sisters" colleges and were at the center of feminist thought and practice. Radcliffe is now the Radcliffe Center for Advanced Women's Studies. In 1971-74, Olsen compiled lists of female authors whose works she had been teaching in her class at Amherst. These lists would later be addressed in her call for women to read and "resurrect" women authors in Olsen's essay, "Women Who Write in our Time: One Out of Twelve."

Olsen's early 30s' texts are marked by closure—that is, a restricting of meaning potentially available from the text...[and closure] was intended to spark political resistance once the reader 'experience[s]' the reported conditions or event. At the same time, however, its didacticism actually limits involvement by undercutting the reader's role as an active producer of meaning. (142)

If one examines *Yonnondio* strictly within the context of Olsen's Marxist affiliations during the 1930s and the text's practice of Gold's "Proletarian Realism," the novel's interpretation is certainly limited as Coiner implies Olsen's early texts are. However, Coiner, like the many Olsen critics, does not acknowledge the importance of *Yonnondio*'s publication date and the influence surrounding Olsen's editing of the original text. Second Wave Feminism, usually dated to 1968, pervades Olsen's text and is evident in *Yonnondio* through what content Olsen kept and omitted in the novel, even if she did not alter a word of the story. The omission of the original ending where Mazie becomes a labor leader and writer to Baby Bess's affirmations of "I! I!" shifts the main focus at the end of the novel from the uprising of the proletarian class (though this is still present) to that of oppressed women (Olsen 191). The marginalized class' uprising and newly found empowerment are evocative of Gold's assertion that "swift action, clear form... makes for [the proletariat ideology's] beautiful youthful clarity" and is essential to promote the upcoming revolution (207). Olsen follows one of Gold's mandates for the construction of proletarian literature and subverts it as a feminist affirmation by using Gold's prescribed literary dogma and form in a double context without being contradictory.

In order for Olsen's *Yonnondio* to be read through and be connected by at least two different critical lenses, the reader must understand the central themes of the Marxist and Feminist ideologies for which the novel is a filter. Marxism is described by Nora Roberts in her book, *Three Radical Women Writers: Class and Gender in Meridel*

LeSueur, Tillie Olsen, and Josephine Herbst (1996), as a “paradigm” in which Marx and Engel “were adamant on the proposition that, freed from economic constraint to respond to capitalist market conditions, the human race would be free as well to explore new means of developing personal and ‘fully human’ relationships” (22). Before people are freed from economic, and thus capitalist, limitations “the commodity itself replicates the social split between public and private,” where the public is men’s professional domain and the private is the women’s domestic domain (19). “The public domain, far from being... [an] expression of citizenship,” Roberts explains, “turns out to be... under capitalism, a nursery for the tending and developing of” the overinflated values of individualism (19). This discord of male and female spheres, the working class and the bourgeois, then, is caused by capitalism.¹⁰ This capitalist economic system must be abolished and replaced with the collectivist ideology of Marxism in order to mend the social split between the two and the domination of the private by the public. Power, then, must be given to the masculine proletariat group rather than the individual regardless of gender, thus creating a male-centric collectivist system. However, “once [Marxism] was translated into conditions of social power and the struggle for social power, the dictates of socialist and proletarian realism became dangerous edicts” that threatened to overthrow the oppressive economic practice of capitalism (Roberts 30). Thus, each ideology is a threat to the other so one must be abolished for the other to thrive.

¹⁰ In Marxism, the masculine gender is almost always associated with the working class or the proletariat. The feminine is usually associated with the bourgeois. The proletariat is the marginalized, lowest economic class of the masses who are characterized by a collectivist political and economic outlook and the bourgeois class is the social upper middle class who are characterized by individualistic, capitalistic tendencies (Gold).

The feminist ideology of the late 1960s and early 1970s seems to directly oppose Marxist ideals in certain ways. The ideas of the masculine public sphere and the feminine domestic sphere exist within the context of most kinds of feminisms as well. However, feminism, in opposition to Marxism, encourages women to step outside the private, domestic sphere into the more masculine public sphere as an “expression of citizenship” (Roberts 19). Betty Friedan, founder of the National Organization for Women (NOW), “called for getting women out of the entrapment as housewives, out of the subservience to a consumer culture, and out of the family forms that were wreaking psychic havoc on their lives” (Farganis 15). Feminism, like Marxism, recognizes “consumer culture” as an oppressive force, but instead of focusing on class differentiation and oppression within the capitalist system, it focuses on gender inequalities and female subjugation. Sandra Farganis explains that “feminism argues that women are oppressed or dominated by men and that the structural arrangements that initiate, support, and legitimate that systematic oppression constitute patriarchy” (15). Feminism’s response to the patriarchal system is much like that of Marxism; Feminism’s “objective...is to constitute itself as a social and political movement to undo this domination” (15).

The similarities of Marxism and feminism are obvious and strong. Both ideologies contend that people are oppressed as a result of social status, with Marxism’s idea of social status based on economic class and feminism’s based on gender or sex. Each ideology feels the need to create a “social movement” or revolution to “undo this domination,” whether it is a capitalist or a patriarchal society. It is in this need to revolt that Tillie Olsen merges these two seemingly conflicting ideologies in a manner that each movement is dependent on the other, especially Marxism’s need to accommodate

feminism which, through her work, Olsen expresses as a central theme. Both the working class and the female plights are depicted by Tillie Olsen in the manner of Mike Gold's literary dogma, proletarian realism. Olsen is honest about the human nature of her imperfect working class and feminist hero characters and portrays the "horror and drabness in the Worker's [and female's] life... [and the] revolutionary elan [that] will sweep this mess out of the world forever" (Gold 207-8). By using Gold's model of masculine proletarian realism, Olsen promotes the feminine needs of individual women thereby connecting class and gender in an interdependent relationship of power and empowerment.

This feminized form of Gold's literary dogma begins with the symbolism of Tillie Olsen's "The Iron Throat"—a 1934 short story that later became the first chapter of Olsen's novel *Yonnondio*. The story and subsequent novel present a striking power struggle involving both gender and class. Olsen uses the coal mine at the center of the story as a yonic symbol; the male workers' desire to silence the mine's whistle, a representative female "voice," simultaneously expresses both economic and gender power relations. Olsen saturates both of her texts with issues of gender role division and resentment which, ultimately, are caused (or at least heightened) by the deplorable conditions of living as part of the lower class, worker population. These conditions and a dangerous workplace environment initiate a familial resentment which leads to the father/husband figure, Jim, asserting dominance over his wife, Anna, through acts of domestic violence and "silencing."

The text of "The Iron Throat" acts as a microcosm for conflicts that inform the remainder of the novel, *Yonnondio*. Moreover, the story provides an entry point for a

study of issues of labor and gender struggles in capitalist society particularly if examined with Olsen's Marxist affiliations and Gold's proletarian realism as a backdrop for the novel; *Yonnondio* shows how the primary priorities of money and survival can dwarf the responsibilities of spouse and parent. In both "The Iron Throat" and *Yonnondio*, monetary necessities take precedence over emotional responsibilities, creating a domestic patriarchy based on fiscal oppression. This survival-based hierarchy allows shocking violence to become an accepted method of maintaining power and order within the working-class family. Fiscal oppression also intertwines with a power struggle between the genders—a struggle in which both class and gender combine to implement and perpetuate domestic brutality.

As part of the struggle between men and women, a theme of brutal "silencing" of female characters runs through *Yonnondio*. This conflict manifests itself as Jim, the father, needs to assert his dominance over the rest of the family due to his masculine power being stripped by the conditions of his work place. Nearly every job Jim holds has appalling, dangerous conditions, particularly in the mine where men are killed or maimed, and the meager pay is barely enough to keep his family fed and clothed. This economic struggle within the capitalist system is an oppressive force by which the working class is subjugated and exploited, causing violent discord in the private, domestic domain. Though no one is exempt from Jim's vicious treatment, his wife Anna's voice is quieted most often by the threat of physical force. Anna's protest of Jim's actions is sure to bring a blow and/or a command for silence: "Once Anna had questioned him timidly concerning his work; he struck her in the mouth with a bellow of 'Shut your damn trap'" (9). Anna's question, related to his work in the mine, is received with

shocking, swift viciousness with the intent to stifle her voice. Mazie Holbrook, like her mother, also seeks to question her father about his job. She wants to know “what makes people a-cryen” (11). The “rough retort” Jim intends to make leaves him as he allows the question to “hurt him” (11). His ultimate response, though nonviolent, is akin to his response to Anna’s question: He silences Mazie by giving her a sucker, something to put in her mouth so she cannot speak or ask about his distressing job.

The silencing of a female voice, a specific concern of the Second Wave Feminism of the latter part of the Twentieth Century, takes place in relation to the mine in the final 1974 edition of *Yonnondio* as well as part of the original 1934 text of “The Iron Throat.” This suggests the assessment of women’s needs depicted in the first chapter of *Yonnondio* and “The Iron Throat”¹¹ predict the direction feminism would take in the years following 1934. When the whistle, or the mine’s voice, blows at any other time than a shift change, it can only mean something dire has happened and indicates, within the context of Second Wave Feminism, that a “concern that women’s voices have not been heard” (Farganis 20). This mine, as a representation of the female, has power over all who depend on it, directly or indirectly, as a livelihood which should “give legitimacy to those voices” (20). Instead of validating and listening to the feminine mine’s call for an attentive audience, the need to silence the mine is regarded by the working class as a need to take from it its enveloping, destructive capitalist power. Even those men who have been hurt by the feminine power of the mine seem to barely understand its female needs. Sheen McEvoy, a former mine worker who has been harmed by the mine’s vengeance,

¹¹ “The Iron Throat” was first published in *The Partisan Review* in 1934 and is the first chapter of *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*. There are very few edits in the text, most of which are grammar or punctuation changes. There are no significant content edits.

seems to believe that the mine is not satisfied with “consuming” men and tries to appease this womb of a mine by offering it a child, Mazie. Drunk, McEvoy meets Mazie on the street and sees in her a sacrifice and attempts to throw her into the womb of the mine. By trying to sacrifice Mazie, McEvoy attempts to make amends for stripping the mine of its fruits, thus seeking to decrease its dangerous conditions and suppress its voice of power and discontent—the whistle. The mine also represents a manmade workplace, a masculine enterprise that is threatened by the feminine features and wrath of the mine. The dangers of the mine are created by the men’s disregard for the mine’s needs which, in turn, causes the mine to be dangerous and a threat to the safety of the workers.

Because the mine is seen as a feminine entity with needs that the men may see as feminine, its traits are transferred by implication onto all females and feminine forces in the novel. Because male workers and managers consistently strip her of the “fruits” of her womb and neglect her care and upkeep, she periodically erupts in an explosion of deadly violence. The feminine character of the mine becomes associated with a dangerous, oppressive labor atmosphere—it is an instrument of what leftist critic Mike Gold referred to as the “feminine” bourgeois class—even though this volatile environment is caused by masculine behavior. Present in the 1934 text of “The Iron Throat,” the first chapter of what would become *Yonnonddio*, Olsen portrays to readers a power conflict in the womb-like, “mother earth” imagery that gives the mine the character of a female entity which cannot function in harmony with its male workers due to their neglect of the mine’s safety needs. The build-up of flammable gas and the fear of the male mine manager to address the situation causes the mine to erupt and collapse on several male workers. When the mine’s “feminine” needs are not addressed adequately

by dismissing the warning of the mine's feminine voice, the results are violent and vengeful—a stereotypical representation of “a woman scorned.”¹² This is an indication in Olsen's text of part of the power struggle between men and women—postulating the potential consequences of males simultaneously creating female needs while depriving women of social mobility—an issue which Olsen experienced as a politically active working class mother.

The matter of neglecting feminine needs in *Yonnondio* and “The Iron Throat” also seems to correlate to the neglectful behavior Olsen may have experienced as an affiliate of the Communist Party. In the American Marxist magazine, *Party Organizer* c. 1930, readers and critics made a plea for the Communist Party—purveyor and advocate of the proletariat and working class movement—“to recognize...women's everyday needs,” including paying attention to “their social customs, their particular problems, hardships, and grievances...and their living conditions at home” (qtd in Coiner 44, *Party Organizer* 13). However, the Communist Party's “failure to acknowledge the real conditions of women's lives caused by the Party” or, in the case of *Yonnondio*, the working class, “placed unreasonable demands on its women members” (Coiner 45). In Olsen's text, the lack of attention paid to women and their needs leads directly to a volatile and dangerous situation in the mine, but also within a family atmosphere and in gender relations between men and women. The role of the mine is a man's construct just as the role of a woman is; both are exploited and neglected with disastrous circumstances. The situation in the mine and the plea in the *Party Organizer* appear to be proleptic and warn that ignoring the necessities of women and demanding unrealistic expectations from women

¹² Quote attributed to William Congreve's *The Mourning Bride* (1697).

will produce violent, harmful discord and may be counterproductive to the impending revolution.

In *Yonnondio*, Olsen clearly demonstrates the consequences of such a neglect of women's needs. After the family moves to a sharecropping farm, away from the chaotic presence of the mine, Anna becomes ill, her symptoms go untended by Jim until she collapses from overwhelming exhaustion and neglect. Jim is then forced to assume her domestic responsibilities—in addition to his taxing fiscal duties—that he meets with “sarcasm and hostility” (Coiner 45) because unpaid domestic work is regarded as a “woman's function” and “that a man should undertake such duties is laughable” (Roberts 16). The implication, then, is that even though men and women are united against capitalist oppression, the wives and women of the working class are still subjugated to gender inequalities and unrealistic domestic expectations by the male proletariat in addition to class oppression and poverty. Jim's masculine need to assert power over Anna takes the form of rape, which leads to Anna's miscarriage and physical collapse. His assertion of power does not merely adhere to a class structure of necessities, but indicates a link to a sexual or gender power struggle where masculine and feminine needs are equally important. Only after Anna's absolute breakdown does Jim make an effort to help around the house, thus addressing her need for domestic cooperation. As Anna's health improves and the Holbrooks develop more familial accord, the novel suggests that attending to gender specific needs are as important as class and fiscal requirements and, like maintenance of the mine, can prevent violence and dissonance in both the workplace and domestic environment.

Communist and radical labor economist Grace Hutchins has argued that Anna's collapse is a direct result of her unsympathetic role as the sole domestic caretaker, an "unpaid position of housewife" on which the "economic basis of women's subjugation" under men is founded (qtd. in Coiner 45). Hutchins would have readers believe Anna's subjugation is specifically a result of earning power and class, but it seems the failure to address the gender-specific "feminine" needs, or cooperative contribution to childcare, housework, and personal healthcare and having a purpose outside the home plays a major role in both Anna's inability to function in her domestic sphere and Jim's inability to function in his public sphere as breadwinner. It is when Anna's needs are met that she reclaims her role in the domestic sphere and ventures outside the home to work and contribute, not only financially to the family unit, but potentially as a worker to the Marxist movement. Therefore, Olsen's work clearly demonstrates that Marxism and its impending revolution cannot achieve complete success if males and females regard each other in terms of the working class needs but dismiss gender and individual needs. Thus, the neglect of the female (or male) will hinder the "elan of revolution" (Gold 207).

In the Holbrook family, both parents are oppressed by their class and gender roles in a perpetual quest for survival: The children are dependent on Anna and Anna is dependent on Jim who, in turn, is dependent on his job situation for survival. "Anna Holbrook... is so depleted by her children's dependency that she sinks into a dream paralysis" (Olsen 52) during which time she loses touch with reality and cannot act as her role as a wife and mother demands. Because she is overwhelmed with children, she is unreliable in her performance of even the smallest acts of mothering. Jim responds similarly when overwhelmed with responsibility, but, instead of becoming "paralyzed,"

Jim simply leaves and stays away from his family, unable, like Anna, to function in his prescribed role. His lack of autonomy within the working class leads to tensions and frustration which culminate in violent outbursts without “straining” to show life as a “supreme melodrama” (Gold 208).

