

# Tillie Olsen: Working-Class Mother, Proletarian Writer and Feminist Forerunner

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## **Abstract**

In this article, I want to trace the interwoven pattern of relationships between Tillie Olsen's life as a working-class mother, her radical political commitment as a socialist and feminist and her own fictional and non-fictional writing. I want to show that despite the fragmentary nature of her literary production, there is a tangible and essential link between her personal experience, her politics and her aesthetics as a modern proletarian writer. It is, I would claim, this combination of gender, class and radical consciousness that enabled her to produce some of the most remarkably unorthodox fictional narratives of working-class women's lives in the whole of twentieth-century American literature.

**Key words:** Tillie Olsen, Proletarian Literature, Working-Class Motherhood, Feminism

How many great works of world literature describe simple household chores like ironing clothes? Tillie Olsen's story, *I Stand Here Ironing*, does just that. Moreover, despite its unusually domestic subject matter, it was hailed as a modern classic when it was first published in 1957. A year later it was chosen as one of the best American short stories and has been reprinted almost every year since. According to Joanne S. Frye, the "uniqueness" of the story "lies in its fusion of motherhood as both metaphor and experience: it shows us motherhood bared, stripped of romantic distortion, and reinfused with the power of genuine metaphorical insight into the problems of selfhood in the modern world" (1981, reprinted in Hoyle Nelson & Huse 1994: 128). In contrast, when Olsen included an earlier version of the story in an application for a Stanford University Creative Writing Fellowship in 1955, one of the male members of the admissions committee threw the story into the wastebasket "in disgust", saying "Can you imagine. That woman went on for *pages* just about *ironing*. Standing there ironing!" (Quoted in Coiner 1995:151).

Olsen's own life, her experience of writing and early difficulties in getting published corroborate what Virginia Woolf previously concluded in *A Room of One's Own*, that women have to negotiate the lack of time, opportunity and support in order to become writers, not least in relation to the demands placed upon them as wives and mothers. Of the great women novelists like Jane Austen, George Eliot and the Brontë sisters, Woolf comments that "not one of them had a child" (2012:77). Tillie Olsen raised four daughters, often as a single parent, while at the same time working in a series of low-paid jobs as a hotel maid, packinghouse worker, linen checker, waitress, laundry worker, factory worker and secretary. As a consequence of being a working-class mother, Olsen's writing reflects not only a world of domestic care, but also a very different outlook on life than the one

normally represented in fiction written by men. This was a characteristic that Woolf also noted in relation to women’s writing: “[S]ince a novel has this correspondence to real life, its values are to some extent those of real life. But it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the opposite sex; naturally, this is so [...]. And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction” (2012:85-6). In Olsen’s view, it was this nexus of maternal responsibility that was one of the most glaring absences in literature, a feminist issue that she later addressed in her combined “Daybook and Reader”, *Mother to Daughter, Daughter to Mother*:

Most of what has been, is, between mothers, daughters, and in motherhood, in daughterhood, has never been recorded, nor (even as yet) written with comprehension in our own voices, out of our own lives and truths. What does exist is a small, perhaps the smallest portion of all literature. Nearly all of it is recent and, not surprisingly, primarily the contribution of women in the first generation of their families to emerge into written literature – and mostly of working class origins, Scandinavian, Canadian, women of color. (1984:274-5)

In this article, I want to trace the interwoven pattern of relationships between Tillie Olsen’s life as a working-class mother, her radical political commitment as a socialist and feminist and her own fictional and non-fictional writing. I want to show that despite the fragmentary nature of her literary production, there is a tangible and essential link between her personal experience, her politics and her aesthetics as a modern proletarian writer. It is, I would claim, this combination of gender, class and radical consciousness that enabled her to produce some of the most remarkably unorthodox fictional narratives of working-class women’s lives in the whole of twentieth-century American literature.

In her critical biography, *Tillie Olsen: One Woman, Many Riddles* (2010), Panthea Reid opens with a sweeping and celebratory summary of the main facets of Olsen’s life-long career of social and political activism:

She was a ‘hell-cat’ in the 1920s, an earnest revolutionary during the entire 1930s, the ‘most sought-after writer’ in America in the mid-1930s, a war-relief patriot during World War II, a crusader for equal pay for equal work in the mid-1940s, a stay-at-home mom with a baby-boomer during the rest of the 1940s, a victim of FBI surveillance in the 1950s, a storyteller who foregrounded the struggles of mothers and ordinary men and women in the late 1950s, a figure in the Civil Rights, feminist, and anti-war protests of the 1960s and 1970s, a feminist icon in the 1980s and 1990s, and in her twilight years a beloved emblem of one woman’s power to change the world. (2010:3)

At the same time, throughout the rest of her biography, Reid expresses a growing personal scepticism about the negative impact that Olsen’s long-term membership of the Communist Party of America had on her writing. The point is clearly made that literature and politics don’t mix. Reid also has a tendency to treat Olsen as primarily an autobiographical “storyteller” rather than a serious writer of fiction. Thus in relation to her hugely successful short story collection, Reid comments: “Tillie produced the great stories in *Tell Me a Riddle*, all based on actual people,

mostly her family, and on actual events, not ideology” (2010:333). She even suggests that it was the politics that prevented Olsen from completing *Yonnondio*, her one attempt at writing a full-length novel. Referring to Olsen’s plan “when she was trying to revise her 1930s novel as *Yonnondio*” to include the detailed depiction of a workers’ strike and its tragic aftermath, Reid reiterates her reductive complaint: “This list of disasters would have been little help anyway because she named but did not develop new characters, imagined endless disasters, and subsumed plot to ideology” (2010:347).