The reason for these distressing sexist behaviors, according to Avram Landry, is that “the husband is exploited [by capitalism; therefore] the housewife’s position is wretched and miserable” (cited in Coiner 164). Jim feels emasculated because of his marginalization as an exploited worker of the proletariat. Anna even makes fun of his lack of earning power, to which Jim responds by asserting brutal sexual power over her, again yoking gender and class in his enactment of “domination [and] subjugation” (180). Jim never considers Anna an equal—he is more important as the one who earns money so that the family can survive. This doubled oppression of Anna apparently gives Jim the pretext to use violence as a means of control and a coping mechanism. Olsen effectively depicts the violence and subjugation within the proletarian realist model and, in doing so, presents readers with a conflict-ridden view of following Marxism by exposing its flaws through a feminist perspective.

Marxism not only neglects women’s needs, but strips the woman of body and child bearing ownership as well as all people of individual ownership of self. The influence Second Wave Feminism had on Olsen is felt in this theme of self valuation. According to Nora Roberts, in Marxism, people are “regarded...as individuals... precisely because of the role they might conceivable play in the suggested forthcoming revolution” (78). Roberts uses the example of the young worker, Andy Kvaternick, who is made to work in the mine after his father is killed by a cave-in, to illustrate this point:

“The young man [Kvaternick] is of little significance to the narrative yet receives the bounty of the author’s” passionate empathy which indicates that all characters are reduced to “typology” or role of the impending revolution (Roberts 78). The potential of the upcoming revolution relegates individuals to class groupings that benefit the Communist cause. “They are workers before they are people” (78). This loss of self ownership means that an individual belongs to the cause and, therefore, has no real autonomy as a person. Olsen depicts this lack of autonomy through Andy Kvaternick and, more poignantly, the character of Kvaternick’s mother. Though she is not explicitly wed nor mother to the proletariat cause, readers are privy to Kvaternick’s mother’s private anguish and individual pain at the loss of her husband and, presumably, her son as potential players in the upcoming insurgency. Though Olsen uses Gold’s rule that proletarian realism must have a revolutionary slant and a point (206-7), she subverts this notion by depicting the consequences of the uprising through the eyes of a female individual, a mother. By Olsen making the loss more substantial for the mother than it is for the impending revolution, she places more weight on individual concern rather than that of the proletariat.

Not only does Olsen use the specific view of a mother to question the validity of valuing the group over the individual, she also uses the plight and edicts imposed on any Communist mother figure to challenge the group focus. In Marxism, part of the female’s duties and contributions to the movement involves what Coiner terms “institutionalized motherhood” (181) where one of the responsibilities of the woman is to provide “Bolshevik workers” (Roberts 85) for the Marxist cause. By using women as a means to provide the worker population for the proletariat, Marxism removes the value of the

individual mother, treating each as part of the movement. In the 1930s, the woman's body did not belong to her, but to her class and the patriarchal Marxist system and, therefore, men in general.¹³ This lack of female ownership may be a large part of the justification behind the (marital) rape Jim imposes on Anna. If Anna's body belongs to the masculine working class as a production tool, the working class father/husband has the right to use it. However, Olsen questions this particular doctrine of the Marxist revolution by using Jim's proletariat-sanctioned rape as a means to show its damage to the working class movement. Anna's near fatal miscarriage speaks to the Marxist consequences and the feminist implications of marital rape, yet it denies her the right to her own baby and the violence imposed upon her and the child. The proletariat man, by disregarding his wife's wellbeing and brutalizing her in a sexual manner that suggests ownership, jeopardizes the future "Bolshevik worker" and labor force. This counterproductive act is suggestive of Olsen's depiction that gender based oppression is not always the result of an economic system, but also of a patriarchal society which feminism strives to "undo, thus blurring gender roles and expectations.

In order to undo this inequality and oppression, according to feminism, women must be given a "guarantee" in the "right of choice with respect to bearing children" (Farganis 28). A far cry from Coiner's "institutionalized motherhood," this guarantee ensured that women had complete control over their bodies and autonomy from systems, such as Marxism, that viewed a woman as a means to provide a work force. Feminism's influences on Olsen become increasingly obvious after this point in *Yonnondio*, possibly a result of Olsen's editing during the 1970s, as Olsen begins to portray the prevention of,

¹³ Men's bodies may also belong to the Marxist movement as part of the proletariat, working class revolution.

first, “individuals from oppressing each other and, second, to prevent government [or ruling class/sex] from oppressing individuals” (28). In addressing individual views and concerns regarding oppression and gender, Olsen strays from Gold’s proletarian realism while still maintaining a focus on the imminent reform of class structure as well as calling for change in the domestic sphere of women. She, therefore, uses Gold’s goals and formula to advocate working class and feminist goals, linking the two as a merge of the masculine and feminine.

Though female empowerment, in terms of body ownership, is important to achieving equality within the class and gender systems of the novel, it has also been suggested that “...*Yonnondio* implies that gender-based antagonisms are related in a simple cause and effect way to economic depression” (Coiner 180). Even though the links of gender and class weigh heavily on oppressive forces in this novel, monetary status still gives priority to any adult within the family. Earning power also contributes to the egalitarianism within the male/female relationship. Females must earn money in order to be equal to the breadwinner male and therefore would be just as important, in terms of class as Marxism says, to the survival of the family. However, “fighting for gender equality was a relatively low priority of the [Communist] Party” and can be explained “by the Party’s focus...on the workplace organizing. The Party believed that basic industry contained the element of the working class most central to the economy” (Coiner 41). According to Coiner, only “20% of women worked outside of the home in the 1930s”; this assigned the Communist Party’s sustainability to the men who provided “the element of the working class most central to the economy” (41). The reluctance to recognize or appreciate a woman’s contribution within her domestic sphere and a lack of

a female's monetary contribution gave the man power over his wife and primacy within the family, as Jim and Anna's relationship depicts. The man can live without his family, but the family cannot live without the man.

By depicting this gender power struggle within the terms of the Marxist ideal of the male's priority over the female as a function of class and monetary oppression, Olsen links gender and class as correlating oppressive forces. Olsen intensifies her focus to a more overtly feminist perspective on economic family contribution and gender struggle without losing the Marxist agenda. Because of Anna's inability to work outside the home and contribute to family finances in locations previous to Kansas City, she, as a victim of the patriarchal capitalist system, unintentionally burdens Jim in terms of obligation for family survival and fiscal responsibility. As noted in earlier instances throughout the story, all fiscal accountability lies with Jim. It is this heavy accountability that leads Jim to rebel against his monetary oppression with desperate brutality. He battles against that which is holding him back—Anna and his family, the representation of complete dependency—with the only tool he has: violence. Anna, for her part, reacts much the same way as Jim. “In the proverbial chain reaction, Anna responds, alternating defensiveness with like-minded abuse to the children” (Roberts 94). Her abusive behavior toward her children illustrates her oppressed role as the woman/domestic caretaker and subject of the male, working class anger. Again, the brutality and its perpetuation are linked through both gender and class.

Financial security and freedom sought by feminists in the late 1960s and early 70s, mirror the financial and public empowerment of Anna. Even though Anna tries to assert herself as a contributor to the family in the 1930s manuscript, it is through the

editing choices Olsen makes in the 1970s that Anna as a potential money earner. In the 1930s manuscript, Anna wants to help feed the family by raising a garden—a typical Marxist scenario for survival. Only in the 70s does Anna use domestic work in order to contribute financially to her family’s survival. The editing choice of using domestic work instead of agricultural labor as a means to survive indicates a shift of focus from Marxism to feminism in that, in each case, Anna uses that which would oppress her as a source of power. As Jim begins to make more money working in a Kansas City slaughterhouse, the financial burden on the family is lessened and the domestic hierarchy based on survival and fiscal importance wanes, as does the brutality incurred by financial hardship. As financial survival becomes less of an oppressive issue for the Holbrooks, it is then that oppression is more clearly established through gender roles, expectations, and contributions. The source of power is not in the necessity for earning power, as it is in the beginning chapters, but in the lack of necessity for earning power. Because it is unnecessary for Anna to earn money for the family’s survival, Jim’s power lies in that he provides sufficient financial support and does not need his wife to supplement his income; he becomes more powerful because he makes Anna unnecessary in typical economic terms—her domestic contribution is needed but not valued. In doing so, Jim fills the role of successful breadwinner and refuses the potential monetary contribution from his wife. Monetary contribution means Anna would have to empower herself, as Betty Friedan urged, by “getting out of the entrapment as housewives” and out of the domestic domination that is “wreaking psychic havoc” on her life (Farganis 15). By alleviating the survival-based domestic hierarchy, the power shifts to the husband who can provide enough so that a wife does not need and therefore should not work, thereby

relegating her to the “subservience to a consumer culture” (15). The stripping of potential empowerment of monetary contribution continues a woman’s role and place within the domestic hierarchy.

Anna, though, in the spirit of Second Wave Feminism, rebels against the patriarchal edicts of her husband and empowers herself by taking on employment. Anna’s “trust in [her] own perception” of the importance of her financial contribution may lead to her “conscious raising” (19) which brings her “women’s needs into the public...sphere” (16). Anna’s employment thrusts her into the working class world, and she brings her needs with her into her new employment. She is aware that her needs are important and that, by limiting herself or allowing herself to be limited in the domestic sphere, she is submitting to the oppression of the patriarchal system. Anna’s desire to work and her impending emergence into the working class correlates with Second Wave Feminism’s beliefs that women can achieve “equality of opportunity” by striving to be employed in the same positions as men. Even though her work as a washerwoman is domestic in nature, her employment empowers her as an equal because she would “gain the rewards that followed from a genuine meritocratic system” (Farganis 27). Olsen’s clear point and path to feminist revolution clearly follows Gold’s philosophy of proletarian realism, yet the revolution is not for the working classes—it is for women.

Another suggestion of Olsen’s familiarity and endorsement of Second Wave Feminism are Bess, the baby’s, primitive vocalizations and internal assertions “I achieve, I use my powers; I! I!” (*Yonnondio* 191). Though only a baby and unable to physically articulate, Bess finds her voice and no attempt is made by Jim or Anna to silence her. She delights in her “achieve[ment]” and finds power in her control over her own actions.

Bess exhibits a “distinct voice” embraced by Second Wave Feminism which entails “an intensive thinking aloud about what it means to be a woman” (Farginis 25). While Bess, as a baby, is too young to assert what it means to be a woman, she nevertheless asserts her power and independence as a female who becomes aware of her voice, capabilities, and power. As she finds independence as one who no longer depends on others to feed her or speak for her, she is a representative of the emerging, empowered voice of Second Wave Feminists.

Some of the strongest links between *Yonnondio* and Olsen’s immersion in the feminist movement come from her edits of her original manuscript. It is in the portrayal of separating the domestic responsibilities where Olsen signifies the importance of the concept of cooperation. In Olsen’s manuscript for *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, she illuminates how the separation of the mother’s and father’s roles must be brought together in a collaborative manner in order for the family to function and survive. In this scene Jim tries to coax an exhausted and physically depleted Anna back into the house from the yard to fix dinner for the family. He wants her to act in her role and only in her role as mother because she “aint well yet” (Olsen, *Yonnondio* makings). Anna’s response to Jim:

gall words scald from her tongue with bitterness [sic], the old bitterness that has packed down so deep, and the tormenting fear of the future, “Sure, go in, it don’t matter maybe the kids’ll be waitin for supper someday and none to give; sure, go in, what you care the worries I got, on the big wages you’re makin, I put in a garden and we wont starve anyhow, sure, go in,” (Olsen, *Yonnondio* makings)

The obvious separation of purpose and roles in the family has driven a wedge between Jim and Anna. The two are not a united entity trying to survive in poverty; the husband and wife are detached from each other’s lives. Anna makes Jim’s absence from the

realities of family survival very clear in her scathing review of his lack of interest in her struggle because of the “big wages [he’s] makin.” This disparity of purpose and perception of mutual priority between the two has caused Anna to previously lie “pallidly in bed” for days from the exhaustion and overwhelming responsibilities she must meet alone.

In both the manuscript and the published novel, Anna’s isolation from Jim makes her unable to function effectively in her role as wife and mother. Without support, her responsibility becomes overwhelming, just as Jim’s financial responsibility overwhelms him in the first two thirds of the novel. Olsen’s manuscript indicates that she recognizes this separation of duties as the reason for the family’s woes. Jim recognizes Anna’s need for cooperative support and, after finding her working in the garden when she is still ill, “helps her into the house, and makes her supper, and makes the children supper, and after the house is quiet, goes out into the clear night and works till midnight, turning the earth...For awhile, his tenderness and his help” allow Anna to recover (Olsen, *Yonnonndio* makings). The result of Jim’s “help” is that “it is easier now for awhile” (Olsen, *Yonnonndio* makings). So, even in the earliest makings of *Yonnonndio*,¹⁴ Olsen’s apparent goal is to merge different elements together to show a pragmatic, Marxist method of cooperation that eases daily struggles of marginalized peoples which, at the same time, blurs gender roles.

However, the final, published *Yonnonndio* of the 1970s is edited so that the separation of gender roles is amplified, making the message of cooperation more subtle in

¹⁴ The page, due to poor physical condition and significant textual difference from the final *Yonnonndio*, is believed by me to be from the late thirties.

its presence. In the correlating section of the 1974 edition of *Yonnondio* to the aforementioned passage, Anna has not planted her garden yet, nor does Jim go out of his way to help with her domestic duties. The published passage has been expanded from the manuscript copy and furthers the sense of isolation of Anna and Jim from each other. In the published copy, during a period of time when Anna is supposed to be bedridden from exhaustion, she argues with Jim about money and providing basic needs for the family. In the corresponding passage, Anna says:

Maybe they'll be waiting for supper someday and there'll be none to give. You ever think of that? We're putting in a garden like you promised and never done, that's what I'm doin up. And I'm starting launderin work again if I can get it...Go on in yourself...Let the dirt stay, let the kids run wild and not a decent stitch on 'em, let there be no makin do on the money, I shouldn't be up. Don't touch me! And who's to cook and clean and look after the kids if I'm in bed? Who? The servants? The fine servants we keep on the big wages you're makin? (*Yonnondio* 129).

Olsen has added, from the manuscript,¹⁵ more intensity to the separation of roles between Jim and Anna. By removing the acts of collaboration found in the original manuscript, Olsen intensifies the isolation felt by both Anna and Jim. Olsen chooses to keep Anna's biting words that criticize Jim's ability to financially provide for the family, but she amplifies Anna's marginalization by portraying Jim as denying her the garden. This garden would be a way for Anna to provide for the family apart from Jim, and she would need his help and cooperation in order to construct her garden as well as being a major

¹⁵ This assertion is made from evidence found from the Tillie Olsen Collection found in the Stanford University Archives. There are some remnants of Olsen's manuscripts in the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library. Because there exists more Olsen makings than the one collection I found, I cannot say with absolute certainty that Olsen did not change her original manuscript in the 1930s. However, the similarities in the text and sentiments of the text indicate that the "rewriting" is merely an editing choice made to better the flow and style of the text.

component in Marxist concerns. In the manuscript, Jim spends copious hours tilling soil in cooperation with Anna's desire to raise a garden. However, in the published novel, Jim merely "attempts [to] comfort" Anna with his promise, "*I'll spade up your garden and tomorrow, payday, we'll get seeds. We'll work things out, you'll see, don't take on so,*" knowing he is making "vows that life will never let him keep" (130, italics in original). So, the segregation of the spouses toward the end of the published novel is much more pronounced than in Olsen's manuscript and Anna's desires and selfhood are marginalized by her and Jim's inability to work together. In removing many visible signs of cooperation, Olsen reduces the significance of Communist/collectivist ideology and allows the influence of Second Wave Feminism to overshadow the novel's previous primary ideological structure, thus becoming a predominantly feminist influenced text.

Anna's pronounced marginalization and spousal separation is not the only way Olsen allows Second Wave Feminism to pervade the 1970s edition of the novel. Olsen also manages to empower Anna by making her an agent of monetary contribution to the family. In the manuscript, there is little mention of Anna earning money to try to alleviate some of the financial burden placed on Jim, but the Anna of the 1970s novel explicitly states that she is going to "start launderin work if she can get it" (130).¹⁶ The 1970s version of Anna also independently begins a savings fund for Will's education. Anna's agency and ownership of self is directly influenced by the Second Wave Feminist Movement which is even more apparent because the preceding passage of text would be found toward the end of the novel, giving even more credibility to the claim that the

¹⁶ Again, this assertion is made from evidence found from the Tillie Olsen Collection found in the Stanford University Archives. This assertion is based off of correlating passages in the working manuscript and the published novel.

influence of Second Wave Feminism takes precedence over Marxism as Olsen's 1970s editing choices are revealed. To a degree, Olsen gives Anna social and financial independence from Jim, the ability to some extent provide for her family, and the ownership of her actions that allows her to do so.

Toward the end of *Yonnondio*, the feminist perspective seems close to overtaking the Marxist agenda, but it does not; Jim joins an organized union at work to oppose the capitalist exploitation of the working class. However, Olsen shifts focus to Anna's empowerment as a supplement to the background of Jim's working class organization. Olsen's scenario of marital rape, miscarriages, and domestic subjugation directly reflects Second Wave Feminism's exploration of a "more emphatically gendered view" between men and women (23). Olsen follows this phase of feminism as she examines Anna's, Mazie's, and Bess's "women's experiences, emotions, and feelings" where "emphasis was placed on what is essential to the woman by seeing a world through a woman's eyes...life affirming" (23). Obviously, Mazie's nickname, "Big Eyes," (though original to the 1934 text, as are most of the scenarios) and her central perception in the storytelling mirrors feminism's focus on a woman's perspective. Anna's experiences as a wife and a mother certainly raise questions about the Marxist neglect of feminine needs and the oppression of women through patriarchal society. And, of course, Bess affirms her femininity as she finds her voice at the end of the novel.

All of these feminist aspects indicate that Olsen's suggestion that if empowered by themselves and men, women can have a huge impact on the Marxist revolution as a more public force, thereby completing the reform. Olsen's text merges the Marxist and feminist revolutionary elans within the proletarian realist dogma prescribed by Mike

Gold. In merging the conflicts of Marxism and capitalism, male and female gender struggles, and proletarian realism and feminine discourse, Olsen creates complex power struggle within her novel, *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*. By using Mike Gold's model of "masculine" proletarian realism to promote the feminine needs of individual women, Olsen connects economic and gender conflicts in an interdependent relationship of power and empowerment.

CHAPTER III

OLSEN'S ATTEMPT AT CRITICISM: REBECCA HARDING DAVIS' *LIFE IN THE IRON MILLS* AND "ONE OUT OF TWELVE"

Beginning in 1969 and at the forefront of Second Wave Feminism,¹⁷ Tillie Olsen began compiling reading lists of women authors who had been forgotten or ignored in the literary canon; she then published these lists from 1972-1974 (Robinson 289). As a part of her attempt to draw attention to these female authors, Olsen challenged the canon in the early 1970s when she "place[d] obscure and unknown authors on the shelf reserved for the classics" (296). Due to "this event," Olsen is credited as a "herald [to] the paradigm shift in literary studies which is still underway" (296). To further her cause, Olsen published "Women Who Are Writers in Our Century: One Out of Twelve" and, as a special project, brought considerable attention to the 19th century writer Rebecca Harding Davis and her work "Life in the Iron Mills."¹⁸ Olsen's impact is felt by literature and women's studies departments all over the United States as a significant reason for the increasing veneration and exposure of women writers in academia. While

¹⁷ First Wave Feminism dealt with legal injustices between men and women. Second Wave Feminism sought to eliminate social injustices between men and women. Third Wave Feminism examines the differences between women; it includes GLBT, gender, and sex issues.

¹⁸ Harding Davis was born in 1831 and first published *Life in the Iron Mills* in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1861.

Carla Kaplan refers to this “project” as the “rescue of thwarted, silenced, marginalized women” (Kaplan 169), Olsen refers to her acts as a resurrection of women authors who do not “have [an] audience” and, therefore, suffer “a kind of death” (“Women Who Are Writers in Our Century: One Out of Twelve” 16). Olsen’s place, then, in the feminist movement is literary in nature and is a result of her personal connection to the marginalized classes of society. This connection not only resulted in the biased anger and resentment in her nonfiction work but also in the development of nuanced critical approaches to the evaluation of men and women writers.

Olsen’s feeling of urgency regarding her 1970s literary project to “resurrect” women authors (as well as her proletariat writing) often led to quickly constructed and messy work. The lack of objectivity and abundance of errors in Olsen’s nonfiction texts indicate the speed and passion with which Olsen produced these texts. Olsen’s method, as studied by Deborah Rosenfelt, “expressed a wish to write in a more disciplined way” in that it attempts to take a meticulous approach to producing fiction though this desire does not necessarily result in cleaner prose (Weber 26). Rosenfelt seems to be correct in her assessment of this technique as Olsen not only expresses this rigor in writing throughout her journals but also includes such comments in her manuscripts. The Olsen Archives in the Special Collections at Stanford University reveal Olsen’s intention to become more disciplined from the early 1930s. In materials offering insight to Olsen’s *Yonnondio*: *From the Thirties* makings, Olsen writes “A whole week ahead—everyday free—to work like a horse—8 [crossed out “6”] hrs a day minimum” (Olsen, *Yonnondio* makings). Olsen’s voicing of her desire to be more disciplined in her writing is matched by her numerous manuscript revisions. Olsen’s manuscripts contain multiple revisions of

singular pages or passages, oftentimes with minimal or similar corrections made for each draft. This does not indicate Olsen is a chaotic writer but quite the opposite. Olsen's meticulous revisions (matched by the meticulous care she took of other aspects of her writing and life) reveal her attempt at perfection and, therefore, are, almost by definition, inefficient.¹⁹

Her painstakingly thorough and redundant method may be why Olsen's twenty page short story, "Requa" first published in 1970 in *The Iowa Review*, took two years for Olsen to make suitable for publishing. The inefficiency of Olsen's writing may also be a result of Olsen's constant interruption of family life, work obligations, and political activities. Olsen first put her fiction career on hold in the late 1930s for motherhood and social activism. Olsen often cites her domestic responsibilities, along with discrimination by the upper classes, as a reason for her lack of output. Olsen, then, as Miles Weber contends, "has solidified her unique place in the literary canon by maintaining her status" because of her "silence" (21).²⁰ Weber continues to say that *Tell Me A Riddle* "established her career as a writer; the absence of work since, far from harming her

¹⁹ Olsen's precise examination of her royalty statements and identification of tiny errors, as well as her assertive, even aggressive, manner in dealing with these minor gaffes exposes her attention to detail and fastidious sense of fairness. Olsen's method of righting the mistakes made by either agent or publishing company was to write a letter to her agent, urging him to address the publishing company. Olsen would then continue to write detailed letters until the mistake had been resolved. Olsen also showed the same alertness and attention to minute details when editing her writing. When sent a galley to revise, Olsen would send back a list of sentences, words, punctuation, etc. that would require a slight change. (Tillie Olsen Papers)

²⁰ Weber cites *Tell Me A Riddle* as Olsen's only finished work, *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* is an unfinished, old work, "Requa" is also considered unfinished, and *Silences* contains too many pieces by other authors to be considered a pure Olsen work. Olsen's resurrection work of Rebecca Harding Davis and others are writings by other authors to which Olsen is merely drawing attention (Weber 21).

career, has sustained it, nourished it, become it” (21). Even Olsen herself states that she is so popular because she did not produce a great deal of material. Though there is truth to Weber’s argument (and Olsen’s admission), Olsen’s place in the literary canon is not based solely on her “silence.” It is based on her voice, a voice that has contributed several female authors to the literary canon merely by raising awareness of their existence and worth.²¹ Olsen has written multi-layered literary works that can be read as cultural artifacts, lyrical masterpieces, proletariat literature, and social commentary. Olsen can be read as the voice of all marginalized individuals of her generation and social position who were silenced and portrays their plight through a convergence of several contexts—historical, social, or ideological. Olsen’s complex fictional and critical works and voice, whether finished to the satisfaction and intent of the author, is what cements her place in the literary canon.

Two works of Olsen’s nonfiction, “Women Who Are Writers in Our Century: One Out of Twelve” and “A Biographical Interpretation of ‘Life in the Iron Mills’ by Rebecca Harding Davis” are pieces that place her within the Feminist Movement of the late 60s and throughout the 1970s. The quality of “One Out of Twelve” and “A Biographical Interpretation,” though emotionally charged and powerful in tone, lack so-called academic sophistication. Instead, Olsen decidedly writes from a very personal perspective and exposes her stance as a part of the Feminist literary movement. “One out of Twelve” demonstrates Olsen’s literary project as feminist based and “A Biographical Interpretation” is the fruit borne of that project.

²¹ Olsen published lists in the *Women’s Studies Newsletter* starting in 1969 and from The Feminist Press in 1971. Lists included Zora Neale Hurston and several other authors widely studied in literature programs today (Perlman and Werlock).

“One Out of Twelve” deals with the “silence of women” writers who have suffered “inequities, restrictions, penalties, denials, leeching” causing “limitations, harms, a sense of wrong” (6). Olsen’s goal is to “voice” these inequalities and ignorance of women writers in the past. In the essay, Olsen compares the nineteenth century’s treatment of women to that of the twentieth century and concedes that “ours [twentieth] has been a favorable one” where

we [women] have access to areas of work and life experience previously denied; higher education; longer lives; for the first time in human history, freedom from compulsory child bearing; freer bodies and attitudes toward sexuality; and—of the greatest importance to those like myself who come from generations of illiterate women—increasing literacy, and higher degrees of it. (6)

Olsen goes on to mention results of the “women’s movement” as “productivity: books of all manner and kind” and “comparative earnings” (6).²² Olsen’s last positive result of the Second Wave Feminist Movement is women’s literary “achievement: appearance in twentieth Century literature courses, required reading lists, textbooks; in quality anthologies; the year’s best, the decade’s best, the fifty years’ best,” etc. (6-7). If Olsen cites the most important gain for women in the twentieth century as “higher degrees of...increasing literacy” (6) and the most remarkable result of this gain is productivity and achievement, her specific focus and goals for her involvement as a feminist are of a literary nature. Olsen’s measure of progress is shaped by her own experiences in her profession and in, as she states, seeing both “the first great harvest” of women writers and the literary canon changes brought forth by her work. Olsen’s devotion to women’s

²² “Equal pay for equal work” or the Lily Ledbetter Bill passed in 2007, which is an amendment to the Equal Pay Act of 1963. Olsen mentions that there are “no figures available yet” because the Act did not pass until 26 years after “One Out of Twelve” had been written.

literacy and achievement of women writers gives Olsen a specific and unique role among the most prominent names (i.e. “the sisterhood”) in the feminist movement.²³

While “One Out of Twelve” is obviously passionate and very personal to Olsen (she cites her mother’s journey to literacy as a major reason for her dedication to women authors),²⁴ the zeal and sense of umbrage of the piece pale in comparison to “A Biographical Interpretation.” “A Biographical Interpretation” often refers to parts of the Academy and publishing industry that are “all male, of course” (72), and she focuses on social repressions experienced by women including “indignities and rejection because their appearance and being do not fit the prevailing standards of female beauty” (78). Olsen’s emotional, even angry response of such social wrongs seems to be personal (and pertinent to her career). In the final galley copy of “A Biographical Interpretation,” Olsen adds the word “male” to the galley’s words “heavily [male] edited” when describing Harding Davis’ struggles publishing work as well as including the phrase “humanstory” (manuscript) instead of saying “history.” These changes were made on the final edit of the galley—they did not make it into the text. It seems as if Olsen included these edits after the point they would be added to the published text and, in that case, appear to be Olsen’s feelings, which only intensifies the tone of her personal resentment

²³ Olsen refers to “the sisterhood” in speech notes for a lecture she gave in 1968/1969 at Amherst. In general, “the sisterhood” of the women’s movement means all women, but can refer to its leaders—Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Germaine Greer (Tillie Olsen Papers).

²⁴ Olsen’s mother could not read until she was well into her 20s. Ida Lerner cited literacy as providing her with a new happiness in her life; literacy was a freedom for her. Obviously, Olsen used this as the purpose for her women writers project—not only so women could be heard, but so they could read others with similar experiences thereby freeing them from an isolated view of the world (“One Out of Twelve”).

toward that “heavily [male]” publishing industry and her reclamation of a “humanstory” piece rather than “his[-] story.” Olsen is not writing *his* story; she is writing *her* story and, in doing so, is attempting to make Harding Davis a woman writer. In this case, I am using “his” and “her” in a general sense. In this case, Olsen could be talking about Rebecca Harding Davis’ story, Olsen’s own story, or a female centric story that could be applied to any woman writer. It appears that Olsen is establishing a separate set of standards and criteria by which she will read this woman author than she would read a male writer.

It is this embracing of the personal that Olsen uses in her attempt at scholarly writing, which could be considered transformative to traditional critical standards and practices, that places her specifically within a female perspective. The norm for academic writing is to follow ‘critical etiquette’—an illusion of objectivity while attempting to be political and edgy. Olsen rejects this etiquette and pretense of objectivity—she openly acknowledges her lack of scholarly training and her goal to make her critique political and personal (she calls Harding Davis “Rebecca”). Olsen’s passion is borne of the social differences she sees in men and women, a concept central to the Feminist Movement of the 1970s, and “the damaging differences in [women’s] circumstances and treatment from that of males” (6). Here, Olsen is staking out a place that is outside of the Academy. Her non-criticism criticism is less an examination of Harding Davis’ text (though it is that) than of the individual’s work in contrast to the strictures of the Academy. This seems to be the feminist and fiction writer pushing themselves into Olsen’s scholarly work, trying to make a connection with her audience on an emotional level. If this is the case, Olsen, then, is stepping away from the more

masculine critical approaches of the time such as the Freudian-based psychoanalytical approach. By distancing herself from these particular criticisms, Olsen approaches a text with a different set of concerns regarding women's contributions and criteria for literature.

As indicated in both "A Biographical Interpretation" and "One Out of Twelve," Olsen creates a separation of how she regards men and women based on these concerns. Often, Olsen's relationship and reaction to a text stems from whether the language its author uses is markedly masculine or feminine. Olsen's own writing exhibits what Joanne S. Frye terms a "mother tongue" (Frye 117).²⁵ Before the advent of feminist literary theory—of Feminism itself, the Academy privileged what would be considered "masculine" language and literature because those who dictated the content of the literary canon were all men. Virginia Woolf, in her sections four and five in *A Room of One's Own*, "suggests that language use is gendered" (Barry 126). Woolf also indicates that most examples of language in "great" novels up to that point have distinct "male" characteristics which, according to Peter Barry, appear to be "carefully balanced and patterned rhetorical sequences (126). Women's language and sentences, on the other hand, are constructed of "clauses [that] are linked in looser sequences," rather than the symmetry and rigidity of the predominantly celebrated male prose of the time (126). So, in challenging the Academy's male-centrist ideas of valuable literature, Olsen privileges the distinctive language of female writers. However, even though Olsen—as the focus and purpose of "One Out of Twelve" and "A Biographical Interpretation" suggest—

²⁵ Further examination and analysis of Olsen's relationship to language regarding the "mother tongue" is explored in the final chapter of this thesis.

disputes the male-writer stronghold on the academic canon, that same literary exclusivity is necessary as a standard to which she must compare women authors. Without the “all male, of course” publishing industry or Academy (“A Biographical Interpretation” 72), Olsen’s claims would be fruitless. Thus, Olsen’s affiliation to the Academy, though contentious, is obligatory and generates an ambiguous relationship of mutual necessity and disdain. She is always bound to the notion of the academic canon and struggles to find her place in relation to it; the male-dominated canon must exist in order for Olsen to challenge and find her place in relation to it as an author and critic.