More perceptively, in an article on the work of Olsen and its pivotal significance in bridging the gap between culture and the labour movement, Deborah Rosenfelt pinpointed the fundamental political challenge that Olsen’s writing represents. In particular, how Olsen was concerned with the role of ‘organic’ intellectuals like herself who came from the working class and sought to remain embedded within it:

For Olsen, then, the relationship between the intellectual and the working class was far more than an academic question, for she herself belonged to one world by birth and commitment and was drawn to the other by her gift and love for language and literature. Both the ‘intellectual’ activities of reading and writing and the struggles of working people to improve the quality of their lives were essential to her. The problem was how to combine them. ((1981), reprinted. in Hoyle Nelson & Huse: 1994:66)

The key word here is “commitment”, something that Olsen took very seriously throughout her life. It was this engagement with radical political and trade union activity that gave her the strength and opportunity to both transcend the daily impact of drudgery that she experienced as a working mother, but also to channel this class awareness into the very fabric of her writing. It is this not uncomplicated combination of life, work and feminist commitment in Olsen’s writing that I want to explore in more detail in the remainder of this article. The focus will begin therefore with the image of motherhood that she projected in both her collection of short stories, *Tell Me a Riddle* and her feminist reader, *Mother to Mother, Daughter to Daughter*. I will then connect these concerns with the experience of working-class mothers to her 1930s novel, *Yonnondio*. Finally, the discussion will turn to her classic collection of women’s writing in *Silences* and her strategy of writing back at the absence of women’s voices in traditional literary history.

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In her compilation of extracts, “selected and shaped by Tillie Olsen” (1984:iii), from the writings of women who were also mothers and daughters, *Mother to Daughter, Daughter to Mother*, Olsen creates a dialogic sisterhood of female family experience between the generations. Many of these 120 writers are very famous, such as Virginia Woolf, Alice Munro, Sylvia Plath, Marge Piercy, Katherine Mansfield and Adrienne Rich, while the majority are lesser known. They all contribute to a collective portrayal of motherhood and daughterhood that is both supportive, but also fraught with tensions, guilt feelings and frustrations, as some

of the chapter headings suggest; “Healings, Understandings, Intimacies”, but also “Anger, Chasms, Estrangements” and “Mournings, Elegies, Tributes” (1984:v). As with her previous collection, *Silences*, Olsen states in her postscript that this new anthology was not only the fruit of a long process of reflection and editing, but also of a desire to recover a lost tradition of writings about mothers and daughters by women who often made little or no impact on the literary discourse. It was also an attempt to reach out to a readership of other women who share similar experiences as female carers and home makers:

This small book comes out of years and years of reading on its subject so central to my life; of gathering, storing, sharing passages and work which have given me sustenance, human beauty and anguish, understanding and self-knowledge. It does not pretend to be more than it is – partial (in both senses of the word): resonant with presences, but perhaps most eloquent in its absences, its silences, its indications of what yet needs to be written (and in its spaces awaiting your words) [...] Least present is work written by mothers themselves (although each year sees more). Whatever the differences now (including literacy, small families), for too many of the old, old reasons, few mothers while in the everyday welter of motherhood life, or after, are writing it. That everyday welter, the sense of its troublous context, the voice of the mother herself, are the largest absences in this book. And elsewhere. (1984:275-6)

In her own writing, Olsen certainly tried to remedy this imbalance by devoting herself to exploring the condition of the working-class mother and her relationship with her children, in particular her daughters. One could even claim that this is what all of her work seeks to illuminate – in her fiction, her anthologies, her literary criticism and campaigning journalism. As a key figure in the second-wave of the women’s movement, Olsen’s whole literary enterprise forms an integral part of a growing community of women writers and activists who were inspired by feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous, who called on women to document their own personal experience of patriarchy:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (Cixous 1976, quoted in Eagleton 1996:320)

Olsen was herself the victim of this process of social exclusion while she was a working mother having to raise a family at the same time pursuing her ambitions as a young writer. This double work load led to a 20-year-long literary silence from 1936 onwards that was only broken in 1956 with the publication of her short story *I Stand Here Ironing*. In *Mother to Daughter, Daughter to Mother*, it is not surprising that Olsen includes extracts from her own writings – *Tell Me a Riddle*, *I Stand Here Ironing*, *Yonnondio* and *A Dream-Vision*. It is also revealing to note which parts of these works she chooses to reproduce, not least in terms of the image of motherhood and the relationship between mother and daughter they project. What strikes the reader perhaps most is the remorse that pervades each piece: feelings of inadequacy, of never having enough time, means or physical and

emotional energy to be able to cater for her daughters’ needs. The point of view shifts between mother and daughter, but there is always a sense of looking back at childhood and parenthood through such painful memories of neglect. Thus, in *Tell Me a Riddle*, the sometimes very short passages deal with some sort of emotional debt that needs to be settled: “Pay me back, Mother, pay me back for all you took from me. Those others you crowded into your heart. The hands I needed to be for you, the heaviness, the responsibility [...] I do not know you, Mother. Mother, I never knew you” (1984:63). In a later extract, the same nagging feelings of insufficiency are recalled almost as a trauma of loss and mourning:

It was not that she had not loved her babies, her children. The love – the passion of tending – had risen with the need like a torrent; and like a torrent drowned and immolated all else. But when the need was done – oh the power that was lost in the painful damming back and drying up of what still surged, but had nowhere to go. Only the thin pulsing left that could not quiet, suffering over lives one felt, but could no longer hold nor help. (1984:198)

In contrast, in the extract from *I Stand Here Ironing*, there is at least one reference to, and acknowledgement of, the material constraints of having had to earn a living as a single parent that made the bonds between mother and daughter inevitably less intimate and loving. It is a litany of everyday distractions and demands in the life of a working mother that are meant to explain but not exculpate the lack of devotion that the child finds so unforgiving:

I was nineteen ... I would start running as soon as I got off the streetcar, running up the stairs, the place smelling sour, and awake or asleep to startle awake, when she saw me she would break into a clogged weeping that could not be comforted, a weeping I can hear yet.

After a while I found a job hashing at night so I could be with her days, and it was better. But it came to where I had to bring her to his family and leave her.

It took a long time to raise the money for her fare back. Then she got chicken pox and I had to wait longer. When she finally came, I hardly knew her ... All the baby loveliness gone. She was two. Old enough for nursery school they said, and I did not know then what I know now – the fatigue of the long day, and the lacerations of group life in the kinds of nurseries that are only parking places for children.

Except that it would have made no difference if I had known. It was the only place there was. It was the only way we could be together, the only way I could hold a job. Even without knowing. I knew. (1984:110)

What is also striking is that this image of a constantly harassed working-class mother that comes across in the extracts is in contrast to that of the growing political awareness of the mothers in the complete stories and novel, women who begin to see their condition in a much wider context of patriarchal and class oppression. This does not lighten the immediate burden of domestic chores in any way, but it does give a sense of transcendence from what is otherwise unrelieved poverty, physical oppression and hopelessness. In *I Stand Here Ironing* for instance, the story of Emily’s childhood is told in retrospect by her mother in short vignettes from a difficult past that ebb and flow to the rhythm of the ironing. At the same time, her mother looks back more critically at the social constraints that faced herself and her daughter and the interconnection between her troubled personal development and

the pressures of the times. The mother is clearly conscious that she alone is not fully to blame for the shortcomings in Emily’s upbringing. That she is also a product of the historical period, the economic hardships, as well as the jostling of siblings for their mother’s attention, emotional choices and exclusions that have left Emily sometimes withdrawn:

We were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth. I was a young mother, I was a distracted mother. There were the other children pushing up, demanding. Her younger sister seemed all that she was not. There were years she did not let me touch her. She kept too much in herself, her life was such she had to keep too much in herself. My wisdom came too late. She has much to her and probably little will come of it. She is a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear. (2013:13-14)

At the same time, there are hints that the daughter has absorbed at least some of the wisdom of her mother, in terms of insight into gender politics, while still keeping a certain distance to her mother as a failed maternal figure, a far-too-absent presence. There are for instance signs that the daughter has inherited her mother’s down-to-earth, anti-authoritarian streak. This emerges when a teacher calls to speak to her mother about her daughter’s difficulties in school, something that at first triggers the recollected regrets and reproaches about her upbringing, but later also a defiance towards being analyzed and morally assessed as a parent: “‘Who needs help.’ Even if I came, what good would it do? You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key? She has lived for nineteen years. There is all that life that has happened outside of me, beyond me” (2013:5). The same pragmatic truculence is reflected in her daughter when she becomes a teenager in the Cold War years of the 1950s, leaping upstairs like her mother did years ago and teasing her, suggesting a shared sense of social awareness and self-determination:

She is coming. She runs up the stairs two at a time with her light graceful step, and I know she is happy tonight. Whatever it was that occasioned your call did not happen today.

‘Aren’t you ever going to finish the ironing. Mother? Whistler painted his mother in a rocker. I’d have to paint mine standing over an ironing board.’ This is one of her communicative nights and she tells me everything and nothing as she fixes herself a plate of food out of the icebox.

She is so lovely. Why did you want me to come in at all? Why were you concerned? She will find her way.

She starts up the stairs to bed. ‘Don’t get *me* up with the rest in the morning.’ ‘But I thought you were having midterms.’ ‘Oh, those,’ she comes back in, kisses me, and says quite lightly, ‘in a couple of years when we’ll all be atom-dead they won’t matter a bit’. (2013:13)

The story finishes on an overtly feminist note with the mother appealing to the teacher to help provide her daughter with the knowledge she needs to get through life, but also hoping that as part of a post-war generation of more independent women, she will go beyond her parents’ limitations and domestic conventions as wives and mothers:

Let her be. So all that is in her will not bloom – but in how many does it? There is still enough left to live by. Only help her to know – help make it so there is cause for her to know – that she is more than the dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron. (2013:14)

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A similar gendered shift between past and present forms the framework of Olsen’s other key short story, *Tell Me a Riddle*, in which an old immigrant couple from Russia are shown still nagging at each other after 47 years of marriage, despite the fact that the wife is now dying. The story looks back at their life together in America where the process of adaptation to a new culture and society has meant more of a sacrifice for the wife, as a mother and then grandmother, than to the husband. The point of departure from the old world of their youth was the Russian revolution of 1905 in which they were active participants and from which they had to flee the Tsarist persecution of revolutionaries. The wife in particular has clearly suffered most from the change in social status, from being an independent woman and radical socialist to having to conform to a more conventional gender role in the new world. Thus, the story dramatises this discrepancy between the personal and the ideological, between radical ideas and their lack of implementation in the home. The carping dialogue between the couple continually rehearses this conflict between the wife who wants to continue her involvement as a radical woman and the husband who from the beginning resists her development, not least through reading:

Old scar tissue ruptured and the wounds festered anew. Chekhov indeed. She thought without softness of that young wife, who in the deep night hours while she nursed the current baby, and perhaps held another in her lap, would try to stay awake for the only time there was to read. She would feel again the weather of the outside on his cheek when, coming late from a meeting, he would find her so, and stimulated and ardent, sniffing her skin, coax: ‘I’ll put the baby to bed, and you – put the book away, don’t read, don’t read’.