In Olsen’s galley revisions of “A Biographical Interpretation of ‘Life in the Iron Mills’ by Rebecca Harding Davis,” she further reveals her anger and bitterness over the subjugation of women by a male dominated society that pervade her final text. She adds inciting remarks to clarify the extent, in her opinion, to which women writers are marginalized. In a section discussing norms of women’s professions, domestic obligations, and intellectual abilities in the 1860s, Olsen writes “Was it more a woman’s work to dissect babies rather than suckle them?” (137) to which she adds to the manuscript by hand “repeating the authoritative individual opinion of the day” (“A Biographical Interpretation,” makings). Here, Olsen is describing her perception of how the “authoritative individual opinion of the day,” e.g. the male, regards the female thought capability as limited and traditionally responsible to domestic life. A woman’s role at the time, as implied by Olsen’s text, is fulfilling an obligation to her husband and family. With this subversive addition to the text, Olsen clearly expresses resentment and anger to the notion that women should not have significant roles (her question implies a role in the medical or scientific field) in academics or outside the role of mother. Olsen

continues the distinction between male and female opportunities in the workplace. A later addition to the text again betrays Olsen's frustration and pointed blame on patriarchal society for the lack of opportunity for women to progress in their careers and, in this case, voice an opinion.²⁶ In this draft, the "heavily edited magazine" (165)²⁷ that denies the women's voice becomes a "heavily male edited magazine" ("A Biographical Interpretation" makings). Olsen's disdain for the prevailing male authority is obvious in her extra effort to ensure that her reader understands it is the differences between the sexes that prevent women from receiving the same opportunities as men.²⁸

One does not need to search the manuscript edits, however, to find revealing passages that expose Olsen's anger and resentment of the male dominated literary profession of the 1970s. Olsen's sentiments in "A Biographical Interpretation of 'Life in the Iron Mills' by Rebecca Harding Davis" seem like personal grievances projected onto the facts of Rebecca Harding Davis' life. These projections reveal Olsen's "interpretation," though the interpretation may reveal more about Olsen than it does about Harding Davis. Olsen

²⁶ When discussing the lack of attention given to the "girl" mill workers in Harding Davis' text, Olsen shares their injustice: "These young women were 'hungry to know'; did meet in the Lowell Improvement Circles [a proletarian meeting to educate themselves toward the cause] to study [and write] after their thirteen hour workday, but the conditions under which they worked and their reactions to it were not allowed to appear in the heavily [manuscript add: "male"] edited magazine" (BIO 165).

²⁷ The "heavily edited magazine" is found on page 165 in both the published text and the galley of "A Biographical Interpretation," but the word "male" is handwritten on the galley page and does not appear in the published text.

²⁸ The galley edits of "A Biographical Interpretation" did not make it into the published copy. The final version remains without the additions of "repeating authoritative individual opinion" on pg 137 and "male" on pg 165. The indication, then, is that the galley sheets may have been from the final copy and Olsen's changes were purely personal at that point. In any case, her focus on blaming the male dominated society for the marginalization of women is well represented throughout the text, even without her final additions.

admits that the “outward, known facts are few” during the thirteen years “before the seventeen-year-old girl-valedictorian emerges as the thirty-year-old author of *Life in the Iron Mills*” (“A Biographical Interpretation” 77). Because of the lack of hard information, Olsen must turn “to the writings” to “piece together what some of those thirteen years must have been” (77). It is during this time period, especially, that Olsen may project her own resentments into the text because she must interpret Harding Davis’ fiction to attempt to establish Harding Davis’ state of mind. As her focus, Olsen points out that Harding Davis’ work contains the figures of “proud, vulnerable young women, subjected to indignities and rejection because their appearance and being do not fit the prevailing standards of female beauty or behavior” (78). These women, as Olsen reveals are “patronize[d]...[by] young men [when told] ‘you are built for use, but not for show’” (78). Olsen reads Harding Davis’ women characters as wronged individuals who are viewed as “freaks” and “penalized because they cannot ‘blush and flutter and plume themselves when a man comes near’” (78). Olsen is sympathetic to the plight of these “useful” women, stating “there is nothing sexless about them” (79). The tone of Olsen’s reading of Harding Davis’ characters is not only sympathetic, but it is also empathetic. The empathy and sympathy displayed by Olsen interfere with the degree of objectivity by which she analyzes both “Life in the Iron Mills” and biographical information about Rebecca Harding Davis. “A Biographical Interpretation,” then, is problematic as a piece of historical literary criticism and becomes more akin to the genre of historical fiction. Hayden White, in his article “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” makes the case that any historical writing becomes a form of literature. Just as “the historian...is a practitioner of [history]” White indicates, “he is likely to be a devotee of one or another

of its sects and hence biased” (81), Olsen is biased in her devotion to Rebecca Harding Davis. In his essay, White questions the distinction between history and literature and argues that any historical narrative, like Olsen’s “A Biographical Interpretation,” would be subjected to the historian’s need to “explain” past events rather than merely report them (82). Olsen certainly attempts to explain or “trace what had happened with Rebecca Harding [Davis]” by piecing together the incomplete chronicles and artifacts of Rebecca Harding Davis’ life (“A Biographical Interpretation” 154). In doing so, Olsen has made her historical narrative of Rebecca Harding Davis a “fiction, the contents of which are as much *invented as found*” (White 82-3, original italics). Olsen’s imagination and projection of her own biases into her biographical interpretation constitute what White calls “emplotment” or “the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures” (83). In the same way most “fictions” are structured, Olsen has encoded factual events of Rebecca Harding Davis’ life with a narrative structure that allows for authorial projection, thus relying on the methodology of a literary writer. In doing so, Olsen’s may become what amounts to an autobiographical exercise rather than a piece to resurrect Rebecca Harding Davis. In her narrative, Olsen asks if the passages she had been examining offer clues or autobiography into Harding Davis’ life. It is here where her imagination and “emplotment” of Harding Davis’ history begins. Though Olsen cannot explicitly state there is biographical information in Harding Davis’ writings, she does emphatically proclaim:

But what is most singular in those thirteen years—the development of that girl in her cramped life, fiercely struggling to tame and bind to some unfitting work the power within; of what made it a cramped life; of how she faced down the harm and maimings of her personal situation, the self-scorn, the thwarting, and—fitted

in between tasks and family needs, in secret and in isolation, without literary friendship and its encouragement—developed an ear, a discipline, made of herself a writer, *against the prevalent, found her own subject*—of this there is scarcely a word. (80)

In this passage, the reader finds Olsen's frustrations, obstacles, triumphs, and anger projected into the "biographical interpretation" of Rebecca Harding Davis. Olsen's writing career was "thwarted" by the "maimings of her personal situation" as a young mother whose financial and family circumstances forced her to relinquish writing for years. If taken out of context, one could easily mistake Harding Davis' plight—as described by Olsen—as Olsen's own life.

Olsen's "family needs" removed her from writing and proletariat literary circles, causing her to live a "cramped life" of the working class for over a decade. The interruptions to Olsen's writing career left her in "isolation, without literary friendship and its encouragement." Yet she was able to "develop an ear, discipline, [and] ma[k]e herself a writer" without any formal training and she received the Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship at Stanford University in 1955. During her time at Stanford, Olsen developed stories for what would become her most popular literary work to date, *Tell Me A Riddle*. However, as Olsen found time to write "in between tasks and family needs," she developed perfectionist tendencies ("self-scorn") that presented her with an obstacle of inefficient writing. That obstacle, combined with what she viewed as a "heavily [male] edited" publishing industry and the "authoritative individual opinion of the day," again male, is how she triumphs "against the prevalent, [and] found her own subject [italics original]" ("A Biographical Interpretation" 80) in her treatment of mothers and daughters, the working class plight, and the marginalization of women. Even though Olsen faced these challenges, an integral factor in her career progression and success was

her time in pre-Second Wave Feminist Academia. Yet again, Olsen's success and importance as a writer stems from her dependence on academic institutions, the masculine traditionalism of which she would later challenge.

In revealing her leanings, Olsen also discloses the time period in which she was writing. While Harding Davis may have taken up themes of women's roles and expectations in the society of the 1860s, it is the early 1970s Feminist Movement that brought that type of feminist criticism to prominence. Olsen, in her interpretation, presents a woman-centric text that discloses several clues as to her influence by Second Wave Feminism. Olsen's text consistently assumes the point of view that the "prevalent" is the male perspective and that it dominates society, the literary profession, and monetary success. Olsen, then, constantly points out instances in Harding Davis' life where she is at odds with said "prevalent." Harding Davis' accomplishments are peppered with Olsen's interjections of gender clarity—as if the reader would forget Harding Davis was a woman. When she describes Harding Davis as a "valedictorian," Olsen must place the word "girl" to modify "valedictorian" (77). In her description of Harding Davis' physical appearance, Olsen says it "was probably considered unfortunate—for a girl" (75). Olsen calls attention to the vocation of teacher, one of the few "respectable" jobs for Harding Davis to pursue, and is sure to inform the reader that a woman teacher would be compensated "at a third of men's pay" (74). Olsen seems to be affirming the worth of women as well as the social injustices women of her generation face by constantly qualifying Harding Davis' accomplishments as female and as valid. Olsen must make clear Harding Davis' sex in order to expose the norm of social injustice Harding Davis may have faced from academic success to employment options to physical

appearance. The problem here is that Olsen must speculate and, again, project the severity of injustices Harding Davis experienced, and Olsen obviously is referring to her experience, the period of production, and political contexts of the time.

It is not just the addition of women-centric phrases and terms that voice Olsen's projection of the contemporary issues of the Second Wave Feminist Movement in her text; it is also the tone through which she does it. The sarcasm and piercing bitterness are clear in passages when she considers Harding Davis to be marginalized, as is Olsen's joy when Harding Davis seemingly challenges traditional societal roles of women. Olsen says of Harding Davis' aspirations to continue her education after high school:²⁹ "Even if [Harding Davis] had wanted to go on with education, there was but one college in the entire country that would admit a female, the scandalous, unthinkable (abolitionist) Oberlin" (73-4). As evidenced earlier in this paper, Olsen has strong views on the promotion of female literacy and education. To her, it is a way for women to find "freedom" and it is evident that her feelings are the same. In this case, the "unthinkable" college education would save Harding Davis from the "prescribed one sphere, one vocation" mandated to her by "the massed social structure...--marriage" (74). Olsen's tone and presentation of marriage as an extremely limited job gives the reader the impression that college would free Harding Davis from a lifetime of servitude to her husband. By using cynical tone, Olsen portrays marriage as unjust and subjugating; the wife is confined while the man is free.³⁰

²⁹ Harding Davis graduated from high school in 1848.

³⁰ By all accounts, Olsen's marriage to Jack Olsen was one of mutual respect and cooperation, especially in the fields of politics and socialist activism, with very few instances of what could be termed domestic subjugation.

In contrast to Olsen's bitter tone, she exudes a feeling of rapture when she presents Harding Davis as stepping outside her "prescribed" social obligations. According to Olsen, Harding Davis lived in a time and social circle where "all social activities were calculated towards...[achieving] the most advantageous possible marriage" (75). Olsen, seemingly, could not be happier than when she asserts that "Rebecca did not involve herself in the expected social round" (75). Olsen further explains why "Rebecca" refused to attend such functions:

Whatever the reasons were—subtle family ones,³¹ the lonely pull of obviously shared interests—among them must have been Rebecca's refusal to remain in situations of emptiness, of falsity, of injuries to her sense of selfhood—where there was a choice. She stayed almost exclusively within the family circle. (76)

Olsen's tone here implies that Harding Davis was too thoughtful and deep for the shallow social scene of her time. Of course, according to Olsen, it was Harding Davis' choice not to attend, to refuse speciousness and a perceived loss of self. However, it may or may not have been Harding Davis' choice. First, there is no way of Olsen being able to deduce Harding Davis' motivations for not attending a social function other than to project the motivations Olsen wants Harding Davis to have. Second, Olsen stresses that "there was a choice" (76) Harding Davis makes to rebuke these hollow attempts at socializing and unabashedly praises the author for avoiding these situations. There is no way Olsen, writing her biographical interpretation over one hundred years later, could possibly gain such personal and detailed insight into Harding Davis' life and circumstances.³²

³¹ Olsen gives the "subtle family" reasons for her to stay at home as Harding Davis' "father may have preferred to keep her home, as fathers of the time...often did" (161).

³² Olsen does have access to some personal correspondence of Rebecca Harding Davis. However, this passage is not cited nor have an endnote to verify her claims.

However, as Olsen herself states, Harding Davis' father "may have preferred to keep her home" (161). Harding Davis' role in her family's home, one in which she supposedly chose to remain, consisted of "necessary tasks of caring for family needs, younger children; keeping the atmosphere pleasant, especially for her father" (76). As "the eldest daughter in a large household," the position Harding Davis held in her father's home forced her to "keep her longings, questions, insurrections, secret" (76), which Olsen claims as a reason for Harding Davis not to pursue marriage. Harding Davis seems to take on the wifely/motherly role which she, according to Olsen, chose not to pursue by refusing to attend social functions where the end result was marriage. Could this again be another instance of Olsen projecting her own 1970s awareness of social injustices in marriage to explain Harding Davis' motivations with marriage? It appears the answer can be found in Olsen's treatment of Harding Davis' marriage to Clarke Davis. The affinity Olsen shows to an independent, single Harding Davis throughout "A Biographical Interpretation" is eventually given up, at the cost of near mockery and disdain, to Harding Davis and her groom. It is tempting to read Olsen's disdain for Harding Davis' marriage as a projection of her own marriage to Jack Olsen, but in doing so I would be emplotting Olsen's life experiences into the text.

In what seems like a reaction of disgust to Harding Davis' societal marginalization by men, Olsen expresses a kind of disappointment over Harding Davis' marriage to Clarke Davis. Olsen cites a letter Harding Davis wrote to her close friend and confidant, Annie Fields, stating that Harding Davis' impending marriage meant that her "summer days are coming now" (Olsen 114). Although Harding Davis gushes about her husband to be—"When you [Annie] know him you won't think much of me" (cited in

113)—Olsen nearly scoffs at the notion that this marriage will bring “summer days.” Olsen’s response of “All that had been impressed upon her from babyhood impelled her to the believing [that] ‘love and marriage—a woman’s fulfillment’” meant that “when [a woman] loved, [she] fulfilled the law of [her] woman’s nature” (114). Earlier in the essay, Olsen paints Harding Davis as above finding “satisfactory companionship” (72) in her high school years as her “seriousness of purpose and ‘hunger to know’ set her apart” (72). Olsen seems to be disappointed that Harding Davis embraced the traditional female societal role as a wife and mother, that Harding Davis was, as Annie Fields “no longer of those whom ‘God thought unworthy of every woman’s right, to love and be loved’” (114). Olsen is close to mocking Harding Davis in her hope for a blissful marriage. The question is why? This mockery of Harding Davis’ marriage presents a contradiction of Olsen’s portrayal of the author up to this point. She has been idealizing and praising Harding Davis from the beginning of her essay, yet Olsen scoffs at the marriage. Olsen seems reluctant to accept Harding Davis’ willingness and desire to enter into the traditional societal mandate of marriage.

At this point, I must acknowledge that I am projecting some of Olsen’s personal experiences into her treatment of Harding Davis though I am attempting to use factual evidence to back up my claims. If I were to project my imagination here, where there is not enough verifiable evidence to back up my claims, I would cross the line from criticism to fiction—though I may have done that already—like Olsen does to Harding Davis and project myself into her text. With that in mind, it appears that Olsen’s admiration for the independent Harding Davis pervades her assessment of the author, yet Olsen does not allow for the possibility that Harding Davis is independent by necessity,

not choice. In recounting the marriage hopes of Harding Davis, Olsen romanticizes Harding Davis as a woman who has willingly set herself “against the prevalent” (80) thus balancing power between Harding Davis and her husband. So, as she comes to terms with Harding Davis’ marriage by turning the couple into a progressive institution of marital equality for the time period,³³ Olsen’s projections again turn positive toward both Harding Davis and Clarke Davis.

As a result of Olsen referring to Davis exclusively by her first name throughout the text instead of the more objective “Davis” or “Harding Davis,” Olsen suggests a familiarity and personal connection to her subject. Olsen also refers to other women in the biographical interpretation by their first names (i.e. Annie). Conversely, Olsen refers to men by their last names throughout the text (Davis, Hawthorne);³⁴ she refers to Clarke Davis as “Davis” in the text until the point in the interpretation that he marries Harding Davis. It is Davis’ connection to and Olsen’s respect for his wife that allow Olsen to give Davis a first name. Just by referring to men and women differently—men by their last names and women by their first, Olsen again uses language to deal with males and females in separate contexts. Again, Olsen establishes dissimilar rules for regarding men and women in texts.

³³ Again, this may be a projection from Olsen. Her marriage to Jack Olsen was extremely progressive for the time. They lived together before marriage, were intellectual and ideological equals, and supportive of each other’s independent lives. As the wife, Olsen, though Jack’s equal, still had to clean up after Party meetings in the late 30s and early 40s. Though she always held jobs and Jack was involved, she was the main caretaker of the children.

³⁴ Olsen is referring to Nathaniel Hawthorne. Harding Davis traveled to New England to meet the author, and he became a supporter of her writing.

After the marriage, Olsen accepts “Clarke” by proxy and from her personal loyalty to Harding Davis. Similarly, Olsen refers to the Davis’ son as “Richard” from the moment his name appears in her text. In something as small as a name, Olsen manages to love her subject, accept those around Harding Davis, humanize, and laud “Rebecca.” Mostly, though Olsen exposes her own biases, not only toward her subject, but to the perceived male dominated society that has repressed Harding Davis’ voice.³⁵ By using first and last names, Olsen keeps the male figures at a distance and embraces female figures. At first reading, this method does not seem to coexist well, but when examined further, the relationship between the two approaches emerges as an early form of a historical/critical narrative that is present in today’s critical community. Olsen, then, seems to be creating a new form of criticism, a parallel form of scholarship that suggests that a masculine/formal critical approach can co-exist with a feminine/informal approach. By using both, Olsen also demonstrates her fluency in both. In doing so, Olsen manipulates her reader to grasp a firmer, more personal connection with the women; she again distinguishes the two sexes apart from each other, amplifying and, perhaps, swaying reader loyalty to sympathize and empathize with Harding Davis as a woman. This acts as an equalizing force to present Harding Davis as a leading figure in the text, while the male figures are relegated to background figures. The dominance of the women’s movement issues in Olsen’s “A Biographical Interpretation” are evident in this

³⁵ Harding Davis published one other novel, *Margaret Howth*, a few critically acclaimed essays and short stories, and several popular fiction type short stories. The popular fiction stories were, in Olsen’s opinion, not up to “Rebecca’s” standards. They were written for a paycheck. Olsen clearly blames Harding Davis’ lesser works on the male dominated literary profession’s manipulations of a young woman writer who needed money.

text and much more so than the contemporary historical contexts of the 1830s through the 1860s, if only in her treatment of men and women's names.

As Olsen includes more amounts of historical, social, and ideological contexts from the 1960s and 1970s than from the 19th century, "A Biographical Interpretation," by Hayden White's standards, is not criticism but historical fiction. Olsen uses a historical narrative plot structure, which is "making stories out of *mere* chronicles" (White 83), to interpret Rebecca Harding Davis' life within the contexts of "A Biographical Interpretation's" period of production. It is evident from phrases such as "it is doubtful that Rebecca..." ("A Biographical Interpretation" 74), "may have been..." (116), and "probably to the end of her days..." (151) that Olsen must project imagination into "A Biographical Interpretation" in order to fill the gaps of the incomplete history of Harding Davis. Though she uses accurate historical information regarding Harding Davis' lifestyle and life events, Olsen's projections and explanations as a result of her personal exploration of another author's circumstances disqualify the piece as any form of historical criticism or history; it is fiction. Olsen's Harding Davis can be analyzed and related to other strong female characters in Olsen's body of work. In this text, Olsen tells the story of a female author whom she romanticizes and admires for reasons that go well beyond the significance of Harding Davis' writing. Thus, Harding Davis becomes a fictional heroine.

Similarly, if Harding Davis becomes a fictional heroine in the literary canon because of Olsen, Olsen would become a fictional heroine due to my treatment of her. I have analyzed her involvement, actions, and motivations regarding the resurrection of Harding Davis' work. In a sense, I am pursuing the same action regarding Olsen's work

by drawing attention to its value as both fiction and criticism within the context of Second Wave Feminism. Though my purpose is more driven toward academic enlightenment and contribution to literary studies as I try to base my projections on Olsen's writing strictly on biographical and textual information, I still use what Hayden White would call "emplotment" (White 83). Thus, this critique of Tillie Olsen and her attempt at literary criticism would become a piece of historical narrative—a piece of literature. In a move similar to Olsen's reading of "Life in the Iron Mills," I have projected my imagination into the gaps of Olsen's writing and life that could not possibly be recovered. Therefore, if Olsen's "humanstory" of Rebecca Harding Davis can be judged as fiction and read as such, this examination of Olsen can be read as the same thing—a "humanstory" of a writer and her fiction. Thus, this chapter becomes a parallel story to the critical piece Olsen produced on Rebecca Harding Davis' literary work. If this is true of my text, is it true of all other forms of criticism because of the personal inclinations an author or critic brings to an approach? All texts, then, literary, critical, or informative become works of fiction to a degree. If that is the case, assessments to literature through literary criticism must change. Critics cannot pretend to approach a text from a distance, and the quest for objectivity becomes a fallacy and, therefore, recognizably flawed. Perhaps there would be a mass exodus of critics from the camps of New Historicism, Post Colonialism, Cultural Materialism, Formalism, etc. and a shift to the criticism Olsen demonstrates—one that admits a highly personal connection to the author augmented with partiality and historical background.

So, because "A Biographical Interpretation" and, now this chapter, can be considered works of fiction rather than those of history or literary criticism, readers and

critics must change their interpretations of the texts or at least realize the limitations of inescapable subjectivity. It is important to view the piece as a work of historical fiction. In doing so, readers may be able to deduce, as I have, contextual seams and inconsistencies, complexity of literary style, and the struggle for power between dominant and marginalized populations. If we read “A Biographical Interpretation” as fiction, the text opens up and reveals significant insights into the period of production, the milieu of multiple contexts working with and against each other, and Tillie Olsen as a writer. More importantly, it adds another fictional text to Olsen’s sparse literary catalog which is useful when studying Olsen’s literary contributions as a whole and adding another text through which Olsen’s distinct voice can be heard.

In resurrecting Rebecca Harding Davis, Olsen is effectively resurrecting herself if the idea that she “emplots” the gaps of Harding Davis’ biography with her own biographical information and issues. By doing this, Olsen has become an example of how the author needs the critic to tell the stories of the author and her literature in order for the author to remain relevant as part of the Academy, popular culture, etc. Just as Olsen tries to show charity to Rebecca Harding Davis’ text as a means to keep it on the public reading list, so to speak, she is doing the same thing for herself. I also am playing a part in promoting the importance of Tillie Olsen as an author by examining her here, and by challenging the canon to recognize a forgotten female author, I am joining Olsen in her attempt to resurrect Rebecca Harding Davis. Just as Rebecca Harding Davis needs critics like Tillie Olsen to keep her works read, Olsen needs critics like me to encourage further study of her work. I tell her story as a narrative, a somewhat fictional tale of the meaning and importance of the author and her texts.

CHAPTER IV

“REQUA”: AN EXPLORATION OF GENDER EQUILIBRIUM

In order to understand Olsen’s literary position in the Second Wave Feminist Movement, scholars can look to one of her own works. Olsen’s short story, “Requa”³⁶ presents a “more emphatically gendered view” that seemingly examines, amplifies, and venerates the differences between men and women (Farganis 23). Begun in 1968 after her winning of an NEA Fellowship for creative writing, the work gives a subversive and unique view of the nurturing, parental roles of men and women as well as the formation of gender identity. By mixing the ideology of communism/collectivism of the 1930s with the then-contemporary feminist principles of the late 1960s, Olsen’s story proposes that women should not be the sole caretaker of the house and offspring, as it causes an imbalance in a child’s development and maturity. It is this balance that Olsen strives to promote in her story as she juxtaposes traditional masculine and feminine spheres. The main character, Stevie, is a teen-aged boy whose gender development and identity is imbalanced. His gender ambiguity is a product of the inequity of the responsibility taken by the male and the female in a parenting role. However, Olsen attempts to rectify this imbalance by constructing an image of extreme psychological, emotional, and physical demands in a masculine/feminine power struggle in order to achieve gender equilibrium

³⁶ The story “Requa” was originally planned to be expanded into a novella. Because that did not happen, the title has shifted to “Requa” in several texts and anthologies.

within the boy. In doing so, Olsen may be trying to suggest the validity of gender as a social construct and the necessity of an evenhanded nurturing by both men and women in order to raise a child to be a well-adjusted and capable adult.

The portrayal of gender in “Requa” seems to imply that it is a combination of several factors. The influence of a social upbringing is obviously important to the development of Stevie’s gender identity. Upon arrival in Requa, a town modeled on Requai, Oregon, he is engendered as feminine as a result of being raised by a solely feminine influence—his mother. However, Stevie’s gender imbalance is then equalized by his envelopment in Requa’s masculine forces, including the child rearing methods of his uncle, Wes. If Olsen only portrayed Stevie’s struggle with gender identity as a power struggle of masculine and feminine influence, she would be representing gender merely as a social construct. However, Olsen also depicts the biological nature of a child as part of his gender identity. So, in consistent Olsen fashion, she again combines several factors of influence to depict an innovative theory which transcends common ideas of gender at the date of publication and the Second Wave Feminist Movement which helps to define her story. The representations of nature and nurture combining to become contributing factors in gender development was ahead of its time in the 1960s and has become a widely accepted way of regarding the development of gender identity. Sondra Farganis paraphrases Judith Butler’s 1993 argument that “gender is not only a culturally determined entity but is itself rooted in a real physicality of the body that is born, loves, eats, functions, and dies” (Farganis 37). Butler, an early and current authoritative name in gender theory, did not construct this description of what is widely considered an

accepted view³⁷ of gender identity theory until twenty three years after “Requa” was first published. In “Requa,” Olsen is prophetic in her treatment of sex and gender, creating a representation of gender identity over two decades before it would be described in gender theory by Butler.

According to Diane Middlebrook, Olsen (during her Radcliffe Fellowship days in 1963-1964) rejected Sigmund Freud’s psychosexual theory of gender and sexual identity³⁸ and “looked elsewhere for her insights into family dynamics” (Middlebrook 18). Olsen’s “Socialist upbringing, reinforced throughout [her] life” made her look at “societal roots, causes, circumstances for so much attributed to the personal, the psychological only” (18). “Requa” most definitely displays Olsen’s focus on the learned behaviors of gender, making it a social construct as opposed to the more biologically based psychoanalytic theory and the more recently developed epigenetic systems theory. However, Olsen, like in all her work, blends two seemingly contradictory theories to create a synergy between the two that is more fully developed than either singular view. Olsen mixes the concepts of gender being a product of nature and nurture as well as blurring gender lines to explain and describe Stevie’s initial gender disequilibrium and his eventual success of combining masculinity and femininity.

³⁷ According to *The Developing Person through Childhood and Adolescence 6th Ed.*, “five theories [psychoanalytic theory, behaviorism, cognitive theory, sociocultural theory, and epigenetic systems theory] collectively have led to at least two conclusions...[1] gender differences are biological, not merely cultural: The logical foundation for gender differences includes hormonal influences on the brain as well as bodily organs...[2] Biology is not destiny: Children are shaped by experiences.” (322)). Berger, Kathleen Ed. (2003). *The Developing Person through Childhood and Adolescence*. Worth Publishers.

³⁸ Freud’s psycho sexual theory states that a child’s motivations and identity is inherently biological and sexual in nature, specifically describing the nature of parents and children. (*The Developing Person* 215)

Olsen's abundant use of masculine and feminine juxtapositions only strengthens the gender dichotomy and ambiguities in "Requa." In the story, Stevie, a young boy of fourteen, has been sent to live with his uncle, Wes, after the death of his mother, Wes' sister. Stevie's entire upbringing to this point had been with his mother in a comfortable, urban setting. The exclusively feminine influence with which Stevie has been raised is evident in his absolute failure to subsist in the thoroughly masculine realm of Requa, Oregon. Olsen uses material possessions, behavior, internal thoughts, and others' reactions to expose Stevie's initial gender identity turmoil as well as his subsequent balancing of masculinity and femininity. "Requa" treats grief and the formation of gender and sexual identity as paths for individual growth and as elements that must be balanced in order to lead a productive, well-adjusted life.

Though the urge to be masculine may be biological, Olsen presents the development of the gender identity as clearly a social construct. Stevie must be taught how to be a man in every possible way. He arrives in Requa, obviously aware that he is a male, yet completely inadequate, incapable, and unknowledgeable of any masculine expectations or practices in that setting. Stevie is in the infancy of his masculine development and even assumes some of the physical behaviors of an infant. Just as a newborn's ability to physically support the weight of his head is virtually nil, Stevie's ability to "hold his head up" throughout the text is severely limited. He does not want to "try to remember or hold his head up that wouldn't lay down inside the one on the pillow and let him sleep. down and back down and back" (Olsen 57).³⁹ Olsen seems to be indicating in this passage that there is a dichotomy of his physical self, the head "on

³⁹ This spacing is original to Olsen's text and not a typographical error. Presumably, the spacing is use to show pauses in Stevie's though patterns.

the pillow,” and his psychological self, the head “inside” the other. Stevie is made up of a fourteen year old boy’s body and an infantile, incomplete gender identity that can only be made whole by achieving enough masculine experience and instruction to balance Stevie’s exclusively feminine upbringing. This imbalance is so severe that Stevie, though biologically male, could be viewed as predominantly feminine in gender.

Stevie’s behavior and communication skills parallel that of a very young child who is developing from immaturity to maturity. Early in Stevie’s time in Requa, he “would be lying on a cot in the half dark” (57), sleeping for extended periods of time, waking only to eat to which Wes tells him “it’s no good for you, all this layin around never goin out like normal” (61). At this point, Stevie has not yet achieved the social or physical capabilities to behave in what Wes considers a “normal” adult male fashion because of the boy’s grief and gross imbalance of gender influence. Stevie’s masculine infancy is only reinforced by his emotional immaturity and openness as he, in Wes’ words, “bawl[s]...like a girl” (61) often at this point in his gender development. During meals, Stevie’s immaturity in his grief is even more evident. Wes forces Stevie to “wash up, go in to supper. At the table [Stevie] looked at no one, answered in monosyllables, or seemed not to hear at all, stared at the wall or at his wrist, messed with the food on his plate...hardly ate” (57). Stevie’s communication and behavior at the table rivals that of a baby—inability to engage with others, limited verbal ability, and long periods of sleeping while in mourning for his mother.

Stevie’s sleep patterns, admittedly an effect from the grief he feels from his mother’s death and presumably a coping mechanism, mirror those of a newborn growing into a toddler. As Olsen portrays Stevie as going through childhood stages, beginning

from infancy, in behavior and physical development, she uses the same path of maturity to develop Stevie's gender and sex identity. When he witnesses Wes returning home from visiting a prostitute, it seems as if Stevie discovers the biological differences of men and women as a result of seeing his uncle's penis. Though Stevie may have been aware—it is not explicitly stated in the story—of these biological differences previous to this episode, it appears as if the discovery of Wes' sexual identity prods the discovery of Stevie's own sexual awakening. This stage of concrete sex and gender recognition usually appears in children ages 3 to 4 (Berger 316). Olsen, then, develops Stevie (as a male) from a heavily female influenced infancy and childhood that lacked male input from which Stevie will progress to a masculine puberty.