That had been the most beguiling of all the ‘don’t read, put your book away’ her life had been, Chekhov indeed! (2013:60)

And yet, even at this late stage in their relationship, when the husband continues to patronize her and undermine her independence, there is still a determination and reassertion of her radical past which surfaces towards the end. There is for example a symbolic connection made between the medication she has been told to take and the acknowledgement of their Jewish faith, both of which she tries to resist. All those years of domestic servitude have not obliterated the awareness she acquired in the struggle against autocracy and superstition in order to spread knowledge, to fight for a better future, for the children and not least her own daughter Hannah. Once again there is the same recurring bad conscience about her upbringing and not being able to respond fully to their demands. But her desire to pass on a tradition of emancipation remains unbroken, still raging against the narrow prejudice of religious beliefs that went hand in hand with patriarchy:

Swindler! does she look back on the dark centuries? Candles bought instead of bread and stuck into a potato for a candlestick? Religion that stifled and said: in Paradise, woman, you will be the footstool of your husband, and in life – poor chosen Jew – ground under, despised, trembling in cellars. And cremated. And cremated.

This is religion’s fault? You think you are still an orator of the 1905 revolution? Where are the pills for quieting? Which are they?

Heritage. How have we come from our savage past, how no longer to be savages – this to teach. To look back and learn what humanizes – this to teach. To smash all ghettos that divide us – not to go back, not to go back – this to teach. Learned books in the house, will humankind live or die, and she gives to her boys – superstition.

Hannah that is so good to you. Take your pill, Mrs. Excited for Nothing, swallow.

Heritage! But when did I have time to teach? Of Hannah I asked only hands to help. (2013:71)

The title of the story, *Tell Me a Riddle*, suggests that life is a mystery, full of compromises, distractions and defeats that are difficult to explain or come to terms with, especially for a woman in a marriage in a patriarchal society in a new country. Motherhood seems to be a burden that imposes itself even on the most determined of women, those who were social revolutionaries. And yet the story does not end enigmatically, there is a consistency in the death of the old woman, still looking back at her radical youth as the rationale of the rest of her life: “To let her die, and with her their youth of belief out of which her bright, betrayed words foamed; stained words, that on her working lips came stainless” (2013:95).

*Tell Me a Riddle* and *I Stand Here Ironing* are both poetic and political dramatisations of the theme of motherhood in which Olsen uses an interrupted, fragmentary narrative voice to try and capture the constantly divided, shackled and ultimately unfinished nature of a working-class woman’s life. Circumscribed by material hardship, there is the perpetual renegotiation of the terms of existence, one that is continually compromised by the lack of means to deal with the everyday demands of keeping a roof over your head, a regular income and food on the table. These stories provide a powerful insight into this female working-class predicament. During the 1930s, while Olsen was trying to maintain herself and her children in the face of chronic material deprivation, she nevertheless still struggled to make sense of it in her writing, eventually producing one half of a novel, *Yonnonidio* which, despite its truncated state, remains a sustained, psychologically subtle and superbly crafted work of literary fiction.

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As can be seen from her published pieces of social reportage from the 1930s – “The Strike”, “Thousand-Dollar Vagrant” and “A Vision of Fear and Hope” – Olsen was very familiar with the kind of narrative tropes of exploitation, oppression and collective struggle of ‘proletarian’ writing, the literary genre that came to prominence during a decade of radical responses to the crisis of capitalism, the threat of fascism and the prospect of a new world war. It is also clear that according to the plan she made for her novel, *Yonnonidio*, it was meant to culminate in the



depiction of an industrial strike, its subsequent defeat and disastrous consequences for working-class families involved. At the same time, Olsen sought to shift the emphasis away from the traditionally male-oriented, workerist concerns of proletarian writing to that of the women, the mothers, their daughters and the family. As Deborah Rosenfelt comments: “In writing *Yonnondio*, Olsen was consciously writing class literature from a woman’s point of view, incorporating a dimension that she saw ignored and neglected in the works of most contemporary male leftists” (1981:79). Like several other of Olsen’s literary projects at this time, the novel was abandoned in the mid-1930s and only published in 1974 after she had struggled to restore the pages of the original manuscript. What was missing was the whole of the latter half that would deal with the more political aspects of the strike and its aftermath.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it could very well be argued that the novel is in fact finished, since Olsen’s portrayal of the Holbrook family, in particular of the central character of Anna, the mother, and her daughter Mazie, is complete in its narrative development and exploration of the themes that were closest to Olsen’s own heart: working women, motherhood and the relationship between mother and daughter. Female working-class writers are few in any language, but especially one like Olsen who combined a radically gendered vision of society with a flair for poetic prose, writing that seems to defy ideological closure. The novel is therefore a singular achievement in that it successfully combines kitchen-sink realism with a more elusive stream-of-female-consciousness. As Cora Kaplan wrote in the introduction to the Virago Modern Classics reprint that the novel, the book represented a tenaciously creative dialogue between the same writer at different stages in her life:

*Yonnondio* comes to us ‘unfinished’ in the sense that the young author meant to write more, but it is not therefore rough or incomplete. On the contrary, as it stands it is one of the great short novels in English. The triumphant result of this joint effort might be seen as a small reparation from history for the faith which the older writer always kept with her younger self. (1980:np)

There is another connection in the novel that can be seen as a re-affirmation of Olsen’s own family past – that between Tillie and her own mother, Hashka who, like the radical mother figure in *Tell Me a Riddle*, was active in the Russian revolution of 1905: “The strong bonds she had with her mother, Olsen has said, ‘are part of what made me a revolutionary writer’” (Quoted in Coiner 1995:142). This tangible link between the generations of immigrant women in the novel forms the basis for a shift in focus from production to reproduction, from the traditional locus of the proletarian novel in the factory or coal mine to the women who are there to keep the home fires burning, to slave over a hot kitchen stove, to suffer and be still – all such clichéd phrases that are used about women’s status in the house. There is a clear indication of Olsen consciously writing back at this masculinist perspective

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<sup>1</sup> See further, Olsen’s “1935 Plan for the 1930s Proletarian Novel”, reprinted as an appendix in Reid’s biography (2010), page 347

of real work being done only outside the home that was reproduced in much proletarian fiction of the time.<sup>2</sup> This break with the narrative traditions of social realist fiction is marked in *Yonnonidio* by Olsen interrupting the story with a metafictional comment about the conventional literary expectations about depicting workers as either heroes or hapless victims. After an explosion in a coal mine, an archetypal scene in many 1930s proletarian novels, Olsen’s own authorial voice breaks through in *Yonnonidio* as she addresses the aspiring radical novelist who would seek to romanticize this scene of disaster and death by turning the men and women involved into an archetypal tableau of anonymous figures:

And could you not make a cameo of this and pin it onto your aesthetic hearts? So sharp it is, so clear, so classic. The shattered dusk, the mountain of culm, the tipple; clean lines, bare beauty – carved against them, dwarfed by the vastness of night and the towering tipple, these black figures with bowed heads, waiting, waiting.

Surely it is classical enough for you – the Greek marble of the women, the simple, flowing lines of sorrow, carved so rigid and eternal. Surely it is original enough – these grotesques, this thing with the foot missing, this gargoyle with half the face gone and the arm. In the War to Live, the artist, Coal, sculptured them. It was his Master hand that wrought the intricate mosaic on his face – splintered coal inlaid with patches of skin and threads of rock ... You will have the cameo? Call it Rascoe, Wyoming, any of a thousand towns in America, the night of a mine blowup. (1980:29)

Contrastingly, the gaze in *Yonnonidio* is consistently a female one – women are therefore the moral touchstone of the narrative, always on the receiving end of the impact of the world outside, yet having to deal practically with its domestic consequences. Thus, while Jim Holbrook moves through a series of different soul-destroying jobs – coal miner, tenant farmer, sewage cleaner and packinghouse worker – it is Anna, his wife, and Mazie, their daughter, who filter the changes of circumstances through their consciousness of and relationship with one another. There are certainly other family members, other children, both boys and girls, but Anna and Mazie represent a mother and daughter continuum that is both physically situated in a condition of gendered and class poverty, but which also nurtures a utopian longing for something different, something better. With Anna it is a question of trying to overcome the male bias that places greater obstacles in the way of her daughters, by trying to open up for them an alternative world of books, reading and education:

‘Ma, what’s there to eat?’

‘Coffee. It’s on the stove. Wake Will and Ben and don’t bother me. I got washin to do.’

Later. ‘Ma?’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s an edication?’

‘An edjication?’ Mrs. Holbrook arose from amidst the shifting vapours of the washtub and, with the suds dripping from her red hands, walked over and stood impressively over Mazie.

‘An edjication is what you kids are going to get. It means your hands stay white and you read

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<sup>2</sup> See further, Joseph North ed. *New Masses: An Anthology of the Rebel Thirties* (1972).

books and work in an office. Now, get the kids and scat. But don't go too far, or I'll knock your block off.' (1980:4)

Through Mazie, we follow the growth of her poetic sensibility as she experiences her surroundings imaginatively, at a different angle of perception through the magic of words. She becomes the secret self that her mother has been forced to suppress, weighed down by the constant demands of the home maker, the house keeper. But Mazie is also attuned to this other level in her mother which is linked to nature and the sense of liberation she feels when they manage to escape from the slums for a day, relaxing in the grass in the sunshine, her mother singing a lullaby. It is a moment when a disalienated Anna breaks through, for a short while overcoming all the psychological tension of concern and care of a mother who feels physically confined and inadequate. It is also significant that of all the children who are with her at that moment, it is only Mazie who recognizes this repressed aspect of her mother that is temporarily released, a moment of epiphany that transforms herself:

Mazie felt the strange happiness in her mother's body, happiness that had nought to do with them, with her; happiness and farness and selfness.

'I saw a ship a sailing,  
And on that ship was me.'

The fingers stroked, spun a web, cocooned Mazie into happiness and intactness and selfness. Soft wove the bliss round hurt and fear and want and shame – the old worn fragile bliss, a new frail selfness bliss, healing, transforming. Up from the grasses, from the earth, from the broad tree trunk at their back, latent life streamed and seeded. The air and self shone boundless. Absently, her mother stroked; stroked unfolding, wingedness, boundlessness.