Olsen marks the transition from Stevie's early years in a city environment to a more masculinized setting through a confrontation between him and Wes. Wes tries to comfort Stevie, telling him that "feelin bad...It's all right; it's natural" (61) to which Stevie responds "Shut up bastard...Shut up. I told you I don't think about her, I don't feel bad. She's dead. Don't you know she's dead, don't you know?" (61). Stevie's reaction to his uncle's attempt at comfort is the first articulation of his state of mind. Stevie has acknowledged his mother's death, indicating a maturation of self, and the volatility of the confrontation implies that he has learned Wes' masculine manner of handling conflicts. The following day, Stevie moves further from his masculine infancy by acquiescing to Wes' requests that he not "lay down *once*, not once. Neat up this room. If there's to be any hot water, get yourself scrubbed up...Squeak clean...Get outside even if it's raining down to the river throw some rocks or something. Keep moving" (62). Had Wes not given specific guidelines for Stevie to follow, it is likely that Stevie

would have spent yet another day in bed. However, because Wes, in his masculine authority, tells him what to do, Stevie begins to learn the nuances and guiding principles of being a man in Wes' view. It is here where the construction of Stevie's masculine gender begins and builds rapidly.

Stevie's lack of a stereotypically masculine prowess is evident from his first appearance in the story and continues until the latter portion of the text. The reader's introduction to Stevie begins with his uncle, Wes, a vision of hardy masculinity, mocking Stevie's dearth of physical stamina when faced with a bumpy pickup truck ride, comparing it to his own in an unsympathetic, natural environment:

I got those sittin' kinks too, his uncle said, you don't see *me* staggerin' around like an old drunk... You can't have 'ary a shred left to bring up. Remind me not to take you no place but a streetcar after this... (Olsen 54)

From the onset of the Stevie and Wes' relationship, the two are pitted against each other in Wes' mind as a representation of femininity (Stevie) and established masculinity (Wes). By comparing a clearly weaker Stevie to himself, Wes establishes himself as the model of masculine strength and robustness. Wes is not "staggerin'" due to a lack of physical potency, nor is he uncomfortable in an unforgiving, physically demanding atmosphere. Stevie, then, would feel most secure in an environment filled with physical conveniences, such as "streetcars" and a bed because, in the onset of the story, he is appalled by "lying on the ground. *The ground*" (54 italics in original). As a man accustomed to such environments, Wes has no problem in this camping situation, but Stevie's distaste for ground dwelling leaves him again as an opposite to his stereotypically manly uncle from Requa. Because Olsen immediately sets up Wes as the

masculine force of “Requa” and Stevie as Wes’ foil, Stevie then becomes the representation of femininity.

Stevie’s powerful connection to females and lack of connection to males is evident in the beginning of the text. His upbringing in such an intense, feminine domicile led him to absorb all of the feminine characteristics of his only parent, his mother. Olsen counters this by heaving Stevie into a world of unadulterated rural masculinity. The massive scale of the redwood forest moves Stevie from a feminine environment to a realm of overwhelming masculine power and phallic imagery. Not only are the immense redwood trees daunting, Stevie fears that “there might be snakes” (54), another iconic phallic representation. Stevie’s fear and discomfort with the redwood forest and snakes indicates what may be his realization of his feminine gender leanings and therefore may be confusing gender with sex. Though Olsen rejects Freud, her use of phallic imagery and Stevie’s reaction to it may be interpreted in the Freudian-based concept of womb envy.⁴⁰ In Stevie’s discomfort with phallic representations and his recognition that he possesses a phallus, the suggestion is that his discomfort prompts a desire for that with which he is more comfortable. In this case, because of Stevie’s feminine upbringing, it is oissubke that he may be much more at ease with himself if his anatomy matches the feminine upbringing he to which he has become accustomed. Though Stevie is

⁴⁰ Penis envy, as described by Freud, is the stage in a young girl’s psychosexual development when she realizes she lacks the male sex member thus becoming envious of boys. Many female psychoanalysts use Freud’s penis envy concept to describe a parallel stage in a young boy’s psychosocial development. Womb envy is the stage in a young boy’s psychosexual development when he realizes girls do not have a penis but have a womb instead, again becoming envious. This is supposedly a defining moment in both sexes and gender development (*The Developing Person* 315-6).

biologically male, he identifies socially more with females and may have projected a sense of womb envy on himself.

Conversely, Stevie has a biological connection to the symbol of a male phallus in his female world which would mean that he recognizes himself as male. Previous to Stevie's foray into the ultra-masculine Requa, he found comfort in a priapic image—a lamppost. Stevie had “no time to say goodbye to the lamppost that he could hug and swing round and round. Round and round like his head, having to hold it up forever. Being places he had never been” (54). This phallic symbol is not only a connection, but a source of strength for Stevie as it supports him as he “hug[s it] and swing[s] round and round” (54) on it. The lamppost served a need for Stevie, affording him a necessary foreign, male kinship in the domain of a female. Stevie's draw to the phallic lamppost could indicate his attraction to that which is missing in his life—maleness. Due to the growing up in an extremely feminine environment, Stevie may at this point identify socially more as a female than as a male. If Stevie possesses a feminine gender constructed from his environment, his behavior toward the lamppost could be a manifestation of penis envy as well. It is in this instance that Olsen combines the need to balance social gender influence with the pull of biology. Though Stevie, as shown in later portions of the text, is seemingly feminized as a result of his upbringing, his pull to a male symbol implies that his gender is not only defined by his taught social role but also by his biological sex.

Stevie may have subconsciously recognized his imbalance, though he was not equipped to understand it. In the example of Stevie and the lamppost, Olsen not only balances Stevie in terms of the masculinity and femininity, but also juxtaposes the social

construct of gender with the biological construct of sex. Then, Olsen's theme of balance moves beyond the development of gender roles to encompass a larger question of natural sex affiliation. Stevie's gender identity seems to solidify when he embraces a sexual identity. Olsen uses several symbols and scenarios to guide Stevie to his finalized gender and sexual identity. Olsen signifies Stevie's progress by depicting his journey from the initial discomfort and fear of masculine sexuality to a symbolic public declaration of his sexual virility.

After a night of drinking, a masculine rite of passage of itself, Stevie's reaction to Wes' visit to "Annie Marines, [because] she sells it" is "Nausea. Swelling, swollen aching. Relentless. Helpless..." (70). Stevie's mixture of revulsion and intense fascination reveal his innate urge to experience a sexual connection with women that is hindered by his initial feminine gender bonds. Previously, it seems as if Stevie is unable to view women in a sexual sense due to the strength of that feminine bond. When Stevie views the aftermath Wes' unapologetic and successful quest to quell a sexual appetite, he recognizes women as a physical and sexual Other. Wes complains that he's "had better imagines," and Stevie observes a drunk, post-sex Wes as "a glisten of spit trickled out of the corner of his mouth. His fly was open. How rosy and budlike and quiet it sheathed there" (70). In this scene, Stevie's development is affected in two separate ways. The insult to Annie Marines not only demystifies sex, but it also distances Stevie from his crippling identification with the femininity that makes him unable to function in the masculine world of Requa. In this distancing, Stevie is now able to recognize the differences between men and women and perhaps take a different role in the relationship between the two sexes. More importantly, Stevie's observation of Wes' penis implies an

awakening of admiration and a conscious desire to embrace his masculine gender and sex.

Because of Stevie's and Wes' contrasting personalities, a power struggle expands between the two which only reinforces the opposition and strengthens Stevie's associations with the feminine gender. When Wes inventories his sister's possessions, he is immersed in a culture of relative opulence which is sharply disparaged by his practicality. Stevie's things have sentimental value not practical value. While Wes moves from the less personal to more personal items, the boy sees the details of his mother's life, reminding Stevie of his connection to his feminine propensity. Stevie cannot handle seeing Wes going through his mother's cherished goods, especially because they show the items little to no respect. This lack of veneration again amplifies the separateness of males and females—men do not understand the preciousness and sentimentality of what Wes calls “junk” such as “plush candy box: sewing stuff,” an “enamel cigarette case,” and “a pincushion doll [with a] taffeta bell skirt glistening with glass pinheads” (60). The items are useless to him, have no practical value, and therefore are frivolous.

Stevie says they should have buried the clock and lamp with his mother—he wants “everything to be together” because “it would be easier” and he “wouldn't have to deal” with his grief (57). The burying of his mother's objects would also allow Stevie to exist in a masculine/feminine dichotomy through which the genders have little interaction, but because the keepsakes are not buried, it forces Stevie to incorporate his feminine upbringing with his newly masculine life. Thus, this struggle for inclusion causes discordance between Wes and Stevie. Because of the disconnect in empathy

between Wes and Stevie, Wes forces Stevie to move more quickly through his grieving process than he is taking. Stevie is forced to move through his stages of grief so that he can “get over it,” or accept it. Ironically, Stevie does not know how to cope with his emotions—usually a stereotypical masculine trait. Though this inability might be able to be attributed to youth, it seems to be one of the few masculine traits he inherently possesses; it is curious that Stevie’s imbalanced self is not more in tune with the emotional—a stereotypical feminine trait. Based on how much masculinity Stevie is lacking and how many feminine characteristics he has, it would make sense to think that he would be able to embrace his emotions more. It is ironic that it takes the conventional prototype of masculinity (Wes) to teach Stevie how to cope with his emotions and grief which adds a level of complexity to both characters. Again, this reinforces the idea that a father or male figure is necessary in a child’s life for the child to develop fully and be well rounded and well adjusted as a person. By depicting Stevie and Wes’ relationship in this manner, Olsen’s text suggests that a mother figure cannot reach her son on the same levels of empathy that a father/father figure can. This reinforces Olsen’s seeming theme of the family unit is better if the masculine and feminine figures work together and do not inhabit different spheres.⁴¹

It is in this particular amalgamation of the masculine and feminine that Olsen remains committed to her primary cause of the 1930s (the time period in which the story is set). The items once owned by Stevie’s mother represent a feminine, bourgeois class that is the polar opposite of Wes’ masculine, working class upbringing. Olsen once again

⁴¹ Olsen is blurring gender constructs, troubling those categories. This may not necessarily mean that the best family is a man and woman, but a masculine and feminine regardless of sex.

presents feminism with an undertone of communism/socialism.⁴² The gendered assignments of the bourgeois and the working class only fortify the view of Stevie as a representation of the feminine class and person. Yet in her focus on the power struggle between the male and female social equality, Olsen's text reveals an influence originating in the Second Wave Feminist Movement of the late 1960s and 70s. The contemporary history and ideologies of the 1930s pervade the late 1960s feminist period of production of "Requa." This struggle shifts to a conflict of equality and balance in Olsen's story. The merging of communism and feminism rebukes any one class or sex's superiority, but invites, if not appeals for a balance of importance for each gender. Stevie's upbringing in a solely feminine environment not only hinders his ability to function in a masculine setting; it would also never complete his journey toward maturity, just as his upbringing in a bourgeois city environment would leave him. The intensity of Stevie's masculine experience merely parallels that of his feminine nurturing and is evident in his shrouded attempt to deny both representations of femininity and Wes' dominant masculinity. This total immersion in a masculine world becomes part of the process of Stevie's gender construction as a means to balance his early development.

The idea of balance to necessitate a well-adjusted life not only pervades the text of "Requa"; it was also articulated as part of the context of the story's period of production. An indication of Stevie's veiled drive to balance his identity is his refusal to attend school as an attempt to connect to a masculine identity even though Wes pressures Stevie several times to go. Wes goes so far as to abandon Stevie in a deserted crossroads in an attempt to force Stevie to get on the school bus. Perhaps Stevie's unmistakable

⁴² See *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* Chapter.

defiance is his unconscious realization of the male presence lacking in his life and his attempt to reach out to Wes. Again, this seems to be about balance—balancing practical and working experience with education. Olsen obviously valued both of these.

To further Olsen's argument, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) contains the idea that education is nothing without using it for meaningful employment. From the end of World War II until the 1960s, women (specifically, married women) rarely worked outside the home. Though these women were college-educated (Friedan's informal survey used two hundred of her former Smith College classmates as her subjects), few of them used that education in any kind of career or job experience. As Friedan showed, this inequity and imbalance led to the severe discontent of the women. Perhaps Stevie exudes this idea as well. His entire life he has been in school, a trend Wes intends to continue when Stevie has reached Requa. But Stevie has never known the satisfaction of real work, and this may leave him empty and needing a change after the traumatic event of his mother's death. Though Stevie's age may be an issue regarding his status as a non-working student, it is implied that he has not found participatory interests outside his mother's home. Because Stevie is a biological male, it is possible that Olsen is using him to transcend gender and sex barriers as a representative of all persons who have not received an equitable practice of masculinity and femininity. Though Friedan's text deals only with women, Olsen may be indicating that without the balance of education and work experience, any person—including Wes—can be discontented and emotionally stunted.

It seems as if Stevie does not recognize his own urge to balance out his feminine upbringing with a concentrated effort to be a man; Stevie subconsciously wants a

masculine working experience as a logical culmination of his time in school. His reaction to the school bus allows the reader to witness this:

When the bus stopped and the door snorted open, he [Stevie] still does not move. The driver tried three honks, poked his head out and yelled: c'mon New, whatever your name, I'm late. You can do your snoozing inside...Slowly, as if returning from an infinite distance, the boy focusses [sic] his eyes on the driver, shaking his head and moving his lips as if speaking. He was still mutely shaking "No,"...When he had counted thirteen cars passing (a long while), he crossed and went back down the road, the way his uncle had brought him. (58)

Stevie's choice to return to Wes' world of masculinity instead of escaping to his familiar habit of going to school indicates a shift in the boy. Stevie does not embrace his former life, one that is defined by his feminine rearing, but attempts to relate to a world that is defined by men, thus empowering himself to develop beyond the nurturing of his single mother. Stevie's response to the school bus, because it is reactive, reveals a possible innate desire to assert his masculinity or may indicate a need to avoid the battle for gender labeling as he returns home and sleeps to escape this identity war. By refusing to go to school, though, Stevie is returning to Wes' world and moving toward work in a manner adumbrated by the Friedan's study of educated housewives in *The Feminist Mystique*. Because masculine behavior was never taught to Stevie when growing up, he cannot have a developed sense of masculinity if gender is singularly a social construct. So, because Stevie seems to have an instinctive attraction to the masculine world, his connection must go beyond the social construct of gender to an innate sense of maleness, illustrating the notion that gender is merely social. Olsen, then, presents Stevie's refusal to go to school as an extreme, intrinsic, yet unrecognized, urge to become more masculine thus compensating for the unmitigated influence of females on his behavior, identity, and abilities.

As Olsen's draft manuscripts of "Requa" show, she initially did not write Stevie's character as defiant enough to refuse schooling, yet she allows Stevie to develop a sense of individual empowerment—linked to his identity maturation—throughout the manuscript. Before she cut the section from the final draft, Olsen depicts a bonding scene between Stevie and Wes as Stevie tries to prepare for the "shop" the following Monday.⁴³ Wes is using a lathe, and Stevie asks to try:

[Included in the published text] Wes sets the pitch, the feed, the slide rest to chase a thread. "Wes, *let me*. We're learning it in shop. It's my turn again Monday." (Monday! What Monday? A Monday cobweb weeks miles gone life ago) Hard, reassuring the lathe burrs; spins under his hands. (65)
[Omitted from the published text] [deletes] "I'll let you" [replaces with] "Hey, I thought you wanted to try." ("Requa I" makings)⁴⁴

Even though Olsen omits the previous sentence from the final, published version of "Requa", it is apparent that she is focused on the empowerment of Stevie. Instead of her initial instinct to give Wes control of the interaction and "letting" Stevie run the lathe, Olsen changes this bit of dialogue which results in giving Stevie control. By Wes saying "Hey, I thought you wanted to try" in one of the drafts of "Requa I," Stevie gains the power to choose whether or not he wants to use the lathe instead of Wes possessing the power to choose Stevie's actions for him. Stevie is thus able to choose whether he will continue to be controlled or if he will assert himself through acts defined by masculinity. Though Olsen chose to remove the previous section from the final text, the passage's impact on the published product can help effectively illuminate interpretation for the reader. This exchange between Stevie and Wes is indicative of the necessity of a father

⁴³ It is not clear if the "shop" is at school or at work. This scene seems to take place a few weeks after the bus incident and depicts the merging of learning and blue-collar work.