'I'm hungry.' Ben said.

'Watch me jump,' Jimmie called imperiously.

'Momma, Mazie, watch. You're not watching!'

The wind shifted, blew packing house. A tremble of complicity ran through Mazie's body; with both hands she tethered her mother's hand, to keep it, stroking, stroking. Too late. Something whirred, severed, sank. *Between a breath, between a heartbeat, the weight settled, the bounds reclaimed.*

'I'm watching,' Anna called. The mother look was back on her face, the mother alertness, attunement, in her bounded body.

'I didn't think to bring a bite for us, Ben. Wherever is my head these late days? Balloony. Catalpa.' She laughed. 'Holy Meroly,' using an expression they had never heard before, 'there's nary a shadow. Noontime. And I promised Mis' Kryckszi we'd be back.'

Never again, but once, did Mazie see that look – the other look – on her mother's face. (1980 146-7)

“The other look” is the gaze of freedom and independence, the carefree feeling of not having to always be on her guard for the children's sake against the constant threats that poverty and social vulnerability pose. This latter condition produces the normal everyday look that Mazie and the children are used to. However, the other Anna gives a fleeting glimpse of a world where women, young or old, could begin to live a different, more authentic life on their own terms, beyond the bounds of gender and class.

The climax of the novel involves a dramatic juxtaposition of two scenes, one factory and the other domestic, dramatically revealing the interdependence of the two spheres. On the one hand, it is a blistering hot day and women are working in a meat packing plant, struggling with the greasy entrails of dead animals, while being supervised closely by a male foreman:

The stench is vomit-making as never before. The fat and plucks, the bladders and kidneys and bungs and guts, gone soft and spongy in the heat, perversely resist being trimmed, separated, deslimed; demand closer concentration than ever, extra speed. A hysterical, helpless laughter starts up. Indeed they are in hell; indeed they are damned. *Steamed boiled broiled fried cooked. Geared, meshed.* (1980:180)

There is another correspondence made here between the way the animal carcasses are treated and how the women workers themselves are submitted to the heat and the dehumanising conditions of high-speed factory work. Like animals, they are also separated into reified parts according to their function in the assembly line of meat production. Suddenly, the exposure of their own fragmented bodies is made frighteningly tangible when one of the steam pipes bursts above their heads and they are suddenly themselves on the receiving end of the same kind of scorching treatment as the animals:

At that moment in casings, as if to demonstrate that there is a mightier heat, a higher superior heat, the main steam pipe breaks open, and hissing live steam in a magnificent plume, in a great boiling roll, takes over. Peg and Andra and Philomena and Cleola directly underneath fall and writhe in their crinkling skins, their sudden juices. Lena, pregnant, faints. Laurret, trying to run, slips on the slimy platform. Others tangle over her, try to rise, to help each other up. Ella, already at the work of calming, of rescue, thinks through her own pain: *steamed boiled broiled cooked scalded, I forgot scalded.* (180:181)

It is a scene worthy of Dante’s *Inferno*, except that here, even in their own moment of terrifying individual pain, the women workers instinctively seek to help one another out of the skin-peeling horror. At the same time, the overseer callously tries to force them back inside by threatening them with a loss in pay: “‘Stay where you are,’ yells Bull. ‘Carelessness. Nobody’s getting away with nothing. You’ll be docked for every second you aint workin. And fined for carelessness’ (1980:182). Like victims of rape, the women are compelled to bear both the pain and the blamed for their own misfortune.

At this point, from these harrowing images of a meat-packing underworld, something that Olsen had direct experience of herself, where low-paid women workers were seen as physically expendable, the narrative cuts back to the Holbrook home, where Anna is trying to nurse a family of children who are also suffering in the heat and stench from the nearby meat plant. The implication is that this is what is on offer for a working woman – either factory or domestic labour – where conditions are not so entirely incompatible. In the case of the home, although not as acutely depicted as the scene above, there is still the constant fear of the children getting infections from the water and air pollution and dying of fever: “Mazie half

wakes from her sweated sleep; her mother is sponging her, calling her name urgently over and over. ‘You been sleepin so long I got worried; everytime I looked in on you, you was sleepin. Are you alright? I cant tell is it fever or this heat? Tell me, where is it hurts?’” (1980:188). The home is thus never seen as a haven of security in the novel, but as a place filled with the terrors of sexual abuse, pregnancy, miscarriages, hunger, illness and need. At the same time, at this crucial juncture, a spark of resistance is once again ignited, this time by Anna’s baby Bess. Thus, the novel ends with a cry of primitive protest, of railing against reality, a symbolic act that the rest of the family notice the significance of. Initially, it is a simple gesture on Bess’s part that springs from playing with a metal lid Anna has given her. Her actions trigger a remarkable moment of family bonding – of mind over miserable matter. A very mundane metaphor of carnivalesque defiance against the world, captured in this microcosm of working-class family life:

*Bang!*

Bess who has been fingering a fruit-jar lid – absently, heedlessly drops it – aimlessly groping across the table, reclaims it again. Lightening in her brain. She releases, grabs, releases, grabs. I can do. Bang! I did that, I can do. I! A look of neanderthal concentration is on her face. That noise! In triumphant, astounded joy she clashes the lid down. Bang, slam, whack. Release, grab, slam, bang, bang. Centuries of human drive work in her; human ecstasy of achievement, satisfaction deep and fundamental as sex: *I can do, I use my powers; I! I!* Wilder, madder, happier the bangs. The fetid fevered air rings with Anna’s, Mazie’s, Ben’s laughter; Bess’s toothless, triumphant crow. Heat misery, rash misery transcended. (1980:190-1)

It was also this force of will that enabled Olsen herself to partially overcome the stacked domestic and working odds against writing, even though it meant a prolonged lapse in the publication of her novel. It is her experience of being a mother, whose ambition to write was thwarted by the lack of editor support and publishers’ unwillingness to put her writing into print, that gave her such an understanding of the physical and psychological factors that disqualify so many women who have neither an independent income nor room of their own. *Yonnonidio* was a reassertion of the value of working-class women’s lives that Olsen sought to recover from generations of historical condescension and neglect. It lead her inevitably into another of her ground-breaking compilations of comments and quotes, this time exposing the cultural mechanisms that marginalized and excluded women writers – *Silences*. It was a labour of love and recollected memory that, according to Anthony Dawahare, “helped to establish [Olsen] as a foremost contemporary Marxist and feminist literary critic and theorist” of her generation (2008:np).

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In *A Room of One’s Own*, published in 1928, Virginia Woolf pointed to the gender discrepancy in both literary history and society, that women were very often the desired Other in literature written by men, while being themselves historically absent as writers in their own right. They were relegated to the level of muses at

best and servants at worst. Woolf was one in a long line of feminists who have continued to remind us of this democratic deficit in patriarchal society, where women were the objects of male attention, but seldom the subjects of their own independent creation:

A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband. (2012:51)

Other factors that impacted on the lives of those few women that did manage to break through the literary wall of silence and become famous women writers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were, as the title of Woolf’s book indicated, the access to a private physical space to be able to write, as well as the economic means to concentrate on pursuing their art – a room and five hundred pounds annual income (2012:42-3). Moreover, apart from these material considerations, Woolf was also acutely aware of the lack of encouragement women experienced being outside the networks of power, influence, co-operation and mutual admiration created by and for men. However, Woolf’s solution to the problem remained essentially a middle-class one that proposed the individual promotion of privileged women, as the choice of personal pronoun ‘one’s’ in title of her book also reflected.

When Tillie Olsen came to address the same issues in *Silences*, published in 1978, it seemed very little had changed in the conditions of women who wanted to become writers, although Olsen had a rather different point of departure in her own diagnosis of the causes of their cultural ostracism. Like Woolf, she emphasised the physical restrictions that impacted on the lives of prospective women writers, but redirected the focus to that of domestic work, childbearing and the intersectional impact of gender, race and class in order to explain the continued invisibility of women writers. Thus, writing back at Woolf, Olsen comments:

No one has yet written *A Room of One’s Own* for writers, other than women, still marginal in literature. Nor do any bibliographies exist for writers whose origins and circumstances are marginal. Class remains the greatest unexamined factor. (1980:146)

Olsen also returned to Woolf’s passing observation about most great women writers not having children of their own, while those that did often had servants. In contrast, Olsen broadened the discussion of the difficulties in women writing to include those of working-class mothers who like herself not only had several children to look after, but who had no recourse to help in the home. This was a female experience that needed to be explored in literature, but was almost totally obscured. Childbearing and home caring in the life of any presumptive mother-writer meant, according to Olsen, only “distraction, not meditation, that becomes habitual; interruption, not continuity; spasmodic, not constant toil. The rest has been said

here. Work interrupted, deferred, relinquished, makes blockage – at best, lesser accomplishment. Unused capacities atrophy, cease to be [...] Almost no mothers – as almost no part-time, part-self persons – have created enduring literature ... so far” (1980:19). In her own career as a working-class mother and writer, Olsen proved both the truth of these observations, but also the significance of her strive to process this personal predicament through her writing.

*Silences* confirmed Olsen’s status as a working-class feminist, writer and thinker, a social perspective that had been lacking in the post-war debate about the condition of women under patriarchy. Her exposure of the economic and cultural circumstances that disqualified women writers was therefore also a challenge to the lack of critical attention to the class issue of female emancipation. Constance Coiner makes clear Olsen’s ground-breaking impact on these emerging concerns of the second-wave women’s movement:

*Silences* began as a talk titled ‘Silences in Literature,’ which Olsen delivered in 1962 at the Radcliffe Institute’s weekly colloquium (*Harper’s Magazine* published a version in 1965). These dates are significant. This polemical essay is an even greater achievement because Olsen produced it, like most of her fiction, before the most recent women’s movement provided an audience favorable to such expression. Drawing on an older feminist tradition, Olsen was a forerunner – like Le Sueur, Smedley, Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, and others – of the movement that would eventually claim her. (1995:215-6)

By 1978, when *Silences* finally appeared in its more comprehensive book form, reviewers were still impressed by the power and persuasiveness of Olsen’s exposure of the process of female working-class discrimination both in literature and society. There was also a tangible biographical connection made between Olsen’s own situated experience as a working mother and the way she felt personally affected by the configurations of both gender and class in the male cultural hegemony. In her review of the book, Nolan Miller was one of many to make this association between Olsen’s life and her subjective position as a writer and critic:

There is a good reason for [Olsen’s] low production. For more than forty years she has been a wife and mother, a family wage-earner at dull and time-sapping menial jobs. She has been, like multitudes of other talents, frustratingly ‘silent’ – silent because, most of all, of the necessities of earning a living and keeping a family together.