⁴⁴ These makings are from the original short story "Requa I" before the text had been consistently referred to as "Requa."

figure for empowerment of a young male. Olsen's text again suggests the fundamental value of cultural influence on the development of a young person's sense of self and gender. By allowing Stevie to choose to run the lathe, Olsen gives him an active role in his transition from unbalanced to balanced. Olsen empowers Stevie as a representation of both men and women in a cooperative nature, though this empowerment is more veiled in the published version than in the manuscript. The feminine part of Stevie that is previously unable to use the tool becomes less restricting, allowing him to embrace it more freely instead of rejecting it fully, and the masculine part of Stevie liberates him from his previously forced gender inclination. In this exchange there is the implication that masculinity and femininity are not mutually exclusive.

That is not to say, though, that Stevie is entirely successful at performing the function of his chosen gender. Olsen reveals Stevie's extreme inadequacy at stereotypical masculinity through the depiction of his employment performance. Just as Olsen uses Stevie's association with his mother's items to amplify his overtly feminine and bourgeois nature, she intensifies his masculine insufficiency by placing him in a blue collar workplace engulfed by working class objects, tools, and machismo. Stevie begins working in Wes' exceptionally manly job environment and organizes merchandise in a place that swaps gas for goods including:

Gas	Butane	Sportmen's Goods
Auto Parts	Fittings	Tools
Lumber	Rags	Scrap Iron
Electric/plumbers/builder	supply	
		Housefurnish things
	Auto Repair	Towing
	Machining	Soddering
	Tool & Saw Sharpening	Welding
	Boat/caulking repair	Glasswork
		(63)

The sheer amount of wares to handle seems to be an overwhelming force for Stevie to overcome, setting him up to fail. Though Stevie throws himself into his working class job “helping [to] haul drag break apart; find the right sized used tire, generator, lumbersash; hand the measure the part, the tool,” he fails. Stevie is “cold hardly comprehending wearing out so quickly” (64). Stevie’s weakness is countered by Wes’ determination that “maybe this is better’n school for [him] now” and Wes’ resolve to “keep [Stevie] outdoors, build [him] up” (64). Stevie’s inadequacies, as viewed by Wes, must be eliminated thus raising Stevie to the exalted level of a man.

In her depiction of interaction between Stevie and Wes, Olsen exhibits a view specific to the second phase of the Women’s Movement. According to Sondra Farganis, the second phase’s more “engendered view” to the perspective of women argues that “equitable treatment” is a matter of “making women equal to men and men’s standards” (Farganis 24). Stevie, as an inferior version of a masculine entity and as a feminine figure, is obviously expected be at or develop to Wes’ masculine standards. Wes statement of wanting to “build [Stevie] up” clearly implies this presumption. So, Olsen is using Stevie as a reminder of the social position of the subjugated female as well as placing him in the developing role as a socially constructed male. His ability to merge male and female roles is a way to equalize the sexes in their evolving stages of societal parity. By using Stevie in the manner she does, Olsen eliminates any patronizing behavior that may hinder the “equitable treatment” of women. The early Stevie is held to the same standards as the masculine version of him; Stevie, in both representations, has been made “equal to men and men’s standards.”

In “Requa,” Olsen does not merely present the feminine as being required to conform to masculine standards. Rather, she demands that the very masculine Wes become enlightened to feminine experience by making Wes somewhat conform to stereotypically female standards. Farganis states that “rather than glorify liberalism’s equity, [women] need to affirm feminism’s ways of seeing and being in the world; moreover, it is not simply that women see the world differently but have different virtues, which stem from any number of different factors—their maternalism, their marginality, their alienation...” (24). In her working manuscript, Olsen draws a comparison between Wes and Stevie’s mother that is deleted later from the finished text. Olsen removes the words “slumped body posture” as a comparison of Wes and Stevie’s mother from the text. Olsen does emphasize the words “not defeated” (“Requa I” makings) in Stevie’s recognition of the similarities between his mother and Wes. In the finished text, Olsen links Wes with femininity through a connection made by Stevie: “Was that his mother or his uncle sagged there in the weight of weariness, and why were her feet on the floor?” (58). Both Wes and Stevie’s mother shared an overtiredness from life and the burden of raising a child alone. Though it is not clear if Stevie’s mother works, it is clear that Stevie sees his mother and Wes as a combo. The two parental figures are merged in Stevie’s mind, indicating there is room in Stevie for both male and female, or perhaps he is not seeing the difference in male or female, again blurring gender/sex lines. Their exhaustion postures and refusal to collapse from life’s burdens connects the brother and sister that, in its likeness in image, creates a visceral reaction in Stevie in its likeness as well as an asexual parent—the merging of his main masculine and feminine parental figures. In this link, the reader is witness to the “alienation” and “marginalization” of

Wes that is very similar to that of Stevie's mother. So, Stevie is not the only representation of a need for gender equilibrium; Wes must possess a balance of masculine and feminine traits as well in order to successfully raise Stevie to be a fully developed and well balanced individual.

So, as Stevie becomes more functional in his burgeoning identity, he develops as a more well-balanced adult male. This has been described as a bildungsroman where a "potential for growth and wholeness," as Stevie moves "toward recovery" is a result of him "following some inner directive to connect with someone, something, some work, to link up against the potential devastation of aloneness" (Perlman & Werlock 115). This "inner directive" is Stevie's quest for a personal and gender identity, and he lacks "wholeness" not only because of his grief but because he has yet to discover and embrace both the masculine and feminine sides of his person in a balanced manner. Stevie, though, continues to transform and develop, aided by a breakthrough at Wes' work one day. Stevie is confronted by a now-foreign female presence while in his masculine work environment. Stevie's masculinity is tested in his interaction with the girl he sees at his job at the gas station. To show that Stevie has become more masculine and has cultivated a sexual identity, Olsen fills the scene with sexual imagery. Stevie pumps gas into a girl's car, where she is "so close he can smell her, round his hand to her bared thigh, the curve of her butt" ("Requa" 67). Stevie's sexual identity has been confronted by the Other, the woman, and his development from an effeminate, ineffective boy associated with femininity has shifted toward a virile, desirous man who is associated with masculine prowess. Stevie's desire is "relentless, engorged, clamorous" (67) during the process of pumping gas, the act itself suggestive of sexual intercourse. Stevie's reaction

to this confrontation is an affirmation of his flourishing sexuality and gender identity; he is developing and becoming whole in the most carnal and fundamental ways.

Stevie's ascension to the position of male adolescence completes his gender and sexual identity development in the story, but he still must face his mother's death in order to become fully balanced as an individual. Throughout the story, Stevie is unable to move forward in his grieving process. He is dismissive of the death, denying its effect on him when he thinks "they should have put the clock and lamp in with her" (57). Stevie "does not want to deal" with the reminders of his mother's death and "it would be easier" if her keepsakes were out of sight (57). Stevie is denying his grief and, by doing so, is losing power over his actions. He is constantly unable to "hold his head up" or is "slipping." At one point, Stevie tells himself to "Keep away you remembering slippings / slidings having to hold up my head / Keep away you trying's to get me" (60). By denying his grief and "remembering," Stevie is powerless against them. He loses autonomy of himself and must follow Wes' commands in order to bear a semblance of a life.

As time and Stevie progress, he begins to face his grief, remembering images of his mother alive throughout the story. Once Stevie reaches his awareness of the physical differences between men and women and degrades the girl at the gas station and the prostitute to the level of the carnal body, he is able to confront his mother's death. Stevie allows himself to remember "*Her shiver* Twisting from the pain: face contorted, mouth fallen open fixed the look on her dying, dead face" (70). Stevie's confrontation of his mother's death takes place in correlation to Wes visiting a prostitute in the story. Stevie's prompted sexual awakening coincides with his coping with his mother's death. Stevie has

learned to deal with her death and, in doing so, is continuing the progress of healing from the loss of his mother. It is no accident that Stevie's recognition of his sexual and gender identity coincides with his maturation in his grieving process

Once this phase of his individual development is complete, Stevie is able to move onto the acceptance of his mother's death and takes an active role in balancing his grief and identity to become a well adjusted man. Because of Stevie's relative inability to communicate throughout the story, Wes is surprised by the boy singing: "I didn't know you could sing, Stevie" to which Stevie replies, "It's for my head, Wes" (72). Stevie reclaims his voice and, in doing so, empowers himself as a as a facilitating force in his own healing process. Stevie is able to perform better at work and is praised by Wes, "You're almost doin ok" (73) marking his maturation to an acceptably balanced masculinity he had not possessed before he'd reclaimed his agency and voice. Now, a well balanced Stevie is able to find acceptance and peace within his grief as he enters a cemetery, a feat that would be too daunting for the unbalanced, grieving Stevie of the beginning of the story.

However, because Stevie is able to take an active role in his healing, he is able to manage his anguish and find peace, or "sleep" in the cemetery (74). Stevie finds reassurance in the epitaph from a child's grave: "The mother strives in patient trust / The bleeding heart to bow / For safe in God the Just / Her baby's sleeping now" (74). Stevie, instead of sleeping to forget his mother's death as he does in the beginning, now "sleeps" in comfort. Stevie has accepted his mother's death and finds consolation as a result of this acceptance and his journey to reach adulthood as a well-balanced adolescent man. His transformation seems complete as Mrs. Ed, a marginal character who resides at

Wes' boarding house, refers to him as "Stephen," a much more mature moniker than its diminutive form, Stevie (74). His return from the cemetery marks his return as a maturing young man as Wes remarks, "When I heard where you went I was sure he'd get back near dead, bad as in the beginning. But he's been frisky as a puppy all day...Rassled went down to the river on his own...sharped a saw perfect. Curled up and fell asleep on the way home" (74). Stevie does not revert to his infancy when confronted with death, but progresses. Stevie has regained his power to be a young man by engaging in "rassl[ing]" and succeeding the stereotypically male task of sharpening a tool. Wes recognizes Stevie's growth and development from the infant state in which he arrived and the functional, evolved adolescent Stevie has become. Stevie, it seems, also gains an awareness of his newly empowered and gender balanced identity. The story ends with, presumably, Stevie's thought, "*stealthily secretly reclaiming*" (74 italics in original). Stevie ends the story in the manner he began it, curled up asleep in the front of Wes' truck. He has evolved from an overly feminized young boy, inadequate in a severely masculine world, to a well-adjusted adolescent male who balances the feminine and masculine elements of his identity. When these elements have been balanced, Stevie is able to "*stealthily secretly reclaim*" agency in his life and of his actions (74). Stevie acknowledges his reclamation and progression of his individual identity, empowering himself to practice autonomy within his circumstances rather than his circumstances dictate his actions.

So, "Requa" becomes a text through which gender becomes not only a social construct but also a biological creation that can be blurred by an imbalance of masculine or feminine influence. The aspect of blurring gender lines the text places Olsen firmly

within the Second Wave Feminist movement and, moreover, exhibits her continuing relevance in the current Third Wave Feminist movement. Olsen's text suggests a relationship of blending gender influences equitably in order to establish concrete sexual and gender identity. The implications of "Requa," then, reinforce Judith Butler's gender theory that social influence must be balanced with an innate gender and sex identity in order for an individual to function as a fully developed being. Though gender and sexuality may be innate, the depictions in "Requa" indicate correlating behavior must be learned. Olsen braids contradictory circumstantial and biological elements as a means for the formation of Stevie's character development. The successful combination of the extrinsic and the intrinsic, the feminine and the masculine, insinuates one must balance conflicting drives in order to achieve personal identity and gender equilibrium.

CHAPTER V

TILLIE OLSEN: A MERGING OF DISPARATE ELEMENTS

“My vision is very different from that of most writers. I don’t think in terms of quests for identity to explain human motivation and behavior. I feel that in a world where class, race, and sex are so determining, that has little reality. What matters to me is the kind of soil *out* of which people have to grow, and the kind of climate around them; circumstances are the primary key and not the personal quest for identity” –Tillie Olsen, 1974, Emerson College, Boston, MA (Rosenfelt 404).

Olsen’s words blatantly reveal her belief that her characters are products of their environment and circumstance with little control of “identity.” However, her comments, in expressing the intent of the simplicity of her mission, expose the depth of complexity within her writing. Though it is true she may consciously intend to portray identity, motivation, and historical significance as purely circumstantial—and succeeds to a degree, this line of thought also pervades her process as well. Her novels and stories about the thirties are influenced by her circumstances while writing or editing in the seventies. Her subject matter, identity, and quantity of output are influenced during both decades and her the intervening years by her situation as a mother and Communist.

However, Olsen, as in most of her writing, merges this idea of not viewing life and character development “in terms of quests for identity” with that of the seemingly direct opposite. In “Requa,” Olsen merges an external view of an internal quest for gender identity with external circumstance which influences that identity. In *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* Olsen merges the circumstances of a working class family and its

influence on the children with, yet again, an affirmation of personal identity that can be attributed to both the internal and external. Olsen's take on seemingly disparate ideologies—Communism's valuing of the collective masses versus feminism's valuing of the individual self. Olsen takes two very different time periods, the 1930s and the 1970s, two decades forty years apart and merges them in at least three of her stories, perhaps more.

Olsen, then as her quote suggests, places heavy emphasis on circumstance and neglects to portray the quest for identity in her characters. Joanne S. Frye, in her book *Tillie Olsen: A Study of the Short Fiction*, describes Olsen's rejection of a "personal quest for identity" (Frye 103). Frye states that "Olsen is not disclaiming the distinctiveness of personal human lives...she is rather suggesting that the quest is not for identity and the issues not merely personal; the concern is for meaningful human life in a particular context" (103). Frye's evaluation seems sound in her interpretation of Olsen's intent for her fiction to portray a "meaningful human life" and does not discount the "distinctiveness of personal human lives" (103). Olsen merges these two seemingly disparate ideas into writing which gives respect to both ideas. In both *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* and "Requa," Olsen's work includes issues of certain marginalized sects of society. However, the respect given to the "distinctiveness of personal human lives" is the context by which Olsen shows "the concern for meaningful human life" (103). Even though Olsen contends that a "quest for personal identity" is not her intent, it is that quest that is able to reach her audience. As we have seen with Stevie, Wes, and the Holbrooks, it is through the personal and individual plight of persons that a common connection to a class, gender, or sex is achieved.

This merging of personal identity with circumstantial dictation of identity found in Olsen's writing, then, is in line with a commonality found in *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, "Requa," and others contain seemingly disparate elements—geography, gender, class—merged together to form a cooperative relationship within a historical and social context. It is within the confrontation of these frameworks that her characters are able to achieve identity. In her creation of characters, Olsen somehow ties the contradictions of her characters to two distinct decades. In "Requa," Stevie has dual identities that can be connected to more overtly masculine dominated 1930s and the increasingly feminist society of the 1970s; Stevie exhibits traits of both the masculine and feminine and his heavily feminine characteristics prohibit Stevie's ability to function in an explicitly masculine society. In *Yonnondio*, the Holbrook family exhibits traits consistent with both the 1930s working class idealism as well as an influence of 1970s feminism; the early theme of laborer's rights and organization are tempered by the heavy feminist influence in the latter half of the novel. So, by setting up elements of the text as opposites, Olsen shrewdly weaves a message of collaboration into her texts.