*Silences*, her third book, tells us all of this – tells us why, and how arduous and obstructed her life, a woman’s life, has been. She has not been alone. Her abundant quotations from others who have endured silently, both men and women, may seem abundant only to those unacquainted with or indifferent to society’s waste of individual talents. (1978, quoted in Hoyle Nelson & Huse 1994:252)

In many ways, *Silences* helped pave the way for a new direction within feminist literary studies – gynocriticism – which sought to recover traditions of female writing that had been ignored in the traditionally male-oriented histories (‘histories’) of literature. As Olsen herself declared on the first page of her book: “*Literary history and the present are dark with silences: some the silences for years by our acknowledged great; some silences hidden; some the ceasing to publish after*

one work appear; some the never coming to book form at all” (1980:xi). Yet the work was not just a descriptive documentation of some of the most undervalued careers of female authors in the past, it was an act of recuperation, claiming an place for those women writers who had managed to get published, but whose work needed to be recovered from the archives and recognized for their contribution. Thus, one of the most substantial chapters in Olsen’s book is the reprint of her over 100-page-long study of ‘Rebecca Harding Davis: her life an times’, in which Olsen argues for the critical rehabilitation of Davis, not least for pioneering the genre of industrial fiction in America with the publication of her first novel *Life in the Iron Mills* in 1861:

To the readers of that April 1861 *Atlantic*, *Life in the Iron Mills* came as absolute News, with the shock of unprepared-for revelation.

(To repeat:) in the consciousness of literary America, there had been no dark satanic mills; outside of slavery, no myriads of human beings whose lives were ‘terrible tragedy ... a reality of soul starvation, of living death.’ When industry was considered at all, it was an invasion of pastoral harmony, a threat of materialism to the *spirit*. If working people (again, outside of slavery) existed – and nowhere were they material for serious attention, let alone central subject – they were ‘clean-haired Yankee mill girls,’ ‘minds[s] among the spindles’ (1980:65-6).

Olsen had stayed true to her life-long commitment to working-class writing when she persuaded the Feminist Press already in 1972 to reprint Rebecca Harding Davis’s novel as a forgotten classic of American literature. Moreover, in her biographical interpretation of Davis’s work, Olsen, as Coiner notes, made it clear that there was an integral correspondence between Davis’s gender and class awareness. Thus, according to Coiner, Olsen “argues that Davis’s own oppression as a woman sensitized her to some of the constrictions of working-class life” (1995:219), enabling her to overcome the social prejudice she might have felt as a writer from a middle-class background. As the Feminist Press publishers also admitted in the edition of Davis’s novel that Olsen edited, this republication of a long-lost work of women’s writing was of huge significance in their own development as a radical publishing house: “*Life in the Iron Mills* was the Feminist Press’s first rediscovered classic. It inaugurated our ‘reprint’ series. It has sold more than 26,000 copies in 9 printings over 12 years. Rebecca Harding Davis’s name had been added to the list of major nineteenth-century writers of short fiction” (1985:7). This decisive editorial intervention by Olsen was also an expression of her consistent attempt to connect theory and practice throughout her life. Not only did she write about and agitate against the injustices of both patriarchy and capitalism, she translated this systematic critique into a concrete implementation of her radical ideas. In a tireless endeavour to practice what she proclaimed, she helped organise trade union branches and support striking workers; she established the first child care centre in San Francisco; she campaigned for better schools and for public libraries; she was active in the peace movement and women’s movement; as a Visiting Lecturer at Stanford University Writing Center Seminar in 1972 she gave a course on women and literature, putting together the very first reading list for



women’s studies. Thus, although her own writing career was for many years blocked, her political activism in the cause of working-class women, children and men functioned as a way of overcoming these private frustrations by helping to transform the ways in which the lives of ordinary people around her could be made to matter more.

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Buoyed up by the crest of the second-wave women’s movement in the late 1970s, Olsen finally achieved the broad readership and appreciation her own writing deserved. Not only were several of her works subsequently reprinted as modern classics, she became a much sought after public speaker and reader throughout the U S and Europe. It was a patchwork career made up of many different strands, some broken, some lost, but mostly woven together, always seeking to give a voice to the struggle for women’s social, political, economic and cultural emancipation that she herself had come to personify:

Tillie feared that, if she did not write, no one else would speak for lost, forgotten people. Telling their stories seemed her moral obligation, her way of honoring her mother and expressing her own conviction that the proletariat, when not thwarted, can make profound contributions to civilization. Fearlessly speaking up for women and minorities, she finally saw herself as more a catalytic speaker than a writer. Possibly her inspiring presence did mean more than her unwritten novel would have. Certainly, her resurrection of nearly forgotten women writers was an invaluable contribution to human history. (Reid 2010:334)

As this article has tried to show, Tillie Olsen remains a unique and complex figure in both literary history and the women’s movement. Her combination of personal insight as a working-class mother, proletarian writer and feminist forerunner makes her one of the most intriguing and challenging figures in 20<sup>th</sup> century American history. She is a remarkable example of a woman who successfully tried to live a life in which the personal is the political, where there is an essential link between how one thinks and how one acts and where social liberation begins both inside and outside the home, together. Through exploring this difficult existential correlation in her writing, Olsen consistently sought to interrogate and undermine those forces of patriarchal power and privilege that continue to prevent women from fulfilling their own individual human potential.

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