These struggles and failures are tied to the inability of the disparate ideologies, genders, or contexts to form an effective partnership. Once this failure or struggle becomes apparent, Olsen begins to merge the two seeming disparate pieces in a manner that promotes pragmatism and effectiveness. Her approach to merging the entities-at-odds promotes a form of practical cooperation that would improve living conditions, emotional or physical health, or social injustices in her characters' lives while conveying the same ideas to her readers. By keeping the two elements or ideas apart, it is not

possible to achieve either fully, but it is possible to achieve both by using each as cooperative tool for the other.

Therefore, Tillie Olsen is not a contradiction, nor does she contradict herself in her approach to merging two opposing ideas. Olsen does not outwardly choose one ideology over the other; she would not be able to. She instead merges them to make each work. Again, Olsen explains her own point of view that influences her process. In her piece, “A Response,”⁴⁵ Olsen reacts to the opening panel of the October, 1996 joint meeting of the Western Literature and Western History associations in Lincoln, Nebraska and recalls her end sentence to her preface from *Silences*. In it Olsen writes: “I intend to bring you strength, joy, courage, perspicacity, defiance” (“A Response” 159). Olsen recalls the long forgotten passage bringing her not only “strength, joy, courage, perspicacity, defiance” but also “history, historical imagination, the intertwine of history with literature, presage, and the bond of mutuality” (159). In recalling this passage, she adds words and history to its original text. In doing so, Olsen’s “A Response” acts as a microcosm of her larger works in which she adds terms; “A Response” is, then, a mini-representation of Olsen’s composition process. She captures the feeling of a specific historical time period in description and events, yet Olsen “intertwines” that with the story she is writing during a separate time period. This unique method of braiding contexts within her novels and stories is only one of the reasons why she must be included as an important author in the canon of Twentieth Century American Literature.

⁴⁵ “A Response” (1997) was published in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*. Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 159-160. The University of Nebraska Press. Accessed 25 July, 2008 10:16 am in Bierce Library, The University of Akron, JSTOR Database. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3347189>>.

One tool Olsen uses as plaiting material is language which Joanne S. Frye describes as a merge of seemingly contradictory ideas. Frye states Olsen's "distinctive uses of language and form are integral to Olsen's capacity to convey her complex human insights" (117). Frye names this "distinctive" language the "mother tongue" and uses "Requa" to describe this lexicon which she contends helps to define Olsen's style as distinct from other literature. "Requa" is "not explicitly about the language in the way that much contemporary literature is,"⁴⁶ but it *is* about that deeply felt intersection of language and emotion that Olsen evokes with the phrase 'mother tongue'" (117, original italics). Olsen, Frye notes, describes this "mother tongue" as the "language of emotion," as well as pointing out the "emphasis of sound" (117). Frye describes "Requa" as an "immersion in sound, voicing the unvoiced ... [a] poetry of silence and of music" (117). In this compelling point, Frye's observation strengthens my contention that the mark of Olsen's writing is the taking of two seemingly contradictory elements and uniting them into a whole.

As the use of the "voiced" and "unvoiced," Frye's point of view is specifically linguistic in her reading of "Requa" as an example of a merging of opposites. The idea is that this voice is defined by sound, not words. The story is conveyed through emotions and sounds or music, not words. The idea of a "mother tongue" is that merging of Olsen's concepts of a silenced character or class that speaks in a distinctive voice. The "music" of Stevie's thoughts reveals his emotions and through Stevie's spoken words it reveals his silence. That is to say, Stevie's point of view is disclosed through his physical

⁴⁶ Frye's book, *Tillie Olsen: A Study of the Short Fiction*, was published in 1995. Frye does not make clear whether she is referring to the contemporary literature of Olsen during the period when "Requa" was published or during 1995.

silence, one in which the reader gains access to the internal pain of this character. However, his outwardly spoken words, or extreme lack thereof, expose the degree to which he is silenced. So, Olsen achieves this “song” from silence that illuminates Stevie’s vulnerability and person by using the opposite to describe the other, thus blending voice and silence (118).

As described by Frye, this “mother tongue” creates yet another seam, this time of a linguistic nature, in Olsen’s work. Frye then contends that this “mother tongue” is the language not only of “Requa,” but of “all Olsen’s short fiction” (122). Though Frye may be correct in her assessment that Olsen’s unique “mother tongue” is present in her short fiction, this voice is present in numerous works of her longer fiction. For example, Olsen uses it in each chapter opening in *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*. The lyricism of the opening page to each chapter demonstrates the musical “song” through the silence that Frye describes. Chapter two of *Yonnondio* begins: “A new life in the spring. But now fatback / and cornmeal to eat. Newspapers stuffed in / the shoes so that new ones need not be / bought, and the washing done without / soap” (Olsen, *Yonnondio* 23). There is no specific character speaking to initialize the beginning of chapter two, yet the voice describes the circumstances of the Holbrooks and others of their ilk. The voice indicates a sense of careful frugality and a premonition of future hard times even though there is “now fatback and cornmeal” to eat. At the same time, the voice is musical in its language; the repetition of the “s” sounds and the slant rhyme of the “not be bought” evoke the rhythmic language of a poem. Like chapter two, the other chapter openings are able to convey a sense of the characters’ needs, desperation, and hope through the language on the page, yet it is of no particular character perspective. This voice evokes

the musical “mother tongue” of the silenced, marginalized population represented by Olsen’s characters.

So, as Frye finds linguistic seams of seemingly dissimilar components, I see the convergence of these components in a historical context. According to Frye, Olsen takes her merging of disparate elements beyond that of male/female gender identity to say that “Requa” is “the plaiting together of the city [the representation of the 1970s world] and the natural world [the representation of the 1930s], of memory and concrete immediate sensation, bring him [Stevie] directly to an acknowledgement of what he has been evading—his mother’s death—even as it allows him to treasure his memories of her” (Frye 107). Frye’s pitting of the city versus the natural world can be perceived as elements of the period of production and the historical present. The city can be associated with a 1970s concept because of the strong female influences it represents whereas the natural world can be associated with the extremely masculine working class world of Requa. The convergence of the two opposite entities, the urban and the natural worlds, make a cooperative female-male entity that works much better than either world would alone. The physical sensations of the natural remind him of the emotional pain of the urban and thus become synonymous with each other and work together to help Stevie heal from his mother’s death. This bifurcated tale, then, fuses not only the urban with the natural, but the concrete with the abstract and the feminine with the masculine. The ideological structure of the text relies on opposite concepts to act as buttresses to support the amalgamation of disparate elements.

The elemental bifurcation of “Requa” and other texts creates a disparity between Olsen’s expressed intent and the literature she produces. Olsen has expressed intent to

portray and is interested in only the idea that circumstances, and circumstances alone, are responsible for shaping the identities of individuals. In her work, it is ideologies that shape her characters and stories. The ideologies Olsen merges are, obviously, an external influence. The degree to which each ideology permeates her text is a personal statement of Olsen's identity as an author and her characters' identity. Whether it is the influences of feminism or Communism, the masculine and feminine, or linguistics, Olsen establishes a unique, yet still historically determined, identity for herself and her characters in her balance of these elements. Olsen is then, through her writing and balance of disparate contextual elements, on a personal quest for identity that is the product of both circumstance and ideology.

Does that mean she is able to, at moments, break free from context entirely? It is tempting to conclude that what Olsen creates in the merge of disparate ideological components rises above the contexts of the 1930s and 1970s, communism and feminism, and gender identities. However, art cannot be and is not a product of vacuity, as Olsen's texts indicate. Yet, if we are to understand Olsen's texts as transcending intended contexts (not context altogether), Olsen's contention that circumstance is a hegemonic force may not be fully descriptive of her work. It appears that, through Olsen's method of converging contexts, she creates her own context. She does not break free of any one concept; that is impossible when the texts are historically based like *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* and "Requa."⁴⁷ If Olsen were totally constricted by the ideologies and influences of the 1970s, she would have had to completely rewrite *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* instead of (heavily) editing the novel. She did not start over, nor did she leave it

⁴⁷ "Requa" was explicitly set in the 1930s.

in its 1930s state. She created a hybrid text and a hybrid context through which we can read her work. Olsen's texts contain a partiality of contexts as shown by Stevie's gender duality in "Requa," feminism's and communism's struggle for ideological power in *Yonnondio*, and the imbalance of history and contemporary influence in "A Biographical Interpretation of Rebecca Harding Davis." Olsen, by merging contexts cannot fully escape its contextual ties, but she is able to partially transcend those historical and ideological frameworks

Though Olsen's explanation of her intent must be examined, I believe criticism of Olsen's work cannot be solely based on authorial intent but must use multiple approaches in order to fully illuminate Olsen's texts. In a sentiment that echoes Olsen and Frye, Mara Faulkner asserts that "although Olsen's stories portray individual characters so carefully there is no forgetting...Mazie or Stevie..., she never allows the most solitary of these characters to be seen apart from the overlapping communities and social systems in which they live" (Faulkner 22-3). Faulkner then immediately cites Olsen's 1974 Emerson College speech which explicitly states her focus on how external elements are responsible for shaping human life such as the "soil out of which people grow" and the climate around them" (23). By expressing intent, Olsen, then, limits herself and the approach a critic must take in order to evaluate her work. Both Frye and Faulkner take Olsen's explanation of intent as a filter through which they view her work. This approach by itself may be inadequate because even though Olsen herself indicates her focus and intent is to use circumstance to shape individuals and those individuals are representative of a class, she may not even be aware that her text is capable of transcending that approach.

Though Olsen views her characters as representatives of marginalized populations shaped by circumstance and not trying to pursue a path to personal identity, it does not mean that is actually the case. Olsen betrays her intent with stories like “Requa.” Though Stevie’s experience of trying to survive in an unfamiliar setting and grieving for a deceased mother makes him a product of his circumstances, his journey to find his gender identity makes him not only a product of his environment but also an individual on a personal quest to discover his balance of masculinity and femininity. As I have shown in a previous chapter, Stevie’s gender identity is formed as a social construct and as a biological paradigm which would seem to directly contradict Olsen’s expressed intent. Stevie is Olsen’s prime example of how, through the individual quest for identity, a societal norm or construct can be illuminated. Therefore, society or class populations can learn from the personal development of one unique individual, rather than that individual as a representation as a class. However, if Olsen’s intent is to be accepted as a viable and, as Frye’s and Faulkner’s assertions indicate, correct reading of Olsen’s characters, her work would not be able to transcend time-periods and ideologies as it has. The merging of the 1930s and the 1970s “isms” (Communism/socialism and Second Wave Feminism), which are evident, would not be possible. Olsen’s characters and stories would be frozen within a particular time-period or genre.

However, Olsen’s work transcends any one particular style or genre and is, therefore, is difficult to categorize. As a literary activist, Olsen has had a massive effect on the literary canon by helping to resurrect lost female authors such as Zora Neale

Hurston⁴⁸ and Rebecca Harding Davis.⁴⁹ However, Olsen's own literary contribution is not as prominent in the literary canon as it should be. Olsen's most well known work, *Tell Me A Riddle*, may be classified as feminist literature, but many of her other works (though not excluding *TMAR*) are often overlooked by the canon. Why is this? I believe it is because Olsen's work is not easily grouped into one particular genre, time period, or literary movement. Her unique method of converging disparate elements has displaced her literature from a literary canon that is becoming more and more specific in its cataloging of authors and literature. Olsen is not merely a 1930s proletariat writer; in fact, she deviates enough from Mike Gold's doctrine of proletariat realism that she must conditionally be accepted and rejected from that particular style and genre.⁵⁰ Her rooted settings and ideology of the 1930s is tempered and influenced by the time period in which she was most prolific—the feminist 1970s. Olsen's works, such as *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, contain the brutal starkness of naturalism compounded by realism, which is then infused with musical lyricism. In "Requa," Olsen includes elements of the internal, stream of consciousness Modernist movement as well as a non linear Post-

⁴⁸ Alice Walker answered Olsen's call to read and resurrect lost female authors and, in doing so, used Olsen's list of female authors published in 1971 to resurrect Zora Neale Hurston in 1975, four years after "Women Who Write in Our Time: One Out of Twelve" was published.

⁴⁹ Olsen's contribution to the movement of resurrecting female authors. She published an edition of Harding Davis' "Life in the Iron Mills" and "A Biographical Interpretation of Rebecca Harding Davis" in 1972.

⁵⁰ See the Yonnondio Chapter for an analytical treatment of Olsen's work within the context of Proletariat literature as Mike Gold describes it.

Modernist structure.⁵¹ Olsen's ability to unite all of these different elements and styles makes her effectively unclassifiable and, thus, marginalized by the canon.

This inability to be classified is actually an ability to transcend styles with and within her texts and movements that establishes her value to the literary canon. If she were given the attention she merits, Olsen's work might force a change in how the canon is organized. In *Women's Ethical Coming-of-Age: Adolescent Female Characters in the Prose Fiction of Tillie Olsen*, Agnes Cardoni says that "any change in the [canon] list—a move into pluralism, multiculturalism, feminism—threatens the assumptions upon which the American literary canon rests" (Cardoni 2). Cardoni does, however, go on to cite Frederick Crews' idea that a national canon should continually be expanded and, therefore, reconfigured in order to "match a necessarily unsettled sense of who 'we' are and what we ultimately care about" (Crews, qtd. in Cardoni 2). Cardoni then states that inclusiveness of change "bodes well for the expansion of the canon" as it relates to culture and ethics because "in American literature...ours has been a white male canon reflective of the white male culture" (2-3). The more prominent inclusion of Tillie Olsen into the canon would not merely provide the canon with work from what has been deemed the Other, but from an artist whose work encompasses a "necessarily unsettled sense" of the people, ideologies, and time periods it depicts. Among the texts treated in this paper, "Requa" is her most balanced example of her literary and ideological convergences. This story is a stunning paradigm of her unique literary mark.

⁵¹ "Requa" displays a stream of consciousness method that is indicative of the Modernist style as well as a non linear structure that is characteristic of Post-Modern literature. It achieves this through shifting point of view and perspectives with internal monologues and a depiction of both Stevie and Wes' thought processes. The Post-Modern, non linear structure is constructed by a series of flashbacks, dream sequences, constant perspective shifting, and ambiguity of action.

Like Olsen's comprehensive works, the criticism that surrounds it must also be versatile and involved or else the critic runs the risk of limiting understanding of the text and importance of the author. In order to explore Olsen's texts fully, the reader must separate the multiple contexts so the obviation of various historical milieu is reduced. This methodology dictates that Olsen's work must be examined from the historical contexts of the epoch in which the story is set and the time period in which she wrote the text. The critic must examine social contexts in the period of production and the contemporary history of the piece including ideological, economic, political, and domestic norms of the eras as well as biographical (which may include all of the aforementioned factors) background of the author. In a text that merges separate historical contexts and ideologies, one cannot use a one-sided approach to interpret and critique the work. A multi-faceted approach that merges several different traditional approaches is necessary to grasp the Olsen's textual intricacies.

So, how can the literary canon qualify Olsen? Is there a new form of criticism that must be described in order to better examine and categorize Olsen's work so that it corresponds to the literary canon? Perhaps, but I do not believe that is necessary. Each milieu must first be examined individually as it relates to Olsen's text before convergence of contexts can be analyzed as an amalgamation of perspectives. The reader must approach Olsen's work by several singular perspectives in order to be able to effectively view her literary texts as whole. It may be that the best method of examining Olsen's texts is one that mirrors Olsen's own writing style—a method of convergence and eclecticism which can examine her works from several different, perhaps even conflicting angles. In doing so, the critic may achieve the same end result of Olsen—that of a

narrative piece of historical criticism and fiction. Whether this thesis or other critical texts dealing with Tillie Olsen are indeed fiction as a result of using Olsen's method, it does not matter. This multi-faceted approach is illuminating as a critical strategy, and it only seems appropriate to explore Olsen's texts through a similar manner by which they were constructed, through the merging of seemingly disparate elements.

